The Muted Group Video Project:
Amplifying the Voices of Latinx Immigrant Students

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During the Summer 2019 semester, Writing & Rhetoric students at Florida International University, a public Hispanic-Serving Institution in Miami, Florida, engaged with Muted Group Theory to both understand and challenge the silencing of immigrant voices. Specifically, the FIU students, the majority of whom identified as Hispanic, created video messages for a local third grade class predominantly made up of immigrant students. The videos spotlight the students' personal experiences with immigration, incorporate multiple languages, and explore themes such as cultural diversity and welcoming immigrant students into the classroom. Following the creation of the videos, the college students participated in a video chat with the third graders. This article offers an overview of the video project, student reflections, and guidelines for future pedagogical implementation. In addition, I reflect on the importance of pedagogical flexibility in the classroom and the ways in which multilingualism can expand our understanding of multimodality.

TEACHING RHETORIC AT A HISPANIC SERVING INSTITUTION

Traditional pedagogical practices in the US public education system often discredit, ignore, and/or devalue Latinx experiences (Medina 2013; Montgomery and O'Neil 2017; Villa and Figueroa 2018). This can happen in two ways: first, by excluding Latinx cultural and linguistic practices, pedagogies promote the "the silencing of Latinx students' voices" (Montgomery and O'Neil 2017, 42). Second, when pedagogies do include Latinx experiences, they are often framed by a "public and institutional rhetoric of cultural deficiency" (Medina 2013, 53). Both of these practices ultimately discourage Latinx students from viewing their culture and language as valid and valuable sources of knowledge.

This is especially significant at the institution where I work: Florida International University (FIU), a designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in Miami, Florida. As of July 2019, FIU's "About" page describes the school as a public research university with approximately 54,000 undergraduate and graduate students, over 60% of whom identify as Hispanic.[1] Thus, one of my priorities as an instructor within FIU's Writing and Rhetoric Program is to work against the "rhetoric of cultural deficiency" by making pedagogical decisions that value my students' diverse languages, situated knowledge, and cultural experiences.

This goal remained in the forefront of my mind as I prepared to teach Rhetorical Theory and Practice during the Summer 2019 semester. According to the course syllabus, Rhetorical Theory and Practice is an upper-level undergraduate course that aims to help students "analyze rhetorical principles, ideas, and terminology in local discourse practice." As I considered the fact that twenty-two of the twenty-four students in that class identified as Hispanic, I kept mulling over the phrase "local discourse practice." What might this phrase mean with these particular students? What work could we do that semester that would meaningfully integrate their local

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[1] Here, I use the term "Hispanic" to reflect the language of the Hispanic Serving Institution in which I work. However, in line with Jasmine Villa and Taylor Figueroa, I primarily use the term "Latinx" "to reflect the fluidity of identity markers" (2017-2018, 70) throughout this discussion.

discourse practices? I discovered one answer in a community-based project I call the Muted Group Video Project, a digital project in which the college students created video messages for a local third grade class predominantly made up of immigrant students. The project showcases the college students' experiences growing up in an unfamiliar culture and their thoughts on what it means to have an immigrant identity.

MUTED GROUP THEORY, HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS, AND THE MEDIA

The Muted Group Video Project is rooted in a rhetorical theory called Muted Group Theory, a perspective first introduced to the field of Communications by Cheris Kramarae in 1981. According to Kramarae, "since accepted language practices have been constructed primarily by men in order to express their experiences, women have thus been muted" (Barkman 2018, 3). Since Kramarae's initial discussion, Muted Group Theory has been used to conceptualize the discourse practices of other marginalized groups, including prisoners, graduate students, and entry-level employees. Subordinate groups such as these often find "their speech is disrespected... their knowledge is not considered sufficient...their experiences are interpreted for them by others" (Barkman 2018, 55). Although Muted Group Theory can and has been applied to diverse groups, given our local context, our discussion of Muted Group Theory circulated around the silencing of Hispanic immigrants.

