

Speaking to and through the archive: An exhibition of Puerto Rican materials at the Newberry Library curated by students from the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School in Chicago

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Abstract: At its very core, community informatics (CI) is about enabling communities to more effectively use information while studying how this can be achieved most effectively to best meet community needs. But how can information be used within a community when it is held within the walls of a non-circulating library? Libraries have proven to be an important locus of activity as CI has emerged as a field of study and practice. This paper examines an exhibition curated by students from the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood. The exhibition of Puerto Rican materials held by the Newberry Library, an independent research library in Chicago, was initially conceived as a vehicle for both cultural exploration and the teaching of research skills. However—through a participatory model and deep connections with community concerns—the project revealed how an exhibition of rare materials could serve as information and communication technology used to promote social inclusion and explore the persisting legacy of imperialism and colonization. The project had multiple outcomes, some of them unexpected. Held in an established public forum, the exhibit served as a means for the students to speak back to history rather than be determined by it. The students also began writing their own histories with their own legacies in mind, and helped lay the groundwork for a continued relationship amongst the library, their high school, and their community.

Keywords: Puerto Rico, exhibitions, critical pedagogy, participatory model

Introduction

“Critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice. Otherwise theory becomes simply, ‘blah, blah, blah,’ and practice pure activism”

-Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of Freedom

This essay will examine a recent project that enabled a group of students from an alternative high school to serve as curators of an exhibition at a major cultural institution in Chicago, Illinois. While digital technologies were to play a central role initially in the project, in the end the project shifted away from this focus. As a Community Informatics (CI) student and researcher, this led me to ask whether or not the project was, in fact, an example of Community Informatics at work? While the project addressed issues of social inclusion, was built on a participatory model, and was incubated within a community context, where were the ICTs? How narrowly or broadly should we define Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs)? And, furthermore, is there a danger in overemphasizing, or even fetishizing, the role of modern technology in a manner that sidesteps a better low-tech solution? Can we define technology or ICTs in a manner that includes books, maps, or even museum exhibits?

The project I will examine in the following pages at first may seem simply like an educational project based on a participatory model. But is it Community Informatics? As a student and nascent scholar of the field, this is a question I asked myself upon completing the project. This questioning led me back to Randy Stoecker's essay, “Is Community Informatics

good for communities? Questions confronting an emerging field” (2005). After considering the questions raised by Stoecker, I came away reassured that this was in fact a community informatics project because it put the community and its information needs at the center. As Stoecker urges, the technology must come last, in service of community. In the process of reflecting upon the practice of creating the exhibit project, four core concepts emerged that, I believe, firmly root the project in CI theory:

- 1.) *The participatory model* empowered the students to make materially significant decisions throughout the process and was distinctly if not uniquely in line with the principles of community informatics
- 2.) *Depth of community engagement* – the level of community engagement exceeded initial expectations and involved and intersected with the community in an organic manner
- 3.) *Critical Education as model* – affirmed the relevance of the writings of Paulo Freire to Community Informatics work
- 4.) *The answer doesn't always have to do with computers* – the community's information needs should define the project; the technology should provide a bridge between the community and their information goals

Utilizing the exhibition project as a case study, with critical questions culled from Stoecker's essay, I will address how theory informed practice throughout the course of the exhibit project.

Project Overview

In February 2008 I initiated a project in collaboration with Saúl Meléndez, a teacher at the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School, an alternative school located on Paseo Boricua in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood. The project resulted in the exhibition, *Puerto Rican History through the Eyes of Others*, held from June 2 to July 12, in the public galleries of the Newberry Library, a world-renowned humanities research library and cultural institution in Chicago. The exhibit, curated by students in Meléndez's Puerto Rican history class, was the first-ever exhibition curated by high school students and the first exhibition at the library focused on Puerto Rico. The initial goal of the project was to allow students to learn how to do research using primary sources, while gaining first-hand experience with museum and library studies. The exhibit provided the students with an opportunity to engage with history, while also enabling the students to respond to those that have described and characterized Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans over the centuries.

The project emerged from my ongoing study and work, as a graduate student working and learning within the community of Paseo Boricua as part of the Community Informatics Initiative (CII) of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS). Before the project began, I participated in a Community Informatics graduate class, which performed an information needs assessment and also helped to create an online catalog for the community library. Our classes took place within the community in Chicago, rather than in Urbana-Champaign where the school itself is located.

