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## **Social Studies Teacher Educator as Journalist: My Experiences at the Mexican-American Border and in Washington on January 6th**

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**Abstract:** As an academic, it is easy to unintentionally become disconnected in a tangible way from the issues and individuals at the center of one's research. There are numerous ways to ensure greater engagement at the community and national level, but one that has been especially relevant in my work as a social studies teacher educator is in the area of journalism, particularly in my areas of research and teaching regarding immigration and democratic education. This article lays out my journalistic experiences both at the asylum camps at the Mexican-American Border in the midst of former President Trump's Remain in Mexico Policy and at the attempted insurrection in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021. The experiences have clarified the importance of public scholarship, the need for a reexamination of some academic research protocols, and the way this public engagement can enhance classroom teaching particularly in the social studies education setting where

journalistic perspectives on current events can be particularly relevant to course discussions.

**Keywords:** immigration, journalism, activist professional, democratic education

The work of academics has often been described as working in the ivory tower (Buckley & Du Toit, 2010; Care & Kim, 2012). Though this characterization is at times unfair, there is an ease for those in academia to retreat into a more secluded spot and become disconnected to even some of the topics they are researching. As scholars in the field of education, it is often easier to extend beyond this academic bubble by engaging with schools and students in the local setting. However, particularly in the field of social studies education, I have found this engagement can also bleed into forms of journalism. I have had opportunities recently to take this more journalistic approach both in the asylum camps at Mexican-American

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border and at the attempted insurrection of January 6th, 2021 in Washington, D.C.

### **The Nexus of Journalism and Academic Research**

There are surprising similarities and obvious differences between the roles of researchers and journalists. One difference Post (2014) highlights is that journalists overall thought they could be more objective when collecting specific facts, but were less likely to think they could be objective when seeking to describe broader phenomenon or describing causes and consequences. While academics relied more on specific methodologies. Journalists sought to have the facts “speak for themselves” (p. 14). Another difference that Baser and Martin (2020) describe is journalists often wanting to cover stories in ways that may cross ethical lines while academics may go to the other extreme and not be willing to pursue some more sensitive issues out of excessive caution. This sometimes causes issues with collaboration.

Gandy (2001) highlights how journalists are often the ones who provide the raw data; however, this information needs to be analyzed more carefully by academics, including the need to look for biases in the data especially when dealing with sensitive topics. Furthermore, there is a need for public intellectuals who “are also likely to provide the ‘common sense’ understandings that ordinary citizens adopt as their own” (p. 155). Lugo-Ocando (2015) argues in regard to academic journalism, in particular, that scholars need to understand their social responsibility, which they have been

accused of abandoning. On the other hand, journalists should not use the shortcomings of academics as an excuse for “their lack of engagement with what is by far the only available and credible body of work concerning practice” (p. 347). These authors seem to point to the need for journalists and academics to learn from each other rather than to operate in two impenetrable spheres.

### **Social Justice and Multiculturalism in Teacher Education**

This work also relates to the idea of teacher educators promoting social justice and multiculturalism in the classroom. As Gallavan (2000) highlights, there can be resistance among pre-service teachers to the discussion of justice and multiculturalism and how teaching these courses is often more demanding than courses that do not include these themes. However, as Gay (2013) stresses a focus on multicultural education improves the educational experiences of marginalized groups and prepares all students to become better citizens. This focus on multicultural education has particular relevance when dealing with real world events such as the migrant camps at the border or the events of January 6th. Cherng and Davis (2019) found that students with multicultural beliefs were more prepared to have a strong classroom environment. Tied to a vibrant multicultural education is one that stresses a vibrant social justice education that moves beyond just a focus on diversity to one in which “social change and activism central to the vision of teaching and learning (is) promoted” and where teaching is connected to the larger social justice movements in the society

(McDonald & Zeichner, 2009, p. 597).

### **The Activist Professional**

This pedagogical approach and my journalist work is grounded in the ideas of the activist professional (Sachs, 2000) where “trust, obligation and solidarity work together in complementary ways (p. 81) and one based on generative politics that “allows and encourages individuals and groups to make things happen rather than to let things happen to them” (p.85). Sachs acknowledges that this work is not easy and will at times take an element of risk compared to traditional academic professionalism; however, the benefits outweigh these risks. Kelly-Jackson (2015) explores her own journey of being a type of activist teacher educator and details some of the pushback she received from students, the dangers of being overly heavy handed in implementing the approach, while also stressing the need not to give up on this more activist or social justice approach. Bond and Paterson (2005) describe how many of their academic research subjects have found ways to move down from the “ivory tower” and engage in community work on the local, state, and national level. At times, this work can be “mutually beneficial” with their career goals, but many also explore this work even if at times there can be disincentives on both a personal and professional level (p.347).

