

COMMENTARY

Designing an Assignment on Undocumented Migration: It's All About Framing

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Abstract

Teaching about undocumented Mexican migration means teaching about an issue often seen as controversial. In many contexts, assumptions students bring with them can inhibit their ability to engage with nuance to more effectively understand the issue. It is therefore imperative that instructors deliver this information in a way that allows students to see such nuance. This article details an essay assignment I use to teach about undocumented Mexican migration in the context of the political and economic frameworks that help drive it. A key feature of this assignment is its use of "decoupling," or separating the issue at hand from ideologies and associations surrounding it in order to facilitate understanding. Use of this strategy helps students understand this complex issue in a way, it is hoped, they can apply to complex issues beyond.

Keywords: migration; controversy; decoupling

Introduction

Teaching about immigration in the United States, especially with a focus on undocumented migration from Mexico, does not merely involve imparting information. Discourse around immigration is highly politicized and, even if everyone has the same information, contentiousness emerging from the U.S. political landscape underlies the discussion. This contentiousness comes in with both students and instructors and is shaped by what they have seen and heard in media accounts, what their parents may have told them, and their personal and professional experiences.

Teaching about immigration demands that instructors confront this contentiousness not as a side note, but as a central part of our approach. In this article I discuss an essay assignment I created, "Global Connections in Politics and Economy: Understanding Undocumented Mexican Migration to the U.S.," to help students explore undocumented Mexican migration. I focus on how framing the assignment effectively can lead to more nuanced understanding.

I have developed and refined this assignment over years of working with students with diverse viewpoints and backgrounds. I am currently a full-time instructor in a community college in Michigan and held a similar position in Wyoming for three years before this. For several years before that, I worked as an adjunct instructor in several institutions in Chicago. Having worked with students across a wide geographic and cultural range, I have found it best to be careful about what I assume students know. Because inaccurate information on this subject is so prevalent, I proceed as if students, even if they don't hold them, are at least familiar with and may be susceptible to common inaccuracies, such as undocumented workers "steal jobs" from Americans or that "they don't pay taxes."

I have never had a student lash out against undocumented migration in class. However, I have noticed some references to the inaccuracies above. I have also observed that many tend to think about and assess immigration primarily in terms of legality. Teaching this material through the lens of contentiousness allows the students to process it in this context. This facilitates a more effective understanding of historical and contemporary facts, focusing on matters beyond only legality. Ideally students can then more effectively identify false or misleading political rhetoric.

Approaching a controversial issue such as undocumented Mexican migration is all about the framing. Swedish blogger John Nerst has offered a strategy for framing an argument more effectively known as "decoupling," which was recently the subject of a feature article in *The Atlantic* magazine (Singal 2019). Nerst explains that decoupling consists of debating a claim on its own, rather than the associations and ideologies around it. In teaching about undocumented Mexican migration, the "claim" I make to students is that migration is part of the greater political and economic relationship between the countries involved. The "associations and ideologies around it" concern political rhetoric that reduces this issue to matters of legality. It is important to note that the relationship between what is called the "claim" and what is called the "associations and ideologies around it" can be complex, an issue I touch on in the conclusion.

Applying the Decoupling Framework

As noted above, framing this issue within the controversy is key to decoupling it and helping students focus on the issue at hand. This requires being upfront with students. I include a detailed explanation on the assignment sheet itself to acknowledge that this is a highly controversial issue with important political, economic, and cultural implications. Students are assigned to read a portion of Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz's 2011 ethnography *Labor and Legality: An Ethnography of a Mexican Immigrant Network*, and I first draw their attention to the author's critique of the adjective "illegal" to describe people:

The author notes that applying the term "illegal" in this way glosses over the important historical and contemporary forces that have contributed to and helped maintain this illegality. This is related to issues concerning the political,

economic, and cultural holistic understanding of this matter (which you will read about), to say nothing of its derogatory connotation.