As we discussed Muted Group Theory, the students described times in which they had felt muted by media reports, and it quickly became clear how deeply this theory resonated with their experiences. As a class, we first made a list of the inaccurate stories being told about immigrants: immigrants are lazy; immigrants are stealing jobs; immigrants are uneducated. We then found news articles and reports that perpetuated these stories. Given the position of the current White House administration on immigration, we did not have to look further than the "Immigration" page on the White House website. Here, we found remarks, videos, and other written documents that cast immigrants in derogatory ways. For instance, as of May 2018, according to the current President and Vice President, immigrants are "aliens...threatening lives" and the reason that "drugs pour across our border." They are "gang members and criminals...some of the

worst people anywhere in the world." I gave the students time to work in small groups and discuss the rhetoric of these texts, asking them to consider, for example, the undertone of phrases such as *illegal alien* and *undocumented immigrant*. I prompted them to discuss which of these phrases they prefer and why. As I circulated around the room, I could hear students sharing with one another the ways in which these depictions of immigrants contradicted their own lived experiences.

When we came back together as a class, we returned to Muted Group Theory. We recalled that Muted Group Theory highlights the ways in which marginalized groups often find that "their experiences are interpreted for them by others" (Barkman 2018, 55), and we discovered that the theory offered a productive lens for us to more fully understand the silencing of Hispanic immigrants. Put simply, as our exploration of media depictions revealed, the stories told *about* immigrants were rarely told *by* them. As a result, these stories were often slanted, inaccurate, and harmful depictions of immigrant identities, "not the complete and real stories" (Villa and Figueroa 2018, 74). However, the stories I heard during the small group discussions were "complete and real stories" told by people with first-hand knowledge, and so I invited students to reflect on their own personal experiences with immigration.

REFLECTION, LOCAL COMMUNITY, AND THE MUTED GROUP VIDEO PROJECT

First, students had the opportunity to write about their personal experiences immigrating to the United States. I also explained that if someone was uncomfortable writing about these experiences or did not have a personal experience to share, they could instead write a reflection on the small group work we had completed earlier in class. When students finished writing, I asked if anyone wanted to share their experiences aloud.

Several students were quick to respond. Ana[2], for example, recalled feelings of "isolationism, loneliness, [and] voicelessness" when she first came to this country and the ways in which her parents worked

2   For privacy reasons, student names have been changed throughout this discussion.

multiple jobs to provide for her and her siblings. Victoria self-identified as a student under DACA protection, detailing the inaccurate stories that color her experiences: "People assume [Dreamers] are uneducated, stealing jobs, and that if we do somehow manage to find work, we are gardeners or maids and that we should have applied for citizenship on our own. This is such a completely false idea that we are allowed to pick our own fate when there is legislation in place that determines our future." I offer Ana's and Victoria's comments here as representative examples of the larger class discussion. By the end of the class period, it was clear that the majority of the students in the room had first-hand experience with Muted Group Theory, even if they didn't have the academic language to describe it until that day.

The next class, I introduced my students to South Grade Elementary School, a low-income, Title 1 school about an hour north of FIU. Since one of the aims of this course is to help students "analyze rhetorical principles, ideas, and terminology in local discourse practice," collaborating with a community partner such as South Grade Elementary School nicely complemented our semester. I was familiar with this school because my sister, Alyssa, teaches there. During the 2018-2019 academic year, Alyssa taught a class of twenty-two third graders. Ninety percent of her students were immigrants or part of immigrant families and had been in the country for less than five years. Given our previous class discussion on immigration, the FIU students' connection to these third-graders offered a productive segue into the Muted Group Video Project.

The goal of the project, I explained, was to speak back to the harmful narratives that inaccurately portray immigrants in this country. The previous day, we had used Muted Group Theory to recognize and unpack the oppressive potential of language; however, as Linda Lee Smith Barkman notes, "an integral and vital component of [Muted Group Theory] is that resistance and change are possible" (2018, 4). In other words, Muted Group Theory is a lens through which we can recognize *the power of language*, and this power can be used not only to oppress, but also to empower. This is an important recognition. It "is what keeps [Muted Group Theory] from being a pessimistic labeling *of* the marginalized and turns it into an optimistic tool for providing hope and voice *to* the marginalized" (Barkman 2018, 4).

