

Teaching Modern **Latin America** in the Social Science Curriculum: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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One of the most frequent challenges faced by those who teach Latin America at any level is how to provide a sense of the diversity of the region. The risks range from simplifying and reducing the multiplicity of experience through the study of dominant cultures and cultural forms, on the one hand, to including too much information or too many groups and overwhelming students in the process, on the other hand. The selection of appropriate methodologies and relevant materials is crucial to avoiding these two extremes. An interdisciplinary approach helps to solve these problems.

Below: A visitor looks at a mural by David Alfaro Siqueiros in one of the 16 rooms which underwent restoration at the Museum of Chapultepec Castle, January 28, 2004, in Mexico City.

(AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)



The first question that comes to mind in deciding how to teach Latin America is, what are the defining elements of a Latin American identity? It is not easy to find an answer since, as Susana Nuccetelli reminds us, we need to remember that even though “some Latin Americans have European background (which may or may not be Iberian), others are of Indian, African, Middle Eastern, or East Asian descent. Some speak European languages, mainly but not uniquely Spanish and Portuguese, others Indian ones such as Quechua and Guaraní.” In order to find a common thread among the different cultures and countries, we need to remember that the thinkers of this region have often noted that “in spite of their diversity, these people share a common past marked by the world-changing encounter of 1492.”¹

Unlike the case of the United States, where the independence process failed to launch any discussion of a common identity shared with the other members of the British colonial world, the identity of post-colonial Latin America was tied up with the discussion of a common project that unified the continent against any form of colonial domination. The idea of a continental emancipation that transcends the geographical limits of nations is still raised by such contemporary political figures as the president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez. And it is precisely here, in the process of identity formation, that we can find a good way to incorporate Latin American content into the teaching of the social studies in a way that it will facilitate for students to grasp the material and for teachers to organize it.

It is important to use the diversity of Latin America as a good example of the very diverse reality surrounding students in this country. Organizing thematic units that help students make connections among different areas covered by the social studies is the most important strategy for teaching about this region successfully.

Methodology

These are some examples of thematic units with which to teach Modern Latin America:

- **Race/ethnicity:** Racial and ethnic differences have been crucial to understanding the cultural and social foundation of many Latin American countries. Introducing these themes and concepts allows the teacher to explain a source of conflict that remains relevant to this day. In Cuba and Mexico, for example, race and ethnicity have played a crucial role in defining the historical development of these nations. In the case of Cuba, students need to understand how slavery influenced the history of the nineteenth century. In introducing Mexico, teachers should explain the existence of different indigenous cultures that are usually grouped under the label “Indians.” Students need to recognize that by the end of the fifteenth century, more than 300 languages and cultures flourished in this area, and some of them are still alive in the country today.² It is important to connect this unit with the historical experience of other countries that, even if not part of Latin America, went through the same kinds of conflict.³
- **Progress and Civilization:** these concepts determined the political organization of the first republics, and also were essential in establishing who and what should be included or excluded. The exclusive association of these ideas with European culture determined that the majority of the new nations followed a path in which their new identity only recognized those who could be assimilated, and discarded the rest. Since progress and civilization were viewed as universal forces of assimilation that would link Latin America with the most advanced nations, everything not related to Western culture was considered irrelevant, and was disregarded (a source of important conflicts in countries like Mexico and Peru).⁴

- **Conflict and Violence:** revolutionary wars did not stop with the end of colonial rule. Inequalities and political instability continued within the new republics, which created a revolutionary cycle that continues to this day in countries such as Colombia. Creating a unit that presents the reasons for these conflicts helps students to understand how racial discrimination or conceptions of progress affected the development of the selected country.⁵ In teaching Peru, for example, teachers should identify the roots of indigenous rebellions and look for conflicts that clearly show students the nature of this violence and how it has developed over time. Readings about the Tupac Amaru rebellion together with writings by José Carlos Mariátegui could be a good choice.⁶
- **Migrations:** a unit on migrations would link all the previous units by integrating them into one that explains certain outcomes. Populations have been forced to migrate due to economic conditions, changes in the sources of labor, forced exile, or racist conceptions that facilitated exploitation—all of which could be explored in prior units. This unit could also offer an opportunity to link migratory movements from Latin America to the teaching of United States history.⁷

Materials and Examples

Below are some suggestions on how to incorporate the teaching of the previously mentioned areas of content in ways that follow curriculum requirements and engage students. The incorporation of materials from several disciplines is essential to providing students with the multiplicity of views required in teaching the social studies.⁸ Each unit could be organized in the following way:

- **Race and Ethnicity:** The main challenge in teaching historical processes in which different participants are not equally represented, is finding texts

that reflect the different perspectives of a conflict. The use of testimonials can be very important, in this sense, not only because many reflect underrepresented populations, but also because women have written the majority of them.⁹ Personal diaries, letters, and even court documents can all provide rich context from a variety of points of view. In order to teach about the European/Indian conflict through the experience of Guatemala or Bolivia, for example, the inclusion of readings that depict the Indian perspective is critical. Those interested in testimonials have used the works of Domitila Barrios de Chungara (Bolivia) and Rigoberta Menchú (Guatemala), extensively.¹⁰ If Brazil is the subject of study, for example, the use of African music as an expression of those who had been displaced and exploited can provide students with a different way to analyze music as a text. Caetano Veloso's recent book *Tropical Truth* is a good source for understanding how Brazilian music expresses the different voices of those who were not accounted for in the country's official history.¹¹

- **Progress and Civilization:** Films can be very effective in revealing the nature of colonization in Latin America, and its consequences. Movies that emphasize how, from the moment of the conquest, certain geographical areas and populations were ignored because they were seen as too difficult to assimilate, economically and culturally, can help students grasp a conflict that still affects many countries today. In teaching Brazil's unequal development, for example, the novel *Barren Lives*, by Graciano Ramos, about the social conditions in the northeast part of the country, can be very effective, particularly if the related movie is also shown.¹² *Central Station*, directed by Walter Salles in 1998, is another movie that reflects on the unequal development of Brazil very effectively.¹³

- **Conflict and Violence:** there are many sources that can be used to teach students about the recurrent violence that has affected many of the countries in the region. In teaching Mexico's most important modern conflict, the Mexican Revolution, art provides an excellent venue for explaining to students the different historical actors, the source of the conflict, and its eventual resolution.¹⁴ Examining the works of "the three greats"—José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—provides an excellent medium for also exploring the connections between the United States and Mexico, because the work of these muralists was very influential to some artists in this country.¹⁵ Analyzing these murals together with novels that describe this period is very effective in teaching students to learn from different media. The novels of the Mexican Revolution can be combined with the teaching of the art made by the muralists.¹⁶ Contemporary novels about this subject can also be effective in introducing the current perceptions of the conflict. Angeles Mastretta's *Tear this Heart Out* is a good choice for classroom use.¹⁷

- **Migrations:** due to the above-mentioned reasons, populations have been forced to leave their native territories throughout the history of Latin America. In teaching about Cuba, many might first think about the thousands who left the country either due to the wars of independence against Spain or to more recent conflict with Fidel Castro's regime. But Cuba was also the center of the Caribbean migrations spurred by the economic organization of this region and the importance of temporary work during the nineteenth century. Due to the nature of monoculture economies in which most employment was seasonal, thousands of families migrated looking for alternative employment during the months they were laid off. The teaching of music is very important for exploring the migratory process

of those who were displaced in search of work. The influence of the French-Haitian workers in the eastern part of the island can be heard in the Bantú and Dahomeyan aspect in the music, for example. Moreover, Cuban music had a tremendous impact on U.S. Latino communities. Teaching about migrations through the paths along which music traveled is very accessible to students. It also provides teachers with the opportunity to create a link between the teaching of Latin American and United States history since the class readings can be a good introduction to the culture of Latin Americans living in this country.¹⁸ A comparative study of musical migrations in Argentina can also be effective in teaching about the cultural formation of this country. Through the study of the tango as danceable music students can trace the influence of the Congo culture in Latin America and the United States, and learn about how this form migrated from Africa to Cuba before reaching its final destination in Buenos Aires.¹⁹

Measuring Outcomes

After defining the areas of content and the interdisciplinary materials to be used, the third important step is to decide the outcomes to be measured and how they will be assessed. Given the interdisciplinary approach previously outlined, students should be able to draw comparisons between different cultures and how human experience can be analyzed according to different contexts. After studying Latin America, students should be able to recognize key events in the building of a regional cultural identity and how this process is linked to the cultural development of other regions.

In order to measure students' progress efficiently, a combination of objective-type testing and essay questions works best. Regular testing is helpful to determine how each individual incorporates general historical facts, but essay questions that ask students to explain connections between certain events are

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necessary for testing the ability to make cultural comparisons. Following the examples given in this article, helpful questions might include the following:

- Explain the difference between racial attitudes in Latin American countries and the United States.
- How did the supremacy of European culture become the source of cultural conflict in Latin America?
- Explain the main influence in the formation of a Latin American identity.

