

GENIAL

Latino Audiences: Embracing Complexity¹

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ABSTRACT

It is essential to understand the complexity and diversity of Latino audiences for authentic engagement in any field, including informal science learning. We offer four key ideas that can serve as foundations for considering Latino audiences: identity and culture, amplification, decolonization, and risk-taking. The content of these ideas speaks to the need to shift from simplistic viewpoints to more holistic perspectives which acknowledge culture as dynamic and fluid, view audiences in more complex ways that reflect on the intersections of identities and experiences, and engage in practices that deepen our own cultural competencies. These practices can move us toward more genuine collaborations with the communities informal learning organizations seek to reach.

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INTRODUCTION

When we are asked about strategies for engaging Latino audiences, we often find unexamined assumptions and stereotypes or limited ways of thinking about Latino communities. Discussions tend to oversimplify the issues at hand, leading toward overly facile approaches to working with Latino communities.

Indeed, the very notion of “Latino audiences” itself is problematic. Who exactly are we referring to when we say our organization hopes to engage Latino audiences? Any initiative that aims to engage Latinos cannot approach such a heterogeneous group as if it were monolithic. This paper does not aim to be comprehensive, or provide definitive answers, but rather explores several ideas that we hope provide a more nuanced narrative of Latino communities. We offer four key ideas—or building blocks—that can serve as foundations for authentic collaboration with Latino communities.

FOUR KEY IDEAS

IDENTITY AND CULTURE

There is a need to shift from binary perspectives of culture to understanding of culture as fluid and dynamic.

As with any cultural group, U.S. Latinos are quite diverse. They represent, for example, more than 20 different countries, including those born in the United States, those who trace their family roots to spaces later acquired by the United States,² and those who have immigrated. These groups form communities with varied levels of acculturation, socioeconomic status, and education (Flores, 2017). Furthermore, cultural identity is not fixed, but rather dynamic, fluid, and context driven (Chuang, 2003; Nagel, 1994). Yet the dominant culture often views nondominant groups as monolithic and static.

The inability to see culture as complex, and understand it as fluid and dynamic, leads to binary thinking. One example of this in the museum field is the assumption that Latinos will generally speak Spanish *or* English (Garibay and Yalowitz, 2015). The reality, however, is that many of us who identify as Latino operate in the “and” space. We readily *code-switch*—move back and forth in a conversation between English and Spanish—and, because language is inextricably tied to culture, our ability to switch between Spanish and English illustrates cultural fluidity.

Binary thinking can also lead to *othering*, in which individuals or groups (in this case Latinos) are seen as separate from American society, rather than part of it. From this perspective, the very use of labels such as “Latino” or “Hispanic” can be problematic.

For example, when individuals move to the United States from Latin America, they are categorized as “Latino” or “Hispanic” although they themselves would more typically identify with their *nationality* (e.g., Uruguayan,

² Much of the territory that is now part of the United States was originally part of Mexico and had been settled for hundreds of years before the formation of the United States. The Mexican-American War (1846–1848) led to the Treaty of Guadalupe, which in 1848 turned over to the United States the territory encompassing the present-day states of California, Texas, Utah, and Nevada, as well as parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming (Gonzales, 1999).

Peruvian, Mexican; Lopez, 2013). The “Latino” category, usually imposed by others, can be layered, confusing, and sometimes even mysterious to someone newly arrived. Such categorization becomes a dissection of one’s origins, categories, differences, and similarities—in fact one’s very sense of belonging. As one of the authors notes of her experience, “I didn’t know I was Latina until I came to the United States.” Such insistence on categorization raises many questions: Who is Latina/o? How do Latinos who have lived in the United States for generations see themselves in relation to the rest of the nation’s population and to newly arrived Latin Americans? Who defines us and how do we define ourselves?

Identity, of course, is complex and cannot be reduced to a set of categories. One’s identity, then, is multifaceted, and the aspect of identity most important at a given moment may depend on many things, including specific context. One of the authors of this paper, for example, describes it this way: “Your identity exists in a quantum flux of states. You’re all of it until it collapses in a given interaction. I’m Jose, Mexican by birth, American by citizenship, Latino by cultural identity, Chicano by sociopolitical identity, and Hispanic by census count. All of those are true, but which Jose does the Department of Motor Vehicles get [when I go for my driver’s license] versus which Jose does my grandmother get?”