I presented the Muted Group Video Project as one such tool, a platform upon which we could share more accurate and empowering perspectives with these young students than what they might otherwise hear and see in mainstream media. I explained to the students that they would work in small groups to film video messages for the third graders, and I offered the following guidelines:

- Not everyone in the group needs to be on camera. If you are not comfortable being filmed, then you can help with filming, brainstorming ideas, etc.
- If you are in the video, introduce yourself and give brief relevant info about who you are as a way for the third-grade students to relate to you.
- Incorporating multiple languages and personal stories is encouraged.
- Film the videos with a phone or a laptop. The videos do not need to be professional or formal; the focus here is the message that the video communicates.
- You may film the videos anywhere on campus; you will upload the video file to our course site at the end of the class period.

Prior to this class, I asked Alyssa for ideas of topics that would be relevant to the current needs and experiences of her students. I shared with my students her response:

The FIU students can address that it's okay to have more than one culture, that my students can learn English and have American friends, but while still celebrating their Hispanic culture. They can also give tips for welcoming immigrant students to the class since I often have students join our class mid-year. Finally, it would be really powerful if the FIU students shared how they have faced similar challenges with culture, language, and identity as my students, but they worked hard in school and are now doing well in college. Most of my students do not even think about college as an option for themselves. (Alyssa Maddox, email, May 2019)

Based on Alyssa's suggestions, the students and I identified four themes to guide our videos: the value of having multiple cultures,

strategies for welcoming immigrant students, the importance of school, and college as a goal for the future. The students then formed small groups based on their interests in one of the four themes. After some initial planning discussions, the groups dispersed throughout campus to film their videos. About thirty minutes later, the groups returned to the class and submitted their videos to our course site. Each video lasted approximately 2-4 minutes, and although we ultimately wanted one video, it was logistically easier for each group to film and submit individual videos. Alyssa and I then edited the individual videos together into one file.[3]

The next day, Alyssa shared the video with her students. After viewing the video, Alyssa worked with her class to write questions for my students. The questions included, "When you came to the US, was there anyone else who spoke your language?" and "How did you make friends in this country?" In an effort "to bring community voices into the classroom" (Cary 2016, 141), Alyssa and I planned a video conference for several days later so that the two classes could have a face-to-face discussion, and my students could answer the third-graders' questions. During the discussion, the students conversed in Spanish, English, and Haitian Creole, bonding over their experiences growing up in an unfamiliar culture and what it means to be an immigrant student.

MOVING THEORY BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Following our video conference, my students wrote reflections on their experiences with the Muted Group Video Project. One theme that echoed throughout the reflections is the necessity of moving theory beyond the walls of the classroom. Gabe succinctly summarizes this in his reflection: "we are useless if all we do is strategize for other people to act." If we do not act ourselves, this comment suggests, then our strategizing has limited value. Angela came to a similar realization, explaining, "just thinking of the ways we can stop stereotypes [and] holding space for accurate and diverse media representation is important, but it will only work if messages of inclusivity are given through education." Put in the context of our Rhetorical Theory class, then, it would not have been enough to

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3   The completed video can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gidpym4y_aQ&feature=youtu.be

learn about Muted Group Theory without also finding a way to put this theory into practice within our community. We needed, as Mari observed, "to share personal stories and publicly challenge these stereotypes [to] help humanize [immigrant students] and give a voice to those who have been muted."

Comments such as these underscore the value of the Muted Group Video Project as a valuable pedagogical tool for connecting the ideas discussed *within* the classroom to the community living *beyond* the classroom. Specifically, by giving my students a platform upon which they could present new narratives about the Hispanic immigrant experience, this project provided a vehicle for our class to shift "from information (data) gathering to interactive process" (Anderson and Jack 1998, 169). Put simply, it allowed the students to *interact with* Muted Group Theory rather than only *gather information about* it, and this shift from passive recipients to active participants is central to a pedagogy that seeks to link student learning and community engagement.

Not only did this project allow students to move theory beyond the classroom, but it also invited them to view their cultural experiences and linguistic diversity as strengths rather than shortcomings. By presenting their experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge, the FIU students challenge the "deficit perspective" and instead "affirm Latinx knowledge(s)" as worth discussing and sharing (Villa and Figueroa 2017-2018, 71-73). It is important to note that this shift from deficit to affirmation happened as a result of two purposeful pedagogical decisions: 1) students spoke for themselves about their own experiences, and 2) students decided what to focus on in their videos.

