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This article describes the Catch the Next Ascender model, developed under the aegis of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board as a corrective to increase persistence and completion rates among the Texas Latinx college population.

Teaching Latinx Students With *Carino*: Using Validation Theory and Culturally Inclusive Pedagogy in Catch the Next's Ascender Program

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Because community colleges are open-admission institutions, few restrictions prohibit students from attending. If enrollees have below-average grades and less than satisfactory ACT or SAT scores, students are accepted on conditional admission requiring remediation before taking credit-bearing courses. Remedial courses are common among community college institutions. What is uncommon, however, are students with remedial course loads averaging between 12 to 15 semester hours in credit-bearing courses, and if failure occurs at this juncture, then students become disenchanted, dropping out before starting a credit-bearing program (Castillo, 2018).

To remedy this, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) implemented, in 2012, a statewide Integrated Reading and Writing (IRW) Professional Development Project. Its mission was to provide faculty, staff, and administrative support to “plan and implement a successful IRW program” (THECB, 2014, p. 34). These integrated programs were tasked with providing accelerated reading and writing courses to help prepare students for college-level, credit-bearing courses.

In the summer of 2012, the THECB sent a select group of Texas community college faculty, along with college administrators, to partner with Catch the Next, Inc., to learn how best to implement a bridge program that would reverse the dropout rate and strengthen persistence levels among its Latinx student population (THECB, 2014, p. 34). Catch the Next, Inc., then gathered a group of stakeholders committed to improving the educational

attainment of Latinx constituents and created the Texas College Success Program: Crossing Bridges-Catching Dreams. The bridge program for some time used “Puente” for short, which means bridge in Spanish.

Catch the Next, Inc., (hereafter CTN) is a college-readiness program with organizational roots in New Haven, Connecticut and New York City. The organization was founded by New York philanthropist John Siceloff, an award-winning film producer with ties to PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) and a former war correspondent with CBS and NBC News. Siceloff hired Maria Martha Chavez-Brummel, an Associate Dean emerita at Yale, to direct and staff the program.

In 2016, CTN’s Dream-Catcher program underwent a name-change after a branding contest opting for “Ascender” instead of the former Dream-Catcher moniker, and thus, Ascender became the trademark for the program. The CTN Ascender program helps students to bridge new forays into academic culture, understand college academic life, and develop new strategies for managing academic time, taking notes, active listening, and dealing with an unfamiliar campus life. Clearly, moving from a high-school environment to competitive, higher-order thinking courses heightens pressures among students. The term “Ascender” can be pronounced two ways—in Spanish and English—and it means to ascend in both languages. The ambiguity of the term empowers students fluent in both languages to obtain higher levels of cultural capital because the students understand the meaning and intent of bridging in both languages (Castillo, 2018).

The persistence and graduation rates among Texas Latinx students have been dismal. “In Texas alone, 284,892 Latinos enrolled in community colleges in 2013, while only 34,000 earned a degree or certificate that same year” (Castillo, 2017, p. A13). Against this backdrop, the THECB gave approval for CTN to partner with a California college vendor with the idea of framing its own Texas program. Demographer Robert Murdock noted that the low graduation rates among Latinx students and African Americans lagged sufficiently relative to White students to describe the issue as a crisis situation, which prompted the Texas Legislature to create the 60 × 30 Initiative with the goal to reach 60% of Texas completion rates by 2030 (Castillo, 2017; THECB, 2014). The following four Texas community colleges were the first to participate in the state-wide effort: El Paso Community College, South Texas College, Palo Alto College in San Antonio, and Lee College, in Baytown.

