

Beyond Learning Loss

Testimonios of a Pandemic
Education/

Más Allá de la Pérdida

Testimonios de Una Educación
Pandémica

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Abstract

COVID-19 has disproportionately affected Latinx/a/o communities as people face interlocking global pandemics: "COVID-19, economic recession, global warming, and structural racism" (Solorzano, 2021, xvi). While popular discussions have focused on how these systemic inequities have resulted in learning loss, we have found the focus on school-based learning loss also obscures experiential knowledge students have gained from home, work, and community activities (Delgado Bernal, 2001; González et al., 1995; Pacheco, 2012;

Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014; Yosso, 2006). In this article, we, a group of working student-researchers of Peruvian, Mexican, and Bolivian heritage and our research mentors, share six digital testimonios that examine how we learned during the ongoing pandemic. This multi-authored, multilingual, and multimodal article uses digital testimonio (Benmayor, 2012; Medina, 2016) as methodology (Pérez Huber, 2009, 2021) to demonstrate how, in addition to any learning losses and barriers we had experienced in our formal education, we also learned from our lived experience of the pandemic and wish to see that learning valued in formal education.

Introduction

COVID-19 has disproportionately affected Latinx/a/o communities as people face interlocking global pandemics: “COVID-19, economic recession, global warming, and structural racism” (Solorzano, 2021, p. xvi). This context has importantly highlighted how neoliberal universities that were never built for Latinx/a/o students create barriers to their learning (Flores Carmona, 2021, pp. 68-9; García de Müller et al., 2020; Yosso, 2006). And as students and schools adapt to pandemic conditions, education conversations have focused on student learning loss and barriers to learning (Anderson et al., 2022) in K-12 (Goldhaber et al., 2022) and higher education marked by instructional interruptions and declining college enrollment (Brown, 2022; Ahn & Dominguez-Villegas, 2022). While this focus on learning loss is vital to understanding barriers to higher education, including disproportionate illness and limited access to material resources, it also obscures experiential knowledge students have gained from home, work, and community activities (González et al., 1995; Delgado Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2006; Pacheco, 2012; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014) during COVID-19. In this article we ask, what have

we, a group of working student-researchers of Peruvian, Mexican, and Bolivian heritage, learned during the ongoing pandemic? And how can this learning support structural change?

To answer these questions, we engaged in a participatory project with faculty research mentors using digital testimonio (Benmayor, 2012; Medina, 2016; Delgado, Burciaga, & Flores 2012) as methodology (Pérez Huber, 2009, 2021). We found that, in addition to any learning losses and barriers we had experienced in our formal education, we also learned a great deal from our lived experience of the pandemic. Our testimonios reflect big questions like, how do we deal with loss? What do we value? How do we want to live as opposed to survive? These are the things we are learning. Our testimonios reflect developing life philosophies connected to our transnational experiences and how those philosophies help us find resilience for the future. In this multi-authored text, we explain the broader project including its contributors and the theories and methods that impacted our work. Then we share our experiences and learning through multilingual testimonios. Finally, we offer collective contributions and recommendations for centering knowledge derived from the pandemic in K-college education. We believe these methods would result in more just and integrative schooling that can challenge pandemic injustice specifically connected to inequitable silencing, fragmenting, loss, and isolation. We hope that these ideas and the testimonios will benefit other students and their communities, and we share them with you to inspire writing in whatever context you teach, write, and learn.

Descripción y Compromisos de Nuestro Grupo/Our Group Description and Commitments/

Before sharing how the project worked, we would like to define ourselves, our commitments (Combahee River Collective, 2015; Godbee, 2022), and how we relate to one another. We offer these descriptions here in Spanish and English.

Somos estudiantes que trabajamos en el campus de UVU, hemos sido afectados por COVID-19 estamos tratando de marcar la diferencia en el campus y ayudar a mantenerlo seguro. Somos escritores e investigadores bilingües/multilingües con experiencias únicas y específicas, pero también comunes. Somos estudiantes internacionales, estudiantes inmigrantes de primera y segunda generación de Perú, México y Bolivia. Algunos de nosotros somos estudiantes universitarios adultos y padres, y todos somos miembros de familias. Todos tenemos historias importantes que contar sobre COVID-19.