PEDAGOGICAL FLEXIBILITY AND A RECEPTIVITY TO LEARN

Despite the fact that these pedagogical decisions were purposeful, they were not automatic. When I first presented the video project to my students, I hoped that they would be willing to speak in the video about their own experiences. Thus, I had no hesitancy with pedagogical move #1. However, pedagogical move #2 caught me by surprise. I came to the students with a set idea of what they would discuss in the video. Mainly, I envisioned the students debunking

the harmful narratives swirling around about Hispanic immigrants. However, after listening to Alyssa describe the needs of her class and recognizing that not all of my students had personal experiences with immigration, I realized that the content of the video needed to change. Indirectly, our video project would still challenge false perceptions of Hispanic immigrants by sharing empowering messages with the third graders; however, this would not be the explicit focus. Instead, the Muted Group Video Project would discuss the value of having multiple cultures, strategies for welcoming immigrant students, the importance of school, and college as a goal for the future. These themes met the third graders where they were, attending to their specific needs and experiences, and they also allowed all of the college students to engage with the project, regardless of personal experiences with immigration.

This experience taught me the importance of pedagogical flexibility, what I have come to understand as the ability to adjust pre-set plans to reflect student needs and experiences. The significance of such flexibility can be more fully understood by considering Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack's discussion of oral history interviews (1998). In "Learning to listen: Interview techniques and analyses," Anderson and Jack share their experiences interviewing rural women about their lives in an attempt to give these women the opportunity to speak for themselves about their experiences. However, as they reflect on and reread their interview transcripts, Anderson observes the ways in which her interviews actually further silenced these women. She writes, "as I rummage through the interviews…I am painfully aware of lost opportunities for women to reflect on the activities and events they described and to explain their terms more fully in their own words" (159). She admits being too focused on the goals of the larger oral history project rather than on her interactions with the women as individuals. As a result, her interview questions were restrictive and guiding, focused on "prov[ing] preexisting ideas" rather than on allowing the interview direction to organically emerge based on the women's in-the-moment responses (158).

Although Anderson is discussing interview techniques specifically, her observations illuminate my work with students in the Muted Group Video Project. That is, after I listened more critically to the

students and loosened my grip on our pedagogical plans, I made room for the content of our video to shift. The result was a more responsive, inclusive video project. Specifically, as a result of the shift in video focus, more of my students could find points of connection, and the messages shared with the third graders were more applicable to their particular situations. Not only did I learn how to practice pedagogical flexibility, but I also learned the importance of adopting what Anderson and Jack call an "attitude…of receptivity to learn" (1998, 158). For me, this receptivity meant allowing space for the project to take shape according to the specific needs of the participants – both those within the classroom and those within the community.

MULTIPLE (LANGUAGE) MODES

We can further recognize the pedagogical potential of the Muted Group Video Project by considering Cruz Medina's 2018 discussion of digital testimonios. In "Digital Latinx Storytelling: testimonio as Multimodal Resistance," Medina explains that "testimonio as a genre in Latin America has come to embody a critical practice, much like the familiar motto of 'speaking truth to power'" (par. 5). Testimonio, Medina explains, has been embraced by many Latin Americans as a form of resistance, a way to challenge "dominant colonial narratives" and create new "sites of knowledge production" (par. 2). As a writing instructor, Medina's main focus is on the benefit of including digital testimonios within the writing classroom:

> Digital testimonio is a Latinx digital writing practice that makes use of the different semiotic affordances of multimodal communication in online environments, and it embodies a resistant ethos in an academic space to engage with issues of race, class, gender, and disability. The digital genre of testimonio affords further opportunities to communicate these messages of an individual "speaking truth to power" through modes that do not require authorization by the gatekeepers of traditional platforms of publication and media distribution. (Medina 2018, par. 2)

Medina's discussion of digital testimonio as a multimodal practice focuses on the combination of modes such as visual (photos and screen shots), linguistic (written words), and aural (voice overs) into a single video recording. From this perspective, the Muted Group

Video Project is a digital, multimodal testimonio – it is a video project through which students use multiple modes to enact resistance in a digital space.