### **Positionality**

I am a white male professor in my mid 30s living in the American South. I understand that this reality provides me certain privileges in doing the work particularly

related to the experiences on January 6th. People of color may have had particular difficulty being given equal respect or relative safety given the often white supremacist stances of those at the insurrection. I do also understand the limitations my positionality has given me in regard to my understanding of some of the experiences at the border as I have not faced the type of discrimination based on race or gender or more particularly in relation to immigration status and national origin. Despite the limitations this positionality brings, I have been able to gain some foundations for conducting this type of work through living in Latin America for four years, speaking Spanish, and working with immigrants extensively in the United States. Additionally, I have been able to be a board member and travel with a non-profit, Practice Mercy, that works directly with asylum seekers. This position has given me unique opportunities in being more intricately involved with the experiences of asylum seekers that has created more access than many journalists would have. Conversely, this position has made me both more protective in how stories are covered than a traditional journalist while also taking on a more advocate-based role.

### **Journalistic Experiences**

#### ***Mexican-American Border***

My primary journalistic work has taken place in Matamoros, Mexico across from Brownsville, Texas where the border camp was erected after former President Donald Trump’s Migration Protocol Policy (MPP or “Remain in Mexico Policy”) was enacted in 2019, which forced those seeking to

asylum to stay in Mexico (Montoya-Galvez, 2019). I traveled to the border a total of five times from November of 2019 to March 2021. I entered the camp with a non-profit who sought to intentionally build relationships with those in the camp and thus truly understand and center the voices and experiences of those seeking asylum. Part of the experience involved recording their stories in order to share their stories with my immediate network and beyond. Many of these recordings were done through audio recordings, though some were also video recordings and live video. Much of this work was conducted in the camp during the leadup to the 2020 election to emphasize what was at stake in the election and ensure that this was part of the larger discussion in the midst of a chaotic election. Though there was some coverage of the situation in Matamoros, especially because of COVID this was not central in the larger national discussion.

Some of the stories were extremely sensitive and would perhaps have had trouble going through a traditional IRB, but despite those realities, individuals wanted their stories to be circulated as they felt like they were being forgotten in the camp. For many, any possible risks they faced by telling their stories was less than the danger of not speaking out and allowing the status quo to continue. One of the most memorable days was when we had a protest on the U.S. side of the border in regard to MPP and that same day there was a protest in the camp led by one of the migrant leaders within the camp. We recorded the experience of those behind the barbed wire gate who were being forced to stay in Mexico due to the U.S.

immigration policies. Some took part in this protest despite the personal risk. Several of the non-profit leaders were angry about the migrants leading this protest as they were fearful of the response of the Mexican government, but many of the individuals felt they had no choice even it caused a backlash. It was their chance to be heard.

Most of the individuals in the camp were able to enter the U.S. after MPP was ended by the Joe Biden Administration in early 2020. I was there just a week before most were allowed to enter. We documented some of their stories including a prayer vigil they had in freezing temperatures days before entering when there was still uncertainty of the policy being enacted. We also focused on the need for the U.S. government to also accept the small group of Mexican asylum seekers in the camp who were not technically included in MPP.

Though these asylum seekers were allowed to enter, many of the issues that plagued immigration under former President Donald Trump continued under President Joe Biden, particularly Title 42 which does not allow people to seek asylum due to COVID-19 concerns (Devereux, 2021). This caused more unaccompanied minors to enter the United States as they were the only ones allowed to stay. It also caused a similar humanitarian crisis to occur in Reynosa where a makeshift camp was erected (Aguilera, 2021). This new “camp” may have had less public outrage given the change in administration. Given this reality, this was a time when this journalistic approach was especially needed.

I was able to enter Reynosa in May 2021, months after the Biden Administration had started. I saw how the Title 42 policies were still affecting the lives of those at the border. There were substantive changes from the Trump Administration, such as allowing some of those with the most desperate cases to enter and largely allowing families with children under the age of 6 to stay with their parents in the U.S. if they were caught by Border Patrol. However, the actual legal land entries were still blocked for those who were not U.S. citizens and residents. This meant that most individuals had to go through the cartels and pay thousands of dollars to cross the Rio Grande River. In an indirect way, the U.S. governments' policies were directly bolstering organized crime. This reality at the river not only costs migrants thousands of dollars but puts their lives in grave danger. These policies also caused hundreds of people to be stuck in the local park in Reynosa. Some had tents, but many of them were forced to sleep in large groups under tarps in the gazebo. These people are in grave danger of being kidnapped and abused. I remember mothers talking about how they could not sleep at night due to the terror of what might happen to their children. In many ways, the situation was actually worse than it had been in Matamoros. There was little to no room for children to play and sanitation issues and overcrowding were an even greater concern with greater barriers for non-profits.