In February 2008, Saúl Meléndez and I, along with Héctor Vázquez (a Spanish teacher at the high school), headed to the Newberry. Our aim was to see if the project was viable by assessing the wealth of Puerto Rican materials available at the Newberry and to gauge the potential scope and focus of an exhibition. Here we found materials ranging from sixteenth century atlases to a two-volume set of books containing dozens of early photographs of Puerto Rico at the turn of the twentieth century. In one book, *Discours of voyages East & West Indies* from 1598, Puerto Rico was shown on a map as “*Boriquén*,” or the name of the island given to it by the Taínos (the inhabitants of Puerto Rico at the time the Spanish invasion). The map was accompanied by a brief description of the island that referenced folklore about Puerto Rico that persists today, including a story of how a group of Taínos drowned a Spaniard to prove that the Spanish were mortal. An abundance of material was also

discovered covering the Spanish-American War and depictions of Puerto Rico in the United States' popular press at that time. During this initial trip, we stayed for several hours to assess the materials, and finished by having a conversation about how this hands-on experience should inform our next steps and when we should and could bring the students into the Newberry. We also began a conversation with Newberry staff members from readers services, exhibitions, and public programs to coordinate the exhibit and student visits.

In March 2008, students from Saúl Meléndez's Puerto Rican Cultural and History class at the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School all received reader's cards and were given a behind-the-scenes tour of the climate-controlled building where the bulk of the library's materials are stored. Having been introduced to the library, the students began researching the library's large collection of Puerto Rican materials ranging from Spanish manuscripts from the 1600s, original archival photographs, government documents, resources for tracing family histories, and maps from the Renaissance to the Spanish-American War. The student curators worked to research and select the final objects that would be put on display. They helped create the thematic organization, worked to draft the exhibit copy, and then finally to translate the copy into Spanish as part of their Spanish class taught by Héctor Vázquez.

In addition to the public exhibit, each student also imagined a "personal exhibit." Participating students created object lists of items that best represented them with at least three objects chosen by people close to them (family, friends, teachers, etc.). This empowered students to think of themselves within the context of history, while also practicing their skills of interpretation and critical, descriptive writing. At the end of the project a survey-report provided a means for the students to reflect on how their perceptions and understanding of primary sources, libraries, and history had been changed or deepened through the project.

Framing the Project within a Community Context

The reach of the exhibit project extended beyond the community of participating high school students. The project was enthusiastically supported by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and was viewed by PRCC leaders as important to the community as a whole. Defining community is never easy, but to understand the impact and significance of the project one needs to understand something of the richness and complexities inherent in the Puerto Rican community in Chicago and the community of Paseo Boricua specifically. "Community" is a complicated concept in Paseo Boricua; it is one imbued with complications bound up in history, culture, and politics both international and local. The exhibit connected to these complications in unexpected ways. Discussions of colonialism led organically to students discussing their feelings about gentrification. The history of Spanish imperialism and the slave trade led students to reflect on the legacy of racism. And ultimately the exhibit itself, situated at a major cultural institution outside of the geographical space of the community, provided a voice and encouraged a dialogue that spoke back to history and reinterpreted an archive that contained few Puerto Rican voices.

The exhibit project originated from my previous work with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC) and the community of Paseo Boricua. Stoecker states that "the only way to determine what information technologies are appropriate for a given community is to find out, first, about the community itself and, second, about the information the community is trying to get or use" (21). One useful resource in understanding the community was the information needs assessment survey completed in the fall of 2007 as part of a Community Informatics course on "Professional Research in Action." The findings of the assessment, which I contributed to as part of the class, illustrated the perceived importance of libraries within the community, in particular amongst the leadership of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. (The Puerto Rican Cultural Center holds and manages its own community library.) It also illustrated the fact that current community work (which ranges from operating an HIV/AIDS prevention center to a community newspaper and participatory democracy project) was rooted

in a rich understanding of history that encompassed both the history of the local community as well as the history of Puerto Rico generally.

The information needs assessment was one way of finding out about the community, but, perhaps more important than this was the four months of studying and working within the community, and reading scholarship produced within and about the community before the project was initiated. During this time I came to know something of the reality of the community. I came to know the leaders of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and the teachers and staff of the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School. I had casual conversations at the local coffee house and bakery, Café Colao. I participated directly in PRCC programs such as helping high school students deliver copies of *La Voz*, the community newspaper, to local businesses. I attended cultural events such as plays and films. Even walking and riding my bicycle through the neighborhood was informative. Through all of these activities, a more complicated vision of the community took shape. I came to appreciate the community and better understand its history, its politics, and its day-to-day functioning. More importantly, I would not have proposed this project in this form without this knowledge.