However, not only does the Muted Group Video Project combine modes such as visual, linguistic, and aural, but it also combines languages – and this observation suggests a fruitful expansion of Medina's digital testimonio discussion. According to linguists, there are three language modes: the monolingual mode, the intermediate mode, and the bilingual mode (Grosjean 2001; Yu and Schweiter 2018). An individual who can speak multiple languages has the opportunity to move between these modes, deciding what language(s) to use and, thereby, which mode to activate. As we watch the video my students created, we see them navigating between various languages, including Spanish, French, Creole, and English. This linguistic choice is evidence of students enacting the "bilingual mode, [a mode] in which…two languages are utilized…in the form of code-switching or borrowings" (Yu and Schweiter 2018, par. 3).

A consideration of the students' decisions to embrace the bilingual mode alongside Cruz's discussion of digital testimonios expands our understanding of the Muted Group Video Project as a multimodal composition. That is, not only is the project multimodal because it includes modes such as visual, linguistic, and aural, but it is also multimodal in that it features multiple *language modes.*

The freedom for Latinx students to navigate between multiple languages is significant, especially when situated within the writing classroom. When writing classrooms "take as the norm a linguistically homogenous situation: one where writers, speakers, and readers are expected to use Standard English or Edited American English," students who speak and/or write in other languages or language variations can become a muted group (Horner et al. 2011, 303). This harmful perspective impacts more than the voices we hear or don't hear in the classroom. It also impacts students' self-perceptions. Put simply, when students are taught that their language practices are "'substandard' or 'deviant,'" they are simultaneously being taught that they "themselves [are] somehow substandard" (Horner et al. 2011, 304-305). However, projects such as the Muted Group Video

Project have the potential to challenge this notion, to create space for Hispanic immigrant students to publicly claim the validity and authority of their cultural and linguistic experiences.

Furthermore, by doing so for a community audience, as my class did with the third graders, they invite these younger students to do the same. When discussing her students, Alyssa explained that the majority of her students had limited perspectives regarding future goals or opportunities. "Most of my students," she described, "do not even think about college as an option for themselves" because the majority of them do not have older siblings or parents who have attended college and can therefore provide an example of this possibility. However, the Muted Group Video Project introduced the third graders to the fact that college is a reality for many Hispanic immigrants. The interactions between the college students and the third graders echoes Cruz's (2018) observation that digital testimonios "have the potential to promote literacy by broadening audiences' perspectives…while providing a platform for making the personal into the collective" (par. 15). From this perspective, we can see the ways in which The Muted Group Video Project enacted a platform for my students' personal experiences to offer a collective example for the third graders, one that aims to broaden what they recognize as options for their own futures.

APPLYING THE MUTED GROUP VIDEO PROJECT TO OTHER CONTEXTS

Given my local context at an HSI, focusing on Hispanic immigrant students was a natural choice; however, future iterations of this project might consider engaging with other muted groups such as women, other racial minorities, and members of the LGBTQ community. Logan, one of my students, gestures to this potential in his reflection:

> The biggest connection I can draw to [The Muted Group Video Project] is from my experience as a gay man. I am fortunate that I come from a mixed racial background. I'm half Latin and half Caucasian. But I look more Caucasian than Latin. That in itself allows me certain rights and to be heard much louder than my

Latino brethren. But, as a gay man, sometimes I'm not taken as seriously. When people find out I'm gay when I'm trying to have my voice heard about anything relating to politics or human rights, I am muted a bit.

As Logan suggests, the Muted Group Video Project has applicability for other subordinated populations. My hope is that educators reading this will consider ways in which the Muted Group Video Project might amplify muted voices in their classrooms and communities. The following summary of steps aims to facilitate application of the Muted Group Video Project into other classrooms.

1. Consider the demographics of your students and the potential way(s) their life experiences will connect to Muted Group Theory.
2. Approach a community partner such as an elementary school or an after-school children's program and explain the details and goals of the Muted Group Video Project.
3. Collaborate with the community partner to identify specific topics/themes for the video that will be relevant to the current needs and experiences of the community partner.
4. Introduce Muted Group Theory to your students; look for examples in the media and discuss application to students' lives and experiences.
5. Introduce the community partner and Muted Group Video Project to your students; emphasize the potential for resistance that is inherent within Muted Group Theory.
6. Identify specific topic(s)/theme(s) for the video(s).
7. Film video(s).
8. Share with community partner.
9. Conduct a digital or in-person conversation between students and community partner.
10. Invite to students to reflect on experience.

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