Much of this work was more humanitarian-based and also set the groundwork for future research opportunities. However, this also led into the area of journalism, whether this was a formal write-up

experience of the situation at the border camp for three newspapers (Author, 2019; 2021a, 2021b), hosting a forum at the university, or publishing videos through social media to help raise awareness of what was occurring in the camp. Many of the insights given in this article were also highlighted in these journalistic spaces.

As a professor, I was also able to share the experiences with my students and help them think through some of the issues that were raised through the trips. We related it back to issues of immigrant students, which has been a central topic in my educational foundations courses, both at the graduate and undergraduate level. In particular, the experience of asylum seekers at the border could be related to the class readings about the hardship of immigrant students in American history whether this was the anti-Catholic discrimination of the 19th Century or the anti-native language policies in states like Texas in the early 20th Century. What I found was that there was more openness of students to the discussion on immigration due to the work with which I was engaged. It was not just a professor talking about a certain topic or trying to persuade students in a certain direction, rather it was taking the recent personal experiences and the stories that were captured through that experience and their relation to issues of justice and equity.

### ***Washington, D.C.***

Something similar occurred in January of 2021 when I went to Washington D.C. to film the protests on January 6th. I had been actively following the issues of the election as someone in the field of foundations and social studies education

and had discussed these issues in depth with my students. We specifically discussed the role that social media can play in spreading false information and the danger of these false narratives for the stability of the country after the 2020 election. Almost daily in the social studies education class that fall of 2020 we talked about the stability of the republic in light of what was occurring.

I drove to D.C. thinking that it might be a little hectic, but I had no idea it would evolve into what occurred. Most of the day consisted of me going up and asking individuals if I could record them, letting them know that I was an independent journalist from Charleston, and I would like to get their thoughts on the election and understand why they were there. I was particularly interested in what their thoughts were behind the beliefs of the election being stolen. I also was interested in what their ideas were in regard to justifications for violence in these types of situations. Given my demographic make-up as a white male, the part of the country I am from, and my neutral attire for the day, many opened up to me in ways that may have been more difficult for other journalists. I certainly did not enter the conversations in a combative stance or looking to break down their conspiracy theories, but rather to make them comfortable enough to actually express their ideas about what was occurring in order to document it.

I was able to obtain some pretty revealing answers, both about the reasons they believed the election was stolen and the explanations for why even those like

Trump ally and former Attorney General, Bill Barr, and the Supreme Court had sided “against” Trump. There were also some fairly direct statements from those I interviewed presenting the idea that there would be violence if they did not get their way with the election outcome. On one hand, I began to suspect that events could turn in a violent direction, but I had a stronger feeling that those making these statements were all bluster without any real actions. In many ways, I was more focused on the cold than I was about any threats of violence.

As Trump was beginning to give his speech that morning, I walked down to the capitol to see what was going on. There were barricades around the building, and only a few people there. There were people with signs and images that showed a deep level of Christian nationalism, which became focused on more intently after the events of that day. The Capitol was fairly calm and empty, but after former President Trump’s speech the people started marching down the National Mall. I could hear people saying that Trump was actually going to come down and join them. After Trump’s speech, more people began gathering around the Capitol. In some ways, the event seemed rather small to me. I had gone to the Women’s March in 2017, and this protest seemed tiny in comparison. Though the national implications of that day are large, the actual size of the event was not historic. I did not get as close to the group growing near the Capitol, not so much out of a fear of violence but rather wanting to avoid entering a tight crowd, as at that point I was not eligible for the COVID vaccine

and most of the people were not wearing masks. I was wearing two masks, partially because of the cold, but it did likely cause some looks and suspicion from the crowd. Surprisingly, there were not many counter-protesters there that day, but I was able to interview one solitary man who was holding up signs against what he saw as the threat of Trump.

There were some ominous signals of the violence to come. I do remember asking one man about a sign he had about the traitors hanging from the gallows. He got a little defensive with the question and said it was his family members. As I was getting ready to leave, I heard something that sounded like tear gas canisters and noticed some smoke coming from the Capitol. I heard someone saying that the Capitol Building had been breached, but I assumed that this was just another myth that had been propagated like so many I had heard that day. I got back on the metro to get to my car and then headed out of town. It was not until I was back in my car and called my mom that I found out what had occurred at the Capitol. The interviews and my experience took on a specific significance after those realities came to light.