To understand the significance of the exhibit project to the community itself, one must have a deeper understanding of the community. The community cannot be concisely described with either spatial or identity characteristics (Stoecker 17). A simplistic distillation of the community along either of these lines alone calls to mind immediate and misleading binaries (the subtle shadings of which, I would only later come to appreciate). Space within the neighborhood of Humboldt Park is obviously contested. New condominiums in various states of construction and “gut rehabs” could be seen on the many side streets, but the two giant steel Puerto Rican flags on Division Street at Western Avenue to the east and California Avenue to the west, offered a different narrative about space. The “Humboldt Park *No Se Vende*” signs in many windows helped fill in the narrative. Humboldt Park is not for sale some signs indicate. While the realtor signs placed in front of luxury condos seemed to say otherwise.

If space was contested, questions of identity were also apparent, if not as visibly obvious. Even within the Puerto Rican community itself conflict was apparent. At least one book has been dedicated to addressing this (Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas’ *National Performances: The Politics of Class, Race, and Space in Puerto Rican Chicago*). It is far too easy to engage in an oversimplified analysis of “nationalists” seeking independence for Puerto Rico and “statehooders” hoping that Puerto Rico will become the 51st state. That is to say nothing of a simple division along the lines of Puerto Ricans and non-Puerto Ricans within the geographic community. In her book-length study, Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas describes the community as highly politicized with a “keen characterization of itself in historical, global, and imaginative terms” (viii). Her subject is what she identifies as the “performance” of Puerto Rican identity, in which she sees most residents taking part despite a plurality of political and ideological differences (iv). In other words, many people identify proudly as Puerto Rican and this identity manifests itself in many commonly shared ways, even amongst those with vastly divergent political views. She too addresses the complex political differences and seeming contradictions of the community. In her memoir/essay “Cuando nosotros vivíamos...: Stories of Displacement and Settlement in Puerto Rican Chicago” (2001), M. Alicea tells how her parents forbid her from going anywhere near Division Street or Humboldt Park because it was seen as a center of radicalism and “*los independentistas*” (181). Yet at the same time she acknowledges that even as a child this same forbidden area was seen as the center of the Puerto Rican community (182). Gentrification, gangs and violence, and politics can be seen as marking space within the community, or dividing the same community into several related communities, and these perceived borders are constantly shifting and merging over time.

The Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School and the Puerto Rican Cultural Center are located in the epicenter of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center Alicea describes. Both institutions are actively engaged in preserving the history of the community—especially the struggles of the community. Both institutions took shape from these struggles, especially from the “riots” in Humboldt Park in the 1960s and the community leadership that emerged.

Both PACHS and the PRCC see local struggles in a broader context of anti-colonial struggle (Rinaldo 137). In her essay, “Space of resistance: The Puerto Rican Cultural Center and Humboldt Park,” Rachel Rinaldo spells out the simile in plain terms. She writes:

Puerto Rico remains economically, socially, and physically marginal, on the periphery of the United States. The relationship of mainland Puerto Rican barrios to U.S. cities like New York and Chicago is comparable. (160)

Rinaldo makes the point that while most residents may not think in terms of colonialism, many within the community are concerned or angry about the gentrification of their neighborhood (158). In this way, the history of Puerto Rico informs the ongoing community dialogue in both explicit and implicit ways. Perhaps, because of this, the student curators involved with the project had a means of connecting the project with the circumstances of their lives. In their final evaluation surveys, many of the students described the library as a time machine or portal taking them back to the past. And many noted that it allowed them to see where it is that they came from. And the conversations we had during the project indicated that it provided the students with a new means for thinking about where they were today.

Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School and Critical Pedagogy

In the 2008 Yearbook for the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos high school Matt Rodríguez, in his “Message from the Assistant Director,” explains that the high school was started in the 1970s to address a 70% “dropout/pushout rate.” “The statistic,” Rodríguez explains, “reflected a social context of racism, discrimination and marginalization [through a curriculum] designed and delivered without considering the complex realities of Puerto Rican youth” (3). The high school was started after a group of Puerto Rican teachers and students were fired or expelled after organizing several strikes demanding bilingual education and Puerto Rican history classes for a student body that was mostly Puerto Rican; furthermore, the disciplinary action was taken because students and teachers refused to salute the U.S. flag in protest and as a show of support for Puerto Rican independence (Ramos-Zayas 73). In his yearbook message, Rodríguez notes that the dropout rate in Humboldt Park has not improved significantly since the 1970’s and he states that the high school remains an important alternative space for education (3).