We are students who work on the UVU campus, have been affected by COVID-19, and are still trying to make a difference on campus and help keep it safe. We are bi/multilingual writers and researchers with unique and specific but also some common experiences. We are international students and first- and second-generation immigrant students from Peru and Mexico and Bolivia. We span ages and skin colors. Some of us are adult undergraduates and parents, and we are all members of families. We all have important stories to tell about COVID-19.

Reconocemos que "Uno de los desafíos más persistentes que América Latina ha enfrentado en su historia es el de la definición de su

identidad como pueblo” (Enciclopedia de Filosofía de Stanford, 2018). Abarcando continentes, diferentes culturas y etnias, orígenes nacionales y edades, realmente tenemos muchas diferencias. ¿Cómo podemos ser considerados como un pueblo unido? En la superficie, parecería que nada nos uniría, pero a pesar de esto, hay puntos en común que todos compartimos: nuestros valores, perspectivas, metas y experiencias. Todos hemos trabajado en algún momento para Utah Valley University. Como estudiantes, actuamos como los engranajes que mantienen nuestra escuela en funcionamiento y que mejor durante una pandemia, y para aquellos que necesitan de nuestro trabajo. Todos somos reflexivos, inteligentes y trabajadores, todos nos preocupamos por crear un mundo mejor. Somos hijos de un pueblo cuya vida política e intelectual ha sido reprimida, y todos tenemos historias importantes que contar sobre COVID-19.

We recognize that "One of the most enduring challenges that the peoples of Latin America have encountered in their history concerns the definition of their identity as a people" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2018). Spanning across continents, different cultures and ethnicities, national origins and ages, we really do have a lot of differences. How can we be thought of as a united people? On the surface, it would seem that nothing would bind us together, but despite this, there are commonalities we all share—in our values, perspectives, goals, and experiences. All of us have worked at one time or another for Utah Valley University (UVU). As students, we double as the gears that keep our school running—during a plague no less, and as those who benefit from our labor. All of us are reflective and intelligent and hardworking; all of us care about creating a better world. We are children of a people whose political and intellectual life has been suppressed, and we all have important stories to tell about COVID-19.

Los miembros del grupo testimonio son apoyados y asesorados por dos miembros de la facultad de UVU. Leandra Hernández quien es escritora, maestra y académica feminista chicana que trabaja en los departamentos de comunicación y estudios latinoamericanos. (Enciclopedia de Filosofía de Standford, 2018) es una mujer blanca nacida en los EE. UU., ex educadora especial K-12 y madre cuya enseñanza e investigación se centran en la escritura y la justicia lingüística. Lea y Calley se consideran colegas, amigos y aprendices junto con los escritores del grupo. Estamos parados sobre los hombros del Grupo Feminista Latina y estamos profundamente inspirados por su trabajo, así como por el trabajo de las estudiosas feministas chicanas, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa y Dolores Delgado Bernal, quienes nos recuerdan que la teoría debe estar arraigada en las experiencias vividas.

We, the testimonio group members, see ourselves as supported and mentored by two members of the UVU faculty. Lea is a Chicana Feminist writer, teacher, and scholar who works in communication and Latin American Studies. Calley is a white, US-born woman, a former K-12 special educator, and mother whose teaching and research focus on writing and linguistic justice. Lea and Calley consider themselves colleagues, friends, and learners along with the writers in the group. We are standing on the shoulders of the Latina Feminist Group and are deeply indebted and inspired by their work as well as the work of Chicana feminist scholars, including Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Dolores Delgado Bernal, who remind us that theory should be rooted in lived embodied experience.

We believe our stories can transmit experiences that resonate across the group and the broader world as well as show specific, unique experiences during the time of ongoing pandemic. Our stories can help us and others feel seen. We want to tell our stories

because, when we only hear our own experience, we feel alone when we are not. We want to provide motivation to others to press forward through hardship and/or feel an experience they may not have had first-hand. Creating these testimonios helps people understand how COVID has affected people in different ways. We want to use stories to make social change and improve the lives of future people. Overall, we want to share true and honest experiences.