Making it clear that this is based on analysis and not merely my preference, I indicate,

For the purposes of this class, we will refer to such migrants as “undocumented” rather than “illegal.”

Next, I discuss the way a focus on legality in popular discourse tends to obscure the ways laws are constructed and change based on circumstances. I explain that while questions of legality are relevant, there is much more to this issue, and the “more to this issue” will be our focus in the assignment. I emphasize to students that much of the political controversy surrounding this issue is driven by a lack of the very understandings they will be gaining in the assignment. I make it clear that the goal of the assignment is not directly about value judgments, but about more effective understanding of a complex issue:

This assignment is very much intended to do *something*—which is to help you better understand this issue beyond the common misunderstandings, by using anthropological analysis and applying concepts. An analysis of the greater political and economic frameworks that gives rise to this situation, both historically and in contemporary society, beyond only the fact of an illegal act being committed, will provide a much more effective understanding than you can generally get otherwise.

Breaking Down the Assignment

For the assignment, students construct an essay explaining the movement of undocumented Mexican migrants to the U.S. in the framework of historical and contemporary political and economic circumstances surrounding and, in part, producing this situation. They use two readings for this. First is chapter 2, “Why Is There Undocumented Migration?,” from Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz’s *Labor and Legality* (2011). Next is chapter 11, “The Global Economy,” from the textbook *Essentials of Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd edition by Kenneth J. Guest (2020). With chapter 2 from *Labor and Legality*, students are covering the historical and contemporary framework of undocumented migration from Mexico to the U.S. Chapter 11 of *Essentials of Cultural Anthropology* then offers important concepts from the realms of political organization, economy, and culture that help frame migration.

The students are given three required tasks to cover in the essay. First, using “Why Is There Undocumented Migration?” (chapter 2 from *Labor and Legality*) students are required to explain the history of Mexico-U.S. relations with regard to this history’s contributions to migration. This is grounded in the U.S. invasion of Mexico that resulted in the purchase of the northern half of that country’s land. The main focus then turns to

the post-Civil War westward expansion era in the U.S. in the context of the Porfirio Diaz presidency in Mexico. This led to advancing economic connections with the U.S. and, eventually, the Mexican Revolution.

To strengthen this explanation, students must also use the concept “core and periphery” from “The Global Economy” (chapter 11 from *Essentials of Cultural Anthropology*) for support. By incorporating this concept, students examine the historical explanation for this migration pattern with the goal of understanding migration as part of a broader political arrangement that helped influence it. This political arrangement also entails policy changes in the core, allowing students to incorporate changes to U.S. immigration law as this relationship developed. This is the first task of the essay and the first step in decoupling. Rather than starting with the current controversy, this initial step has students consider the history that has led to undocumented Mexican migration. Already at this early stage in the essay, it becomes much easier for students to see that there is “more to this issue,” as I note in the explanation reproduced above. Students have now decoupled the history from the current controversy, which of course tends to disregard this history.

After providing this historical background gleaned from the ethnography and imbued with conceptual material from the textbook, students move on to the second task, exploring economic connections that the concepts of core and periphery point to more directly. For this task, again using the chapter, “Why Is There Undocumented Migration?” from *Labor and Legality*, students explain how changes in the economy over time have contributed to undocumented Mexican migration.

To strengthen this explanation, students must again draw on conceptual material from the textbook for support. This time, from the same chapter, students must incorporate an explanation of the transition from “Fordism” to “flexible accumulation.” And as a means of making more sense of this economic transition, students must also incorporate the concept “neoliberalism.” This concept is elaborated upon in context in the ethnography itself as well. Here, students are contextualizing migration patterns within the greater economic changes taking place over the latter part of the twentieth century. At this point, the students have decoupled the history and the economic connections from the current controversy. In their essays, they have now brought out how these forces have been influencing undocumented migration. In the face of this level of analysis, the “associations and ideologies” around the claim (such as the manufactured controversies about job stealing and so on), can no longer make any sense and are essentially rendered untenable to any critical analysis of this issue.