Rodríguez, who assumed the position of principal in the fall of 2008, also describes the schools pedagogical approach as being one of “critical education” or critical pedagogy. He describes the school as:

At the cutting edge of pedagogical innovation, our classroom instruction replaces rote memorization with an emphasis on developing higher order thinking skills of inquiry and analysis, primarily through project and problem based learning. What inspires and motivates the students is that the problems addressed in their classes are derived from generative themes from the community and the world. (3)

The work of the late Paolo Freire, known as one of the leading proponents of critical pedagogy, informs the curricula and practice of the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School. For Freire the individual and the context of the individual’s life must be taken into account and acknowledged within the process of education. Our project, more than I at first understood, allowed for discussion to be generated that encompassed the students’ own experiences even within the rigorous framework of having to meet the deadlines required for the exhibit to occur.

As the vision for the exhibition project evolved, the experience of my collaborator in the classroom and the underlying philosophy of critical pedagogy that informed his daily practice,

greatly informed the direction we would take. The exhibit incorporated democratic components. Students selected books from the catalog. Students decided on how the books should be placed in cases. Students even elected to place the Spanish descriptions before the English ones in the exhibit cases. Students were also faced with making critical decisions under the constraints of the project. Students had to interpret the books they selected to see if they were significant to include. They had to decide why they were important and what should be said about them in the description. They had to decide collectively how and why to group the objects within the cases and within the gallery.

Freire's ideas about critical learning go beyond mere specifications for the student, and herein lies perhaps the greatest connection with the community informatics Stoecker reaches towards.¹ Of critical learning, Freire writes:

In these conditions, those who are engaged in critical learning know that their teachers are continuously in the process of acquiring new knowledge and that this new knowledge cannot simply be transferred to them, the learners. At the same time, in the context of true learning, the learners will be engaged in a continuous transformation through which they become authentic subjects of the construction and reconstruction of what is being taught, side by side with the teacher, who is equally subject to the same process. (33)

One can imagine this section being rewritten so as to articulate the same process but in a CI context. The CI researcher is not left to drift above this process, like a scientist distantly watching an experiment unfold. Rather, the CI researcher is actively engaged with the community, learning from and amidst the community, with the common goal of putting information to work for purposes defined by the community. The community is engaged in a process of gathering, organizing, or processing information in a manner and toward an end that the community has identified as important or useful. At the same time they are becoming empowered with new tools or expertise to better address their problems in the future and meet their needs collectively. Becoming "authentic subjects" can also be understood as a plurality, in other words, the leveraging, promoting, and attaining of community cohesion around core concepts or goals, what Freire calls, "knowledge socially constructed in communitarian praxis" (36). The process equally (though perhaps differently) transforms both community and researcher alike.

Perhaps there is a danger here of overstating the power of "popular" methodologies, of singing the praises of handing the technological means of production to the people with the expectation that the project will blossom. In the process, of organizing the plan for the exhibit, Meléndez and I made every effort to leave the decision making to the students. While the students themselves selected items from the catalog, the number of items were limited by the library and subjected to space and conservation limitations. Students were expected to meet deadlines that were organized around the Newberry's exhibit schedule. Meléndez and I were affected by these limitations, as were the students. While I had some experience writing exhibit copy, I had never played a major role throughout the entire cycle of creating an exhibition. I also could not read or speak Spanish and initially knew little about Puerto Rican

¹ Stoecker does cite Paulo Freire as a model for community informatics, especially Freire's ideas regarding "popular education." See Stoecker p. 22.

history. Meléndez came to the project with a rich understanding of Puerto Rican history, but had never used the Newberry Library before and had to familiarize himself with the limitations of the Special Collections reading rooms. More significantly when he agreed to do the project, he knew little about putting together a professional exhibit and his enthusiasm for the project was coupled with cautious skepticism about our ability to curate an exhibit with high school students in only a four month period. His skepticism was warranted. I at times wondered to myself whether it was possible for us to meet our deadlines. Though we never voiced these concerns to one another at the time, after the project we both voiced that we had second thoughts at one time or another during the course of the project.