We commit to listening to one another and paying attention to one another to try to understand their ideas. This commitment may mean different ways of paying attention but offering full attention and respect. And it requires showing compassion and empathy. We will try to understand other experiences, but even when we can't understand, we will believe every story matters. We will not assume our experience is the same as others and offer genuine interest by asking questions to try to understand. We will not talk over anyone. We will, however, be willing to have an open disagreement and listen without it affecting our relationship negatively. We will try to make other people feel heard by putting what we are hearing into our own words. And we will keep others' stories within the group unless they choose to take those stories outside of the group.

Now Calley, our mentor and co-researcher, will describe the background and theoretical influences driving our work.

How the Project Started and Transformed

Calley

In the fall of 2020, I began teaching at Utah Valley University (UVU), a predominantly white public access institution predominantly

attended by members of the Church of Latter-Day Saints and a quickly growing Latinx/a/o population. I had just finished a dissertation project with writers who were full-time members of a university custodial staff in the Midwest and identify as Mexican and Cuban men (Marotta, 2020, 2021; Remigo Ortega et al., 2022). At UVU, like many institutions, a large portion of custodial staff (Marko, 2015) were students who were disproportionately Latinx/a/o and Latin American. These student workers held a particularly tenuous position as they worked at the university to fund their education at the same time as their communities were being disproportionately affected by COVID-19, both nationally (CDC, 2023) and locally (Utah Department of Health & Human Services, 2023). Drawing from these conditions and informed by the writers from my dissertation project, I wrote a grant to fund student members of the custodial staff who were Latinx/a/o to research their own lives and create digital testimonios about their experiences learning during COVID-19.

Guided by a youth participatory researcher in education who positions youth as experts of their experience (González Ybarra, 2021; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell 2015; Cammarota & Fine, 2010), I drew from participatory methodologies so that students would be full co-researchers who would write and share their stories for their own purposes and, perhaps, to “use personal writing to make sense of their lives” (Flores, 2021, p. 70) at this difficult time. I designed the study this way because, in my position as a white academic researcher, I am embedded in a long history of exploitation and white supremacy in qualitative research (Tuck, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Fine, 2017; Patel, 2015; Smith, 2021) generally and composition and rhetoric (Lockett et al., 2021) in particular. Students needed to be able to tell their stories without the mediation of a researcher like myself who lacked linguistic knowledge and cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 2001) in relation

to their experience. And from my previous research relationships, I knew that pressure on time and money were major barriers for participation. Writers needed to be compensated for the labor involved in composing as well as producing and sharing knowledge. Following Youth Participatory Action Research Projects that have funded student researchers (Cullen & Walsh, 2019), the grant proposal requested to fund six students to be a part of the testimonio writing and research group with student co-researchers to receive a \$5,000 scholarship and additional funds for materials like books and technology. I proposed the \$5,000 amount because it was comparable to my faculty course buy-out to work on the project.

This funding, which was generously supported by the Spencer Education Foundation, was essential to compensate students for the time, expertise, and insights amidst their many school, work, family, and community responsibilities. Compensation, of course, does not erase power inequities and in many ways complicates them. For example, because I was in the position to organize their compensation, I still asserted power over the students and may have made them feel as if they needed to please me with their projects. In line with our IRB approval and in order to challenge these inequitable relations, I communicated to students that they could keep the first half of their scholarship for initial participation and leave the project at any time. As we will continue to discuss in our methods, we found challenging my position as default leader required ongoing critical reflection, discussion, participation, revision and transparency—particularly around our roles and implications of sponsorship (Brandt, 2001) in our writing lives. Moreover, I worked closely with Leandra (Lea)—a colleague who became a close friend—to co-mentor students, discuss Chicana feminist theories and principles, and collaborate with students throughout the writing process. Given that Lea is a Chicana feminist

in both lived experience and research expertise, together we collaborated upon questions that would guide conversations with students, co-lead student interviews and focus groups, and mentor students through research projects inspired by the grant project. For example, we co-mentored Izchel through a conference submission, which resulted in a collaborative conference presentation at the 2021 Writing and Rhetoric Studies Diversity and Inclusion Symposium at the University of Utah.