What followed was ground-breaking. The representatives from these community colleges were immersed in an intensive summer seminar. CTN staffers and California vendors engaged the Texas group with daily writing exercises, small-group collaborative sessions, and cognitive and creative thinking strategies in which participants read aloud original passages of literature. In addition, the Texas group learned how to create cohort-based learning communities and how to develop community relationships in order to recruit mentors. Data-driven results clearly showed how the

CTN model was a proven corrective that reversed the drop-out rates among Latinx populations (www.catchthenext.org). The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board saw great potential in what CTN was accomplishing and gave institutional approval of pedagogical engagement in best-practices, stating:

CTN builds on the pioneering work of the University of California at Berkeley Project (n.d.), which operated in California since 1981. The Puente framework is interdisciplinary in nature, focusing on English (Integrated Reading and Writing/entry level English course), counseling, mentoring, and professional development at the secondary and postsecondary levels. CTN has contacted Puente to scale the program outside California. In Texas, the first state replicating the model, partners include the following: Alamo Colleges, South Texas College, El Paso Community College, Lee College, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD, VIVA Careers, and the University of Texas at Austin's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement. (THECB, Fall 2014, p. 34)

Early Intervention

One of the best markers for reversing college dropout rates is intervention. Both the California vendor group and CTN clearly focus on increasing higher persistence and completion rates. Mentoring was a simple and cost-effective way to intervene and assist CTN Ascender students as an early alert system. In CTN-affiliated colleges, all students are given mentors to assist them to navigate academic challenges. Each college had mentor directors who recruited professionals within the college or the community and trained them for 2 days to equip mentors on how to interact with assigned mentees. Some mentors were non-faculty, and they were chosen to participate given gender-match or students' major. The student mentors also underwent an intensive background check and were gender-matched to the student's major or field of interest.

Building a Culture of Success

All students are grouped in cohorts of learning communities, clusters of first-year Learning Frameworks classes taught by counselors paired with an accelerated integrated Reading-Writing Intensive English Instructor. These courses use culturally relevant literature that reflects the Latinx community. Critical thinking and writing exercises follow close-reading, affective pedagogy that heightens textual awareness, develops multi-perspectives, uses "looping" brainstorming strategies for topic and composition development, and reinforces the idea of group-bonding. The dynamics of a sustained dialogue-centered on a subject-topic makes the cohort learning communities' approach captivating and successful because all the groups read the same texts. If students are reading the *Autobiography of Richard Rodriguez* in an accelerated English class, their Learning Frameworks class also

covers the assigned reading from different perspectives. These cohort learning communities target the assignment from multiple vantage points thereby providing additional focus and support. Learning Frameworks instructor meets weekly with team members to discuss student progress, target potential academic issues, attendance problems, and the overall academic progress of the team. In short, CTN students get academically triaged without marginalizing them; hence, a holistic academic support system augments the success rate.

The CTN Ascender model also modifies and improves on the California vendor group with certain caveats. It has more learning pillars such as Mentoring, English, Advising, Validation Theory, cohort learning communities, and Pathway courses that include history, psychology, and Mexican American studies.

CTN Ascender Model

Their organizational structure is based on four guiding principles: First, CTN uses mentor panels because of the paucity of non-academic professionals. These mentors are seasoned professionals from the community. The mentor model is a linchpin to successful persistence and completion rates because the mentee can get immediate feedback and support if experiencing academic obstacles. At Palo Alto College, Diane Lerma, an Education professor and Mentor Coordinator, developed the first-ever Mentor stories anthology that featured essays from each mentor, describing each mentor's struggles and failures (Lerma, 2013).

Second, all CTN-participating colleges promote two field trips to flagship Texas colleges like UT-Austin and Texas A&M-College Station. One of the goals of CTN is to instill leadership through Ascender clubs and participation in student-governance activities. Ideally, Ascenders can become mentors upon graduation from 4-year institutions. Third, all CTN-affiliate colleges send faculty to two professional development institutes (Fall/Spring) for a multi-day intensive, workshop-driven week of best-practices and day-to-day operational strategies to keep the focus on Ascender students and faculty-driven programs. The institutes give an opportunity for participants to gain 3 hours of graduate credit from the University of Texas at Austin. In addition, Ascender students may attend a motivational summer institute in which students lodge at UT dorms and experience the cultural impact of college life, complete with seminars and interactive sessions. Fourth, all CTN Ascenders students enjoy a *Noche de Familia* (Family Night), where families meet with students and share a program review. *Noche de Familia* is a gathering of CTN participants with their families at a sit-down formal dinner. Staffers show slides and explain the goals and purposes of the program and necessary outcomes of academic success. During *Noche de Familia*, CTN students are matched with mentors so families can meet mentors.