Freire writes, that “Freedom without limit is as impossible as freedom that is suffocated or contracted. If it were without limit, it would take me outside of the sphere of human action, intervention, or struggle in its own name” (96). While we tried to give the students as many choices as possible, to encourage and enable them to explore their own interests, our role was to structure the experience with the hope of providing the maximum benefit for the students while meeting all of our deadlines. In other words, we had to enforce limitations. The students saw plainly our concerns about deadlines and they recognized that we too were learning and discovering as we went along. One particular student, who was admitted to the school after recently arriving from Puerto Rico, spoke English only hesitantly. He was obviously overwhelmed—or perhaps underwhelmed, is the more appropriate word—with the prospect of spending time in a fortress-like library several blocks from school in Chicago’s Gold Coast neighborhood. However, on the second visit to the library when I openly confessed to him that I could read nothing from the 16th century Spanish manuscript he was looking at, he was able to translate contents of the book for me as needed, which we could then discuss together. He realized he was teaching me. He later would patiently spend 3 hours pouring over the pages looking for a reference to Puerto Rico.

In Freire’s writing, we find a means for understanding how challenges and limitations can serve to enhance collaboration and understanding in a manner that is neither authoritarian nor oppressive, what Freire refers to as a sense of limit ethically integrated with freedom itself (96). Our task as community informatics practitioners is to find or make the space within the limits and requirements of our project to remain open to new ideas and knowledge, to discover and to solve problems. As project facilitators, Meléndez and I strove to ensure that our goals were met, but we also encouraged the students to realize the relevance of the project to their own lives and experience. In turn the students helped to meet the goals, and we as project facilitators also were engaged in reflecting on the materials we too were confronting. The student with the 16th century manuscript realized he had an exceptional skill and ability among the group and could thus provide a unique and largely self-directed contribution. In many instances like this one, Meléndez and I were able to confess our uncertainty or limitations, while firmly understanding and managing our responsibilities. Because of this working ethos, which evolved as we went along, the students grew increasingly engaged and ultimately on the day of the opening they emerged as enthusiastic docents, clearly articulating the processes and reasoning that went into making the exhibit possible.

Conclusion

Without an understanding of local struggles and local histories, it is difficult to articulate the importance and relevance of an exhibition of primary sources relating to the history of Puerto Rico over 500 years. During the course of the project, conversations about a promissory note for a Spanish slave ship led to a conversation about how the legacy of racism continued to affect the community. Through beautiful photographs of Puerto Rico at the turn of the century, descriptions of the legacy and culture of the indigenous Tainos, a racist diary entry of an American soldier fighting in the Spanish-American war, and government documents outlining changes in the status of Puerto Rico under Spain and the United States, students were confronted with a complicated, polyvocal, and often contradictory vision of

Puerto Rico. This vision engaged them with the objects of history and brought them in dialogue with the past. It led to conversations about how their present reality relates to the past and how they themselves might someday be viewed within the context of history.

Every CI researcher and practitioner brings his or her skills to their particular projects, and this of course informs the shape and direction of a project even if community members play a critical role in creating, enabling, and evaluating a project. My previous graduate work, before coming to the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science, focused on the study of “the history of the book” and early printing practices. I was also previously employed by the Newberry Library before attending graduate school and this certainly helped make the project a reality, as I understood the inner workings of the organization.

If I were a computer scientist or a web designer, I probably would have engaged in a very different project. But from the start, I set out to apply the concepts I had learned and seen practiced within the field of community informatics. My initial planning envisioned the student-centered exhibits published online as a compliment to the exhibit of materials in the Newberry Library’s gallery. What I learned was that the process of having the students create exhibits of themselves was in fact a good idea. The idea of putting it online however, would have taken much needed time and resources away from the other activities and deadlines. Or, even worse, it could have ultimately been seen as taking away the students’ subjectivity and making them the objects of an exhibition. The digital component fell out of the project. Was it still Community Informatics? I think so.

In the end, the impact of the project exceeded my expectations and deepened my understanding of Community Informatics work and the possibilities therein. It also serves as evidence that students from an alternative high school, in an area plagued by high dropout rates, can have a voice within a cultural space usually only occupied by scholars. The Newberry Library has expressed interest in doing another exhibit next year. Saúl Meléndez and I are working to formalize the process and create a model and curriculum to be utilized by other schools and other institutions. Another exhibit will be planned during the course of an entire school year. Repeating the project, within a longer timeframe, will provide an opportunity to better assess and quantify outcomes.

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