For the project to reflect group members' identities and desires, we revised the original grant in several ways together. One of the biggest changes was that, although members said their position as custodial staff members was important, they placed less emphasis on their university custodial work than other identities and experiences. In general, "custodial worker" was not one of their central identities and they did not necessarily locate their most significant learnings in that context or role alone (Remigo Ortega et al., 2022). Similarly, although I originally proposed the project as one working with Latinx/a/o writers, as explained above, testimonio members expressed that they identify more with their individual heritage than terms like "Latinx." And drawing from these important discussions, we revised and defined ourselves in relation to one another as described in the previous section.

I am eternally grateful to the writers in the group who have been teachers, learners, and mentors to one another and to me. During a time when I felt lost and fearful about my daily interactions, I left group sessions feeling energized, committed, and cared for. In these precarious times, I often found myself daydreaming—visualizing COVID contact tracing maps. In my mind, I saw the dots representing people connecting to other dots and growing exponentially along with the harm caused by contact. My interactions with the group felt like the exact opposite. I imagined

the testimonio writers—each a point on a map—giving me life through their contact. Marina’s scooter, Izchel’s mandolin notes, Ronel’s voice, Hugo’s questions, Maria’s poetry, Carolina’s travels helped me see and feel the world anew. I thank the writers for their honesty. I thank them for sharing their truths and knowledge and for having faith in the project before they knew exactly what they would bring into being.

Defining Digital Testimonios

Marina: Testimony is something that has happened in your life, and you feel good things and bad things and try to share with other people. It may help other people but doesn't have to. You express something you've gone through to share with someone else.

Izchel: Testimony offers an experience. People use testimony when they want to share what they've experienced and learned.

Ronel: Testimony means that it's an important part of our lives that we are sharing.

Hugo: Testimonio shares an experience and makes someone who hasn't experienced that feel like they have.

Carolina: Testimonio is to tell your story and things that have happened as they relate to the past, present, and future and can include other relationships—not just your life—and how everything related connects with what you want to tell.

Mari: Testimonios are lenses to see people's realities.

While our work foregrounds students' own definitions of testimonio as a part of their lived experience, we also draw from Chicana

feminist (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2016) and Latinx Critical Race Theory (Delgado Bernal & Solorzano, 2001; Yosso, 2006) traditions that connect with testimonio. Most specifically, we draw from Pérez Huber's (2009, 2021) work on testimonio as methodology. Testimonio, a form of first-person storytelling that has roots in Latin American human rights struggles, differs from memoir or autobiography in its justice and solidarity-seeking purposes. Testimonio is, in the words of the Latina Feminist Group, "a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure" (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 2). Testimonio specifically seeks to document experience and knowledge that are so often erased by colonialism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Rather than existing as a particular form or genre, Pérez Huber (2009) argues testimonio is instead a methodology or group of methods for understanding and expressing lived experience in the form and genre chosen by the testimoialistx/a/o. In a more recent essay, Pérez Huber (2021) braids Chicana feminist theory, Chicana feminist epistemologies, and Critical Race Theory together to call for testimonio as a Critical Race feminista methodology in higher education. She understands testimonio to be connected to Critical Race Theory, which centers race and racism and its intersections as a lens for critical analysis and justice. She sees it as drawing from feminist epistemology in the way that it grounds knowledge in experience and cultural intuition. And finally, testimonio meets the call of Chicana feminist theory (Zepeda, 2016) "to create feminist research practices that critique oppression within a history of colonialism, patriarchy and white privilege." (Pérez Huber, 2021, p. 166) In light of its histories and purposes, we understand testimonio to be a culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017) methodology for sharing COVID-19 knowledge because, within systems of white English supremacy, testimonio challenges the centering of dominant stories and the

silencing of those who are minoritized as Latinx/a/o and Latin American.

Students drew specifically from writing that was inspired by or reflected such theories. We stand on the shoulders of the Latina Feminist Group who set an important precedent for testimonio with the text *Living to Tell* (2001), a collection of Latina academics' testimonios. Testimonio group members chose to read excerpts from *Living to Tell* which helped Carolina, Marí, and Izchel imagine how they might structure testimonios and mix their lived histories with their current experiences. We are also deeply indebted and inspired by their work as well as the work of Chicana feminist scholars, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, who remind us that theory should be rooted in lived embodied experience. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* (1987) helped Marí model mixing languages and genres and helped Izchel investigate the complex identities of crossing borders and integrating selves as a female international student from Mexico. And inspired by Critical Race Theory, and specifically Aja Martinez's work in *Counterstory* (2020), Hugo critically reflected on his audience and how his narrative and linguistic choices had historically been shaped by an implied white upper-class academic audience.