Validation Theory and CTN

Finally, the CTN Ascender Model prescribes to Rendon's (1994) Validation Theory that encourages affective pedagogy and the sustaining language of the Latinx home culture. Three articulated phrases common with CTN Ascenders and faculty alike are the Spanish terms: *familia*, *carino*, and *respeto*. The idea behind validation concepts is evident in research. Rendon (2002, 2005, 2009) has done extensive studies on how positive reinforcement is a valuable strategy toward improving college persistence rates. A majority of CTN students recruited are first-generation college students who have the greatest challenges understanding the intricacies of an academic culture. The program immerses them into an accelerated crash course on the culture of success. CTN students arrive at colleges and universities without an understanding of academic culture and language of academia (Castillo, 2018). The idea of academic success and college access must be ingrained into the Latinx family lexicon, and the Ascender program incorporates these foundational ideas into the classroom environment.

Familia is a term generally used to describe all CTN Ascender participants, which immediately gives them cultural bonding essential for academic success. Ascender students quickly understand that they can share ideas, work collaboratively on projects, and look out for colleagues who are slipping away or undergoing difficulty in assignments. Hence, when the CTN instructor says, "Please break into your familias so we may discuss the topic at hand," that instructor is giving gravitas to the group by affirming cultural significance and giving cultural capital to their home culture.

The second phrase is *Carino*, which translates to kindness. Most higher learning institutions are cold, indifferent academic centers where objectivity and rationality are the twin-pillars of pedagogy. CTN is neither subverting nor lessening the idea that institutions centers be aligned to reason, truth, and objectivity, but the fact that these institutions should also be humanizing centers, where faculty acknowledge, support, recognize, and reinforce a student's home language and culture. Feeling a sense of community is one of the hallmarks of building an academic character where critical and creative thinking is nourished and encouraged.

The last critical element is *Respeto*, a term that widely suggests a reciprocal exchange of respect between faculty and student, and between institution and the community surrounding it. Bridge programs are ultimately a palpable support that allows students to get across unknown intellectual zones with an understanding that the goal is assimilation and dissemination of complex ideas that support democratic institutions. These validation concepts enhance the college experience because they assert the idea that the student's culture is also valid, thereby, eliminating stress. One of the humanizing benefits in any institution is the belief that college participants are there to obtain new knowledge and cultural capital that will enhance and increase the general welfare of the nation.

Teaching With Affective Literary Theory

Among practitioners of English composition—especially those teaching introductory literature classes—examining texts, documents, essays, stories, and articles is truly a battlefield of how these artifacts are interpreted, how they are defined and re-defined, and generally how they are internalized. In CTN workshops, participants listen to speakers talk of “culturally relevant” literature as a basis for Ascender text selection. Most of the texts used in CTN Ascender courses are “culturally inclusive,” in addition to being culturally relevant because texts should not only reflect the community at large, but also incorporate all the formal and informal speech patterns of the culture being served. College readings are widely divergent; thus, if an English classroom has room to welcome Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Cervantes, then it should also accommodate the vernacular of Sandra Cisneros, Junot Diaz, Queen Latifah, and Reyna Grande.

Recently the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE; 2018) issued a call to decolonize centuries of harm imposed on Southwestern cultures and people of color, since the advent of American “Manifest Destiny.” What is taking shape is the decolonization of practices that once demeaned swaths of ethnic groups with wrongful actions and demeaning pedagogy claiming certain speech patterns as either sub-standard or lacking cultural relevancy (Castillo, 2005, p. 104–105).

When students attempt to analyze and explain literary texts, the belief exists that there is a correct form of literary analysis among practitioners and students alike. Textual interpretation is predicated on the separation of feeling from judgment and the principle of “objectivity,” that all emotions must be eliminated when conducting literary analysis.

The restricted use of “I” or first-person narrative is a common thread in introductory Freshman English courses as a form of emotionally restrained arguing in which emotions must be eliminated from “objective” analysis and the use of the omnipresent “third-person” is preferred because it negates feelings, as if any trace of humanity must be purged before the reader interacts with the page. All contested pleasures, such as joy, even pain and ugly feelings, are suspect and dismissed as overtly subjective and therefore anathema to academic writing.