AMPLIFICATION

To simplify culture is reductive. Amplification steps outside the assumption frame and acknowledges that culture and identity are assets in authentically building relationships, experiences, and knowledge.

There is a tendency toward reductionism when considering the identity and culture of nondominant groups. The National Research Council (2009, for example, noted that “too often, cultural diversity in science learning is studied by comparing the skills and knowledge of children from nondominant groups with those from the dominant group” (Rogoff and Chavajay, 1995). In these comparisons, mainstream skill and upbringing are considered “‘normal’... lending support to a deficit model of diversity” (p. 217). In the informal learning field, we see similar tendencies; informal science education (ISE) professionals, for example, often think about engaging Spanish speakers from this deficit model approach.

In contrast, the idea of “amplification” allows us to step outside our “assumption frames” and consider culture and identity and the richness of individuals’ lived experiences as assets (González, Moll, Amanti, 2005) with which informal learning organizations can authentically build relationships, experiences, and knowledge.

Speaking a language other than English as the primarily (or only) language, for example, can be considered a type of “linguistic capital” (Bourdieu, 1991) rather than a problem to be addressed. A study with Latino families visiting bilingual science exhibits illustrated the richness of families’ linguistic repertoires and reveals:

“the ways in which families used both Spanish and English resources, the groups’ extensive code-switching between languages ... illuminates the complex linguistic practices within visitor groups and how the bilingual museum experience reflects broader social and cultural dynamics present in a group interaction. It also pushes us to reflect on how important visitor groups’ social and cultural norms are, both in the learning process and in museum experiences” (Garibay and Yalowitz, 2015).

We can think of this linguistic fluidity as being “ambicultural.” Another example of amplification can be found in CALTA21, an initiative that uses visual literacy to develop language skills among adult immigrants. Using a curriculum of identity and portraiture, CALTA21 stresses the value of the knowledge that learners already possess as they explore art and develop meaning-making. “These exchanges empower participants by validating the value of their own cultures, stories, and experiences, while simultaneously validating the cultures of other participants and their newly adopted community (Lannes, 2013).”

Unfortunately, simplistic approaches to culture are still quite common in our field and often reduce Latino engagement to a series of events that informal science learning organizations assume signal cultural relevance to all Latinos. Holding events commemorating Cinco de Mayo or Day of the Dead as a strategy to engage Latinos, for example, not only obscures the diversity of Latinos in the United States but also reduces culture to a series of “celebrations,” which the institution assumes to be culturally relevant. Consider, for example, how a family whose cultural heritage is Nicaraguan would respond to the idea that the Mexican Day of the Dead event was meant to signal inclusion to Latino families. Such events can feel irrelevant at best and, at worst, insincere attempts that amount to no more than “Hispandering.”

Authentic engagement is about respecting and understanding the complexity of Latino communities. When we simplify, we dishonor, leaving people feeling alienated. Is Cinco de Mayo, for example, truly the most important event to celebrate? What efforts could be more meaningful?

This is not to imply that cultural markers are not important. Rather, it is to highlight the importance of understanding which cultural dimensions are salient to specific communities and individuals. It is also about moving from “either/or” perspectives to those that acknowledge the richness of cultural repertoires. Simplification often happens when trying to understand a community from one’s own point of view rather than through engagement in authentic collaboration and co-creation.

It is critical to consider how we as informal learning professionals are developing our *own* cultural competencies and shifting our practices to be culturally responsive and authentic. Martin and Jennings (2015), for example, discuss their organization’s journey at the Children’s Discovery Museum of San Jose in becoming more inclusive, noting the critical role that reflective practice and deepening cultural competence played in the process.

DECOLONIZATION

Co-created rather than appropriated.

Within informal learning environments such as museums, initiatives aimed at “new audiences” often focus on introducing existing experiences and/or content without considering the community’s specific desires or considering culture and context. The goal is to provide access to science without changing existing systems (National Research Council, 2009) and represents what Lee (1999) coined an “assimilationist view of science equity.” This perspective also implies that the primary issue facing institutions is about barriers keeping certain groups from accessing them.

Dawson (2014) has pointed out that framing science engagement as simply being an issue of access or barriers can lead to seeing science engagement as a kind of crusade. She further notes the importance of examining embedded power structures in ISE practices that tend to universalize the dominant group's experiences and culture as the norms.