For the third task, students apply the material they have explained by engaging with ethnographic material based on a particular migrant’s story. The idea here is to bring together the political and economic analyses just provided with the personal experiences of a migrant, providing the thrust of the assignment’s anthropological orientation. Each chapter of the ethnography *Labor and Legality* opens with an ethnographic account from

one of the participants in the author's research. In chapter 2, "Why Is There Undocumented Migration?" this ethnographic account is "Papa Juan's Story."

Students explain his story by once again deploying concepts from the textbook for support, this time "pushes and pulls" and "bridges and barriers," concepts themselves connected to the political and economic frameworks explained above. This focus allows students to see this migrant's story in light of these political and economic frameworks and the person-level effects they can bring. And since they would have read this story first (the chapter begins with it), what they are really doing is looking *back* and seeing it this way. Ideally, this looking back will extend to undocumented Mexican migration more broadly. The decoupling from the previous tasks is extended here and applied to a particular case. Students now see how the history of political and economic connections, as well as the changing global economy, have helped shape this man's life.

Students must then provide a conclusion in which they comment on the difference between understanding this issue using the analysis provided by Gomberg-Muñoz in *Labor and Legality* and applying the concepts from *Essentials of Cultural Anthropology* versus focusing only on the illegality of the act of undocumented migration. That is, they are asked to discuss what this analysis and application of concepts do for more effectively understanding this situation. Here, I want to help students appreciate the value of the level of analysis they just performed. And with any luck, this will inspire them to carry such examination of controversial issues into other areas.

Conclusion: On Being Up Front With Students

One could argue that the associations and ideologies attached to an issue cannot and perhaps even *should not* be separated from factual claims. In the *Atlantic* article covering Nerst's strategy of decoupling, the author notes, "Because of a failure to decouple, people respond indignantly to factual claims when they're actually upset about how those claims might be interpreted" (Signal 2019). But often these interpretations and the context around a fact, such as the political and economic history and circumstances driving undocumented migration, are exactly what we should be focusing on.

This is why being up front with students about the controversy and what the claims actually are—with argumentative support as opposed to assertions—is so important. And I am happy to report that in the conclusions of these essays most students comment on how much more clearly they understand this issue, usually with a particular focus on how the political and economic connections help explain this pattern of migration. Reproduced here is the conclusion from a student paper (summer 2020, shared with permission) in which the student conveys a new understanding of this issue and the migrant people directly involved:

I found that having the history of immigration from Mexico and the story of Papa Juan helped me to better understand the plight of the migrant workers. While I was vaguely aware of why they came here to work, I was not aware of the changes that have occurred in the last 100 years. Having the anthropological tools has given me other ways to think about the situation that I didn't previously have.

Thanks to mainstream media and not having all of the facts, I am afraid to say that I had fallen into the category of one who often "follows the masses" and had not been particularly supportive of migrant workers and why they are here. Especially with regard to those who are undocumented. I truly never knew that there was so much history and change behind the migrant movements. I now better understand why there are so many people here who are undocumented and am saddened to hear of the decisions that have spurred the need for such actions on the part of others.

There is so much to learn about the world around us. I am learning that I need to be more mindful and take the initiative to understand those around me and where they come from. This is why I love studying anthropology so much. It challenges the "norm" and gives us the opportunity to look closer at the people around us and gain a deeper appreciation of who they are and where they come from.

Students who already sympathized with immigrants (which of course includes those with personal connections to immigration) tend to express how happy they are to have reinforcement for their position when they understand the political and economic connections behind immigration. Overall, students' comments focus on the value of critical engagement. Indeed, with this decoupling strategy, we can facilitate more critical thinking on this and other complex issues. And with more people thinking more critically on such issues, we have greater hope to improve them.

References

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