In 1949, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley coined the term, “The Affective Fallacy,” when literary judgments used personal evaluative comments, even autobiographical and personal opinions. Wimsatt and Beardsley (1949) argued that objective criticism will “not talk of tears, prickles, or other physiological symptoms of feeling angry, joyful, hot, cold, or intense, or vaguer states of emotional disturbance, but of shades of distinction and relation between objects of emotion” (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1949, p. 13).

For much of the twentieth century, literary criticism was in the grips of New Criticism, reducing literary texts to simple, formulaic concepts. A good parody of it is when actor Robin Williams, in Peter Weir’s “Dead Poets

Society” (1989), tears off pages of poetic analysis and liberates his students from the mundane, formal objectivity. To Wimsatt and Beardsley (1949), texts should be analyzed scientifically, free from human emotions. The idea was to impress upon readers that emotions contaminated the literary text.

“Affective Literary Theory” is the exact opposite. It centers instead on the emotional effects of literature, both to the reader and to the critic. More recently, the “affective turn” has focused attention upon the world of narrative feeling. A somewhat scandalous inversion of New Criticism is Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Steward’s “The Hundreds” (2019) with one-hundred narrative snippets of casual, mental absorption, forays into encounters, and cryptic scenes of composition, all captured in the chaotic moment of discovery and creation. Captured raw scenes elevate affective theory and give agency to languages of feeling.

In a cultural analysis of Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2019), Hsu writes: Literary criticism used to be centered on meaning. The critic interrogated a poem or a passage and applied her preferred theory of how meanings were produced and where they could be found. A New Critic might have scrutinized form and irony, explicating the interplay between overt and actual meaning; a deconstructionist might have been attuned to the way the metaphors and propositions in a passage undermined each other; a historicist to the way the meanings of a text might be situated within larger political or social tensions. For each, the task was interpretation, and the currency was meaning. In the past couple of decades, however, a different approach has emerged, claiming the rubric “affect theory.”

Under its influence, critics attended to affective charge. They saw our world as shaped not simply by narratives and arguments but also by nonlinguistic effects—by mood, by atmosphere, by feelings. (Hsu, 2019, p. 45)

Using Affective Theory

In 2012, I was one of the first to teach INRW classes at Palo Alto College with a cohort of 28 CTN Ascender students who needed development in comprehension skills, critical thinking, and analysis of culturally diverse texts, both fiction and non-fiction. They took the same instructors for 1 full-year, two semesters. Students were asked to participate in brainstorming activities, peer-evaluation, and interactive power-point presentations plus reading aloud, voicing their feelings with cathartic effect. All students read Sandra Cisneros’s “What is my Name?” and each were paired up and read about to each other, listening carefully for “strong lines” that captured their attention. After several rounds of reading, the writing section was introduced, and the class was asked to write and explain the origin of their name and imitate the voice and syntax used by Cisneros. They were asked to project their feelings when they wrote about their names.

Using Sandra Cisneros's simple narrative gives cultural agency to the readers because their name and culture is being validated. Moreover, looking at themselves and writing about their names allow Ascenders not only to feel a connection to the author but also exert their authentic voice unafraid of expressing emotions.

Another of Cisneros's story is "Pilon," a five-paragraph *cuento* (story) that is not only ambiguous but complex enough to be read as an allegory of "feelings" because it aligns perfectly with affective theory. Because formal writing tends to suppress emotions and largely assumes a non-descript, controlled voice layered with passive voice, the message gets objectified. In a CTN Spring institute conference, I gave a presentation using student examples of descriptive and narrative writing with strong, affective examples. Naomi was a CTN Ascender in my INRW 0420 developmental class, who analyzed Sandra Cisneros's story and made a connection to *La Llorona*, (the Wailing Woman) a common Latinx folk legend. She wrote:

Sandra Cisneros uses Cleofila's story as a parallel to La Llorona. The Story is one of an unhappy woman in an unhappy relationship who is looking for a way out. Cleofila's story clearly conveys a woman in pain who doesn't see a way out. Due to the "Tarantino" style of writing (all over the place)), it was hard to find a definitive direction of the tale. It was very unclear what she plans to do with her husband. Some moments she seems to have a will and desire to move on from her unhappy lifestyle, the next Cisneros consistently reminds us that Cleofila is dependent on her abusive husband. This is sad and it also appears that this vulnerability is leading her toward madness. It also stated in the story that Cleo always felt that if she were to be abused, she wouldn't stay. After the story turns into that abusive mosh-pit, Cleofilas explains the serious nature of her abuse but continues to stay with her violent husband. The story almost suggests that it's okay to be in a relationship because it seems to be normal in this town because of the total dependency of the woman on men in this town. To me, the author is almost justifying the violence by making it seem normal. Then again, I'm aware that this is a reality in many people's lives so it's hard for me to judge someone who really doesn't have much of a choice, given her situation. Maybe the picture that the author is trying to paint is that the violence is a perpetual cycle that only gets worse as time goes by. Maybe La Llorona was also beaten by her husband and that's what drove her to do the unspeakable acts that she allegedly did. I'm a strong believer that violence only begets more violence (CTN, Portfolio, 2012).

Naomi's essay is richly layered with an authentic voice, plus an imitative style that opens up the readers to many treads in her piece. Toward the end, Naomi uses qualifiers such as "To me," sprinkled with "maybe" and the term "abusive mosh-pit." In her reflective journal, Naomi addressed the idea of "dependency" and "abuse" to explain that she understood Cisneros's

cautionary tale of family violence. Making rhetorical inferences was paramount in understanding how to react to certain kinds of writing.

The subsequent semester, the CTN cohort took Freshman English 1301 and read Reyna Grande's "The Distance Between Us" (2012), a poignant tale of migratory crossing to *el otro lado* (U.S. territory) and the harrowing journey in search of her father. Reyna's perilous journey into the United States with the help of a coyote (vernacular Spanish for border-crossing merchant) reflects a common ritual for many migrants seeking refuge in a country of immigrants. In small groups, students read passages that make them laugh, feel joy, cry, utter disgust, expressing a collective cathartic sigh when Reyna and her siblings make it to America.

Students also gave PowerPoint presentations on David Montejano's "Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas" (1987), a textbook documenting the conquest of Texas after 1848 in conjunction with George Stevens' classic film *Giant* (1956) that augmented Montejano's narrative because it gives a visceral portrayal of population displacement and disenfranchisement. Stevens' *Giant* is an eye-opening film about South Texas racial hegemony. The majority of the Ascender students had never witnessed racial discrimination, and one scene toward the end depicted a Latinx elderly couple about to be rejected from Sarge's Café. It's a culminating scene with Bick Benedict standing up for them because of his grandson, Jordan Benedict, Jr., who is of mixed ethnicity.

Students were assigned small group activities where they discussed the evolving character of Bick Benedict (Rock Hudson) and his strong-headed wife, Leslie Benedict (Elizabeth Taylor). After reading history chapters from Montejano's "Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas," one student made a comment: "I noticed that the film, the poems, and this history book all come together." She was reacting to the assorted reading of Tino Villanueva's *Scene from the Movie Giant* (1995), which offered a nuanced text filled with poetry and affective responses, and she was right because the course centered on cultural studies and affective theory, allowing students to openly discuss their visceral feelings about the readings with an idea of incorporating their reflective writing and forging an authentic voice. Affective theory is about liberating the subjective "first-person" from the margins, but also about allowing students to fully experience all the range of emotions.

Conclusion

CTN has grown successfully as a state-wide initiative building a strong, data-driven program that allows students to grow intellectually, to read competently, and to expand their self-worth. The Ascender model enriches students to become civic participants and assume roles for the benefit of all people, regardless of color. Teaching through validation theory increases their self-worth and allows students to influence others and assert their

identity skills in classroom environments. It is worth noting that CTN continues to forge ahead in a state with shifting budgets, earning accolades and supporting excellence as one of its foundational colleges, Palo Alto College, earned the Rising Star Award from the Aspen Foundation. Catch the Next's Ascender Programs continue to gain philanthropic support from the Greater Texas Foundation, the Meadows Foundation, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

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