In their work, group members seek justice in a variety of ways and from a variety of positions in their work. But all the writers recognize how their stories matter and that documenting them alone can be an act of justice in light of such stories being overlooked, silenced, or marginalized. Writers also seek justice by emphasizing solidarity and connection which the group identifies as the ultimate purpose of the project. We do not, however, presume to speak for all students whose heritage is connected to Latinx/a/o cultures and have highlighted some of our own misgivings about the label while introducing ourselves as a group. For example,

within current institutional systems of white supremacy, we do not speak to the particular anti-blackness experienced by students who identify as AfroLatinx/a/o (Garcia-Louis, 2018; Garcia Reyes, 2021). To learn about digital testimonio, we watched digital testimonios created by writers in Reina Benmayor's (2012) course on Chicana feminisms and digital testimonio. These sources helped us generate ideas for digital storytelling and how image, text, and sound could work together to tell a narrative. We found that, as scholars like Cruz Medina (2016) and Mónica González Ybarra (2021) argue, multimodal and digital testimonio offers particular multimodal affordances to resist the silencing many linguistically and racially minoritized students experience. There were many times when we recognized the importance of layering sound, image, and text to express experience across contexts (Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014) and languages. For example, several writers wanted to express the role music played in their lives during this time. It was also important to them that their audiences hear their voices and that they mix languages because, from their complex and often transnational positions, they wanted to reach multiple audiences. By layering translations and captions, they could capture the complex translation work and rhetorical choices writers made multimodally and positing those choices and multimodal translation experiences as valuable rhetorical knowledge they could leverage in their work (Martínez et al., 2008; Gonzales, 2017; Castellanos García et al., 2022).

The affordances of the modes allowed writers to draw from their individual assets and interests as well as to use the form to play with embodiment and focus. For example, Carolina leveraged her love of documenting by creating a documentary-style testimonio and incorporating video footage from the moment she was discussing rather than re-enacting it. Similarly, Marina drew from her graphic design background in Bolivia to incorporate slides, text, and moving

images in PowerPoint. Many writers used the video form to center their embodiment and that of their families through image and voice, but Hugo used images that emphasized place and context specifically to decenter himself as narrator and draw attention to the broader conditions. His composite narrative was inspired by counterstorytelling traditions (bell, 1987, 1992; Yosso, 2006; Martinez 2020). In this way, the multimodal affordances of digital testimonio allowed students a broader range of rhetorical choices to compose identities in ways that achieved their individual and collective purposes.

We believe this is a particularly important historical moment to return to Chicana feminists and Latinx Studies theories (González et al., 1995; Delgado Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2006; Pacheco, 2012) that have argued for institutions to recognize experiential learning that Latinx/a/o students experience outside of formal education in homes and communities because they are valuable sites and sources of knowledge. But amidst many barriers to formal schooling, teachers, students, and institutions must remember that, summarizing bell hooks (2003), we are teaching and learning all the time. We caution against deficit models of education that ignore, silence, and overlook learning happening in these ways because they can particularly hurt students who identify as Latinx/a/o, Students of Color, and/or international students within higher education settings that were not designed for them. We believe that such deficit-orientations have significant implications for working Latinx/a/o students whose pandemic learning may have resulted from their particular positions negotiating transnational, linguistic, cultural, and familial conditions across contexts and in the midst of loss. In our work, we extend the work of scholars who have long emphasized the value of learning through doing and experiencing that is so often devalued within academic institutions and could be unintentionally reified through a focus on learning loss

and barriers alone (Dura, Salas, Medina-Jerez, & Hill, 2015; Del Hierro, Saenz, Gonzales, Dura, & Medina-Jerez, 2019). Without recognizing such experiential learning and without cultivating space for processing that knowledge, schools and instructors will continue to deny the educational assets Latinx/a/o learners bring to classrooms in this particular historical moment. Instead, we encourage schools and teachers to provide opportunities for witnessing and centering knowledge derived from a COVID-19 education beyond school.

Methods: How We Gathered and Collaborated

Before sharing the testimonios, we will also briefly summarize the process by which we came together, collaborated, and composed the testimonios because we want to center the participatory process, not only the products that researchers composed. We follow participatory researchers (Patel, 2016; Cullen, 2018; Fine, 2017) in striving to build humanizing (Paris & Winn, 2014), culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017; Cullen, 2018) and participatory (Deeb-Sossa & Rodriguez, 2019) methods for academics and students to research together.

We are grateful to the office of Latino Initiatives at UVU and Yudi Lewis who originally connected Calley to students who identified as having Latinx/a/o or Latin American heritage and had worked as a student on the custodial staff during the pandemic. Calley called the students (first Izchel, then Carolina and Mari) on the phone and discussed inspiration for the project, her position, and possible directions we could take the project. We also discussed how the research was designed to challenge “typical” research methods and student-teacher relationships because the project would position

us as leaders researching our own lives. After contacting three students from the list—all of whom were interested in participating—we used a snowball model in which those of us who opted into the project suggested other people who might want to participate. That is how we met the final three writers— Ronel, Hugo, and Marina—because other members knew them through their campus work and classes.

We drew from feminist and womanist pedagogies (Delgado Bernal, 1998; hooks, 2003; Elenes, 2007; Villenes, 2019; Flores Carmona, 2021), participatory pedagogies (Kelenyi, 2023), and participatory action research (Patel, 2016; Fine, 2017; Cullen, 2018) to support this work. Laura Gonzales, Shereen El Mallah, Gabrielle Keleyni, Anjali Fahlburg, and Beth Godbee provided specific support to Calley in this area. While we will not be able to discuss all our approaches and experiences to working together here, we designed a virtual presentation for the 2021 College Conference on Composition and Communication, and Marí and Calley co-wrote a forthcoming chapter about our approach to discussion and power relations in the group. We met online in order to protect one another from COVID-19. During our first meeting, we shared photos of family and friends to get to know one another (thank you, Laura Gonzales). We also worked together to revise the original research questions. We have provided the final research questions below.

Research Questions/Preguntas de Investigación:

- What did we learn during COVID-19 (psychologically, financially, socially, academically, etc.)?

- ¿Qué aprendimos durante COVID-19 (psicológicamente, financieramente, académicamente, etc.)?
- What is learning for us?
- ¿Qué es aprendizaje para nosotros?
- How can we use our stories for social and personal change?
- ¿Cómo podemos usar nuestras historias para un cambio personal y social?

Lea

I planned to join groups along with Calley, but we found that few of us had overlapping availability. So we adapted our plan to schedule sessions in which testimonio group members would meet in the same pairs each week. Calley would attend all sessions, and Calley and I would also meet separately to debrief, plan, and have research memo conversations to discuss student conversations, reflections, and next steps for the research project. I was thrilled to serve as a co-mentor with Calley, particularly because Calley and I share a similar feminist mentorship ethos. To value my labor and efforts, I was compensated through the grant to serve as a co-mentor and planning/discussion partner with Calley. Throughout the research process, I drew from my lived linguistic and cultural experiences with the group. For example, while Calley originally envisioned that we would analyze our transcripts together using qualitative methods of focused coding, student researchers expressed that they were more eager to continue discussing their experiences in a less structured and, for them, more generative process. I also shared *plática* as a culturally sustaining and generative method for investigating students' lived experiences. From these discussions, the student testimonios grew and developed.

Calley

Our participatory methods required unlearning for us all. As Mari and I have written about elsewhere, we had to deliberately build structures to unstructure our work. It was important that students could, and felt they could, take the conversation where they wanted. For me personally, after teaching for fifteen years, the sessions took practice and deliberate communication with the group around my position. Specifically, I shared how I found it both difficult and liberating not to have a clear plan and outcome for our sessions beyond telling our stories. We found it helpful to engage in ongoing conversations about our positions, power relations, and how our project dynamic challenged traditional hierarchical models of education and knowledge. And we specifically came back to the idea that Lea and I, although professors, were not the leaders of the group and were not grading writers. From there, we were able to define ourselves in relation to one another as well as the project goals and commitments in ways that supported the project and provided an essential structure for our student-directed conversations and narratives. While these actions did not erase power differentials between any of us, they helped testimonio writers take ownership of their rhetorical choices and findings.

Testimonio Writers

During the first few months of the project in the fall, our meetings consisted of largely unstructured conversations about our current and previous experiences during the pandemic. As we moved into the spring, we engaged in workshops with a local bilingual storyteller, Sofia Rigolon, and digital media teacher Jessie Nixon who helped us, respectively, to learn about narrative focus and how to use image, audio, and the WeVideo program to craft our stories.

These community-based teachers were particularly important because of their specific skills and for sharing some linguistic and cultural experiences with the group. These educators were also important so that Lea and Calley could serve as mentors rather than teachers.

By the summer, with COVID-19 conditions as well as course and work schedules shifting, we were able to meet as a full group, which was a welcome change. During this time, we shared our works-in-progress with the group and problem-solved and received feedback from other writers. Calley provided feedback as a listener and reader where it felt relevant while encouraging us to prioritize our own purposes and processes for their projects. During our final meeting as a group, we watched each testimonio and returned to the research questions that had guided our work. We tried to answer those research questions on pieces of individual paper which Calley collected and helped us put together into an overall findings and recommendations. As youth researchers who work with Mónica González Ybarra (2021) have articulated, it is deeply important to participate in the analysis of experiences we have lived (p. 983). To ensure our ongoing participation, Calley often texted summaries to the group to see what resonated. We replied, clarified, and added on accordingly.

Testimonios

Below we have provided individual descriptions of our testimonios along with our videos.

[Hugo Moreno](#)

This testimonio is an attempt to give a perspective of the pandemic I didn't see anywhere. I've been fortunate enough to inhabit two

distinct worlds—being in the presence of the educated middle class and my own social circle. A poor Mexican has to understand both his own immediate domain, and also be able to intuit the needs and values of the white middle class, if they want to attain a higher socioeconomic status or class. This doesn't really go both ways, and I was hoping to give those people the opportunity to see this period of time through my eyes.

Marina Layme Huarca

La vida es un camino en el que debemos alcanzar nuestras metas, ir poniéndonos retos e ir cumpliéndolos. La vida es un continuo aprendizaje llena de personas extraordinarias y otras que mejor no haber conocido, pero ese conocimiento te hace valorar las buenas y alejarte de los que no te convienen. La vida es un Campo de amor y batalla. No sabemos lo que viene, por eso debemos disfrutar a la familia. Lo unico verdadero.

Life is a path in which we have to reach our goals, set challenges for ourselves, and achieve them. Life is a continuous learning process filled with extraordinary people and others that we are better off not knowing, but that realization makes you value the good friendships and makes you walk away from those who don't suit you. Life is a field of love and battle. We don't know what is coming and, because of that, must enjoy our family. The true and only.

Marí Linares

With my piece, I was trying to juxtapose my experience with change of coming to a new country to how those feelings of change were reflected throughout the pandemic. I also wanted to bring to light myself as a Latina navigating these circumstances. Because as life

changing as the world pandemic was, it was also a simple mirroring of the journey that I'd gone through.

Ronel Almeyda

My testimonio wants to express how, during the pandemic, my situation as a student and worker took a 360-degree turn, and how, from a difficult situation, I was able to transform my educational project that I developed in Peru to make a digital project that impacted many more children. In other words, I was able to find personal resilience and turn difficult situations into opportunities for changing my attitude. But above all, I was motivated by the love of my family.

Izchel Jimenez de la Cruz

The death of my mother, moving out of the country, learning a new language, and COVID-19 were moments where I experienced not only depression but also anxiety. In my testimony, I shared a key that has helped me to face new things and adapt to those constant changes in my life. That key is music. Music has been a way to heal my soul. While listening or playing music, I find happiness, peace, and I feel that I'm not alone wherever I go. I shared part of my personal life with the intention of getting people to know life changes. What we are and what we have now will change in the future; new things could be scary, but I wanted to tell everyone that music will always be there to lift you up.

Carolina Yauyo Zanabria

This testimony shows my experience living with and through the COVID-19 pandemic. It shows how it affected my health