Measuring both the assimilation of information and the ability to establish comparisons between different countries and cultures using an interdisciplinary approach helps the teacher to incorporate the study of Latin America in a way that follows curricular standards, and also facilitates student's understanding of this region's diversity. 📖

Notes

1. Susana Nuccetelli, *Latin American Thought: Philosophical Problems and Arguments* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2002), 225.
2. See: Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press 2001); for a good review of recent books published about indigenous identities see: Otero, Gerardo "The 'Indian Question' in Latin America: Class, State, and Ethnic Identity Construction" *Latin American Research Review* 38: no. 1, 2003: 248-266.
3. The following books can be useful in preparing topics on this subject: Nancy P. Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Roseblat, eds., *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Robert M. Levine, *Race and Ethnic Relations in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Historical Dictionary and Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1980); George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Franklin W. Knight, *Race, Ethnicity, and Class: Forging the Plural Society in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, Markham Press Fund, 1996); Thomas E. Skidmore, Aline Helg, and Alan Knight, eds., *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1990), Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics:*

- Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).
4. Francine Masiello, *Between Civilization and Barbarism: Women, Nation, and Literary Culture in Modern Argentina* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2005); Vivian Schelling, ed., *Through the Kaleidoscope: the Experience of Modernity in Latin America* (New York: Verso, 2000); Harry E. Vanden, Gary Prevost, eds., *Politics of Latin America: The Power Game*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
 5. Joseph W. Esherick, Hasan Kayali, and Eric Van Young, eds., *Empire to Nation: Historical Perspectives on the Making of the Modern World* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis, eds., *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006); Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg, eds., *Banana Wars: Power, Production, and History in the Americas* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003); Aline Helg, *Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770-1835* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Marco Palacios; trans. Richard Stoller, *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia, 1875-2002* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006); Nancy P. Appelbaum, *Muddied Waters: Race, Region, and Local History in Colombia, 1846-1948* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).
 6. See Ward Stavig, *The World of Tupac Amaru: Conflict, Community, and Identity in Colonial Peru* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); José Carlos Mariátegui, *The Heroic and Creative Meaning of Socialism: Selected Essays of José Carlos Mariátegui*, edited and translated by Michael Pearlman. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996).
 7. Kevin A. Yelvington, *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora* (Santa Fe, N. Mex.: School of American Research Press; Oxford: James Currey, 2006); Wanní W. Anderson, Robert G. Lee, *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Frances Aparicio, Cándida Jáquez, María Elena Cepeda, eds., *Musical Migrations: Transnationalism and Cultural Hybridity in Latino America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
 8. These websites can very useful for students: info.lanic.utexas.edu/la/region/history; lib.nmsu.edu/subject/bord/lagua; www.library.vanderbilt.edu/central/latamhist.htm; lanic.utexas.edu; pdba.georgetown.edu.
 9. See Catherine Davis, "Woman as Witness: Essays on Testimonial Literature by Latin American Women (review)" *Biography* 27 (Fall 2004): 855-859; Linda Craft, *Novels of Testimony and Resistance in Central America* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1997); Naomi Lindstrom, *The Social Conscience of Latin American Writing* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1998).
 10. *Let Me Speak!: Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso, 1984).
 11. *Tropical Truth: A Story of Music and Revolution in Brazil* (New York: Knopf, 2002).
 12. Graciliano Ramos, *Barren Lives*, trans. by Ralph Edward Dimmick (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1971). The movie was directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos in 1963.
 13. DVD released by Sony Pictures, 1999.
 14. Leonard Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Pete Hamill, *Diego Rivera*; Patrick Marnham, *Dreaming with His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera*; Luis-Martin Lozano, Augustin Arteaga, William Robinson, *Diego Rivera: Art and Revolution*; Alma Reed, *The Mexican Muralists* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1970); Alma Reed, *Orozco* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1970); Andrea Kettenman, *Diego Rivera* (New York: Taschen, 1997); Philip Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1997); David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990*
 15. Linda Bank Downs, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals*; Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals*; *Diego Rivera, Portrait of America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1950); Jürgen Harten, *Siqueiros/Pollock, Pollock/Siqueiros* (Dumont 1995); Laurence P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque, N. Mex.: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).
 16. Mariano Azuela, *The Underdogs* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 1994); Nellie Campobello, *Cartucho and My Mother's Hands* (Austin, Tex.: Texas University Press, 1988)
 17. Riverhead Books, 1997.
 18. Raúl A. Fernández, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2006); Ed Morales, *The Latin Beat: The Rhythms and Roots of Latin Music from Bossa Nova to Salsa and Beyond* (Cambridge, Mass.: 2003).
 19. See Robert Farris Thompson, *Tango: The Art History of Love* (New York: Vintage, 2006).

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