Just like with the trips to the border, I was able to write about these experiences for a local newspaper (McCorkle 2021c), share the videos extensively on social media, and integrate the experiences within my classroom, particularly the focus that I place on social media literacy, conspiracy theories, and the centrality of these themes to protecting our democratic institutions. We discussed this specifically after having the students independently watch the film

The Social Dilemma (Orlowksi, 2020), which examines the role that social media plays in promoting conspiracies and ultimately endangering the democracy. I also showed some of my own videos from the 6th with those all but calling for violence. This class discussion occurred in late January, 2021 when it was quite fresh in the students' minds and at the center of the political discussion in the nation at the time. It certainly highlighted the urgency and relevance of democratic education in 2021 and the importance of taking a critical approach to citizenship education.

## **Discussion**

There have been several major lessons I have learned from serving in this pseudo-journalistic role as an educator. The first is the good intentions of institutional research boards are often not attached to the realities of life. If we want to break out of the ivory tower, we must take on a more journalistic approach at times. As Baser and Martin (2020) highlight, there is a tendency for academics to avoid sensitive topics due to the realities of their universities. Bringing in a journalistic lens may be able assist in this effort. I remember the difficulties I had getting IRB approval to do simple interviews with people in the camp who had at the same time appeared in the New York Times with their stories. I also submitted an IRB before the trip to Washington. Given the short time frame, it was not accepted in time. However, I did later get an explanation that it would not have been accepted due to the COVID concerns as well as the danger to participants. These barriers in many ways seems disconnected

from reality and the most pressing issues of the society. They can prevent researchers from important on the ground work, which not only could be covered from a journalistic perspective, but would also be helpful to be used in later scholarship.

While we should certainly take precautions to legitimately protect people, bureaucracy and being overly protective at times can impede publishing important work and actually enacting change. While journalists are putting out stories with peoples' faces across the nation, we are more restricted in similar research that will go into an academic journal, often years after the data has been collected with pseudonyms being used. The disconnect between the two is quite strong. This is especially the case with more breaking events that could be used in research that cannot go through some of the bureaucracy of the IRB process. This is not an attempt to critique the IRB at my university as they were actually far more accommodating than many IRB boards would be, but it is rather due to the larger structural realities. Of course, even though journalists do not have the same rigorous standards as the IRB, this does not mean that they do not have ethical standards to consider. The Society of Professional Journalists (2014) have provided some broad standards including seeking to reduce harm while trying to provide needed public information, avoiding conflicts of interest, being honest if mistakes were made in reporting, and serving as a type of check on power in the society.

I have realized more from being involved in this work that there is a great importance in conducting public research and scholarship.

In the case of both of these areas at the border and with the January 6th insurrection, by the time the information is finally published in an academic journal, it is often no longer relevant and will be read by few. Thus, the larger societal impact is quite limited. Our research, particularly those in the field of multicultural and social justice education, should not be just for other academic audiences, but they should be for the general population if we hope to enact change. As Sears (2019) highlights, it is a necessity for academics to bring their work to the public as experts in their field. If not, oftentimes academics who have no real expertise in an area will become the spokesperson for that area. As Gandy (2001) stresses, public intellectuals can find ways to bring these ideas in a tangible and understandable way to the public.

This relates to the larger question of what we want our research to accomplish. Are we looking for it to merely add to the academic repertoire to be cited by a few other academics, to get us tenure and promotion, or are we looking for works which will actually impact the social fabric? I remember when I was in graduate school, and I wrote extensively for the local newspaper. I remember some in the academic setting would almost see it as something that was cute and trite, but not something to invest too much effort into. I understand on one hand that this type of work will not lead to job offers or tenure, but from a social reconstructionist perspective (Counts, 1932), it fulfills the very reason for education in improving the society.



There are certainly scholars that have filled in that gap and have become public individuals. Two of the most famous of the 20th Century were the MIT linguist, Noam Chomsky, and Boston University Historian, Howard Zinn. As Helfenbein and Jackson (2013) state, Zinn took his ideas beyond just words to actual action and civil disobedience. As they state, “Zinn’s feet follow his prayer.” It certainly comes with great risk, especially for those who are not tenured who are told to just keep their head down, stay out of controversy, and do their job. This is perhaps especially true in relation with local news stories, which can be often particularly volatile.

Finally, what I have discovered by serving in these journalistic roles is the impact they can have on my classroom by bringing topics that arose from the trips into the classroom. The videos of real-life experiences are often more tangible to the students, and these then can be integrated in with more theoretical works and discussions. In both cases, I was able to actually integrate these experiences with topics that were present in my foundations and social studies education courses.