Informal learning environments such as museums and science centers provide examples of the underlying systemic issues. These spaces and offerings (i.e., exhibits and programs) are based on specific norms and practices that may work for those who frequently visit, but are unwelcoming and enigmatic places for others and necessitate high levels of familiarity and knowledge about their contexts and conventions (Garibay, 2011, 2009).

These observations serve as powerful reminders of the potential of “community engagement” efforts to reify colonialist legacies and existing power structures. It also points to the urgency of carefully examining our own places of privilege and power and to reconsider our work as informal science learning professionals.

Do we approach community engagement in ways that protect our own power and privilege, because we don't want to lose them, or are we willing to figure out ways to share authority and open up space in ways that allow for something richer, more equitable, and meaningful?

Less obvious but also important is the history of Latin America, which is in part a story of colonialism. Part of Latino identity is that of *mestizaje*—colonizer and colonized. When engaging with the diversity of Latinos, this issue and the aspect of identity may come up. What aspect of identity do we choose to value and which to ignore? In what ways do we choose to understand Latino communities? As one of the authors of this paper puts it, “Often, to be brown is to be seen as ‘less than.’ I want to make sure that the European side [of me] is not the only way that I am seen and that the indigenous part of me is not devalued.”

We offer the idea of sovereignty as a guiding principle. At its essence, sovereignty is agency and self-determination. Respecting the way that individuals and communities self-identify is one example of honoring sovereignty. The terms Hispanic, Chicano, Latino, Latinx, and Nuyorican, for instance, are all valid and have very specific histories and meanings to individuals and their communities.

Understanding and valuing other ways of knowing, recognizing that self-representation is fundamental, and supporting ways that Latino communities themselves vision and develop informal science experiences are all essential dimensions of sovereignty. Authentic community collaboration is thus critical in changing practices.

How are you, within your organization, examining your own biases and understanding your privilege? How are you working to elevate community voices and priorities and share authority with communities? Are you sharing resources equitably? Are you out in the community, building authentic relationships that help shift you and your organization to becoming *part of* the community, rather than someone who *serves* the community from the outside?

RISK-TAKING

Willingness to experiment and move outside of established practices to authentically collaborate and innovate with others moving outside your comfort zone to make space for a joint creative process.

Although we often are asked about “best practices” for engaging Latinos in informal learning, we find this concept problematic. First, given the nuance and complexity of Latino identities and communities, and their diverse contexts, a checklist approach is not useful or appropriate for authentic community engagement. Second, operating under the frame of established practices is counter to the risk-taking needed to create change.

If our organizations have historically not done well at engaging Latino communities, using current practices and operating from our places of comfort means that we cannot expect things to change. Opening up the space for authentic collaboration and engagement, requires us to move outside established norms and practices, take risks, and disrupt systems.

In the context of inclusion, however, organizations cannot innovate alone. Change must be created in concert with the very communities that informal learning organizations seek to engage for several reasons. First, the breadth of perspectives is critical in visioning and creating something new. Second, co-creation has a much higher chance to be meaningful and relevant to those communities who are part of the process. Third, shared collaboration shifts power structures and makes space for shared ownership.

Risk-taking, of course, also requires accepting the possibility that we might fail. As Imber (2016) writes, “Failure is generally thought of as a dirty word, and something that gets swept under the carpet when it does rear its ugly head. But being able to acknowledge and learn from failure is a huge part of building a culture where risk-taking is tolerated and where innovation can thrive.” Critical to this process then is being willing to move into potentially unknown territory and see ourselves as learners.

Ultimately, pushing ourselves outside our comfort zone, co-creating with communities we seek to authentically engage, and honestly sharing our failures and lessons learned are all critical parts of the process.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has raised a number of issues about engaging Latino audiences in informal science learning. We have argued for a need for a more nuanced understanding of Latino communities and for carefully considered approaches to engagement.

Rather than provide definitive answers, we explored a number of ideas that illuminated a number of critical issues, including our needing to:

- shift from overly simplistic and stereotypical perspectives of Latino communities.
- acknowledge issues of power and privilege and ways in which our practices reify colonialist legacies and inequities.
- engage in reflective practice that helps deepen our own cultural competencies.
- move outside our comfort zones and take risks in ways that allow for authentic collaboration.

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