This work can also resonate firmly with the ideas of multicultural education, social justice, and equity. In the case of the trip to the border, it was through centering the stories and experiences of individuals that are often marginalized and forgotten. It also could help education students relate to the larger issue of right for immigrants in the society and their future classrooms. In examining these experiences, it is not just relevant to the particular individuals currently at the border but also to the future immigrant students. The experience from January 6th could also highlight the dangers

of what occurs when there is not a vibrant and critical multicultural education. What is the long-term impact when teachers do not want to or are prohibited from discussion themes related to a more critical citizenship education?

Through integrating these experiences into the classroom, students can consider the long-term implications their own pedagogy. As Ladson-Billings (2008) highlights, teachers have to learn to look beyond just the immediate time the student are in their classroom and instead enter into the broader social realities that affect their lives. Mayorga and Picower (2018) stress the need for teacher educators to take a stance of “active solidarity” with movements for justice (p. 215). They apply this idea to the work of Black Lives Matter, but similar arguments could be made in regard to moves towards rights for immigrants or against white supremacy/anti-democracy movements.

As teacher educators the more we can create experiences for students to move beyond abstract ideas to understanding lived realities of individuals, the greater opportunities there can be for more equitable beliefs to emerge (McCorkle, 2018). Simply giving a lecture about my beliefs about the borders and migration may have had an impact with some students who may have already agreed ideologically, but it would be far less effective than my reflections on an experience I had engaged with personally. It is harder to merely discount or reject the ideas. I have found the same dynamic when I have had DREAMers speak to my education students. During my graduate studies, I worked with a group of students from a particularly conservative

background. I remember some of the comments regarding how impactful the experience was hearing from the immigrant students directly and how it at least problematized their simplistic manner of thinking on immigration and rights for immigrants. Some students might still consider themselves as conservatives, but they could no longer accept the simplistic narratives regarding immigration they had previously believed.

The same principle could be applied to the highly volatile issue of the insurrection on January 6th. Though it is still possible for some students to reject the experiences of a professor (or any individual) that gave their account of their actions of the day, it is more difficult than it is for someone who is just repeating tired talking points that are coming from a certain political persuasion. When I was filming individuals cheering for violence to occur if Trump was not allowed to remain as president, it is more difficult to just dismiss. Though teacher educators are not going to have personal experiences in regard to every issue that is being discussed, they should be intentional in providing students' opportunities to hear from individuals that can relate personally to the larger issue being addressed, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. While reading articles or watching videos can be a good start, real tangible conversations with individuals can be the most transformative. I have found this especially important as a white male teaching certain course. I can talk about race, immigration, or the struggles of the rural South, but it is not nearly as impactful as if I can make intentional space for speakers that can attest to their own experiences.

Education students could also be encouraged

to engage with their own journalistic projects. Though this may not be an interest for all students, having students engage in a more wholistic way, particularly in their local communities can allow them to not only gain a greater sense of the needs of the community but also what role they play as future educators. As Barnes (2017) highlights, this type of community-based experience that is grounded in the idea of reciprocity is particularly important for students from more privileged backgrounds who may not understand the relationship between power, place, and education. One simple way I have allowed my foundations students to enter into this type work is through their current event projects. I previously had them just research information and then discuss their findings with the class. This last semester, from the example of one of my previous mentors, I had students interview community members, teachers, family, or friends that have specific experiences or expertise related to a particular issue related to education. They then integrated these interviews into a larger video on the topic. In a small way, they are learning the value of a form of journalism in expanding their understanding of education and social justice.

As social studies teacher educators, it is important for students to see us engaged with society in the present. Students often are very open about their embrace of professors that seem to be connected to the school system as opposed to those who seem so far removed from the system that they no longer tangibly understand the realities that teachers face. The same can be seen in regard to larger social issues. It is often easy to fall into a type of group

think and distorted thinking when living in an academic bubble. Expanding into different social realities can deepen and nuance this thinking. Zlotkowski and Williams (2003) argue that academics need to join together across disciplines to share their work and collaborate. They also argue that this engagement needs to be more direct as simply learning about issues abstractly will not naturally lead to greater civic engagement with students.

## Conclusion

Not every professor needs to become an activist, journalist, or community organizer. With the demands that are put on many in modern academia, it is difficult to meet the required duties, much less take on these other social roles. However, as social studies educators, it is important to reach for a balance and to keep at least one foot outside of academia to enrich our research and teaching. On a global, national, and local level there are ways for social studies educators to engage in the current realities. As educators take on a more embodied presence in the community, not only does the academy become more vibrant but hopefully there will be a substantial societal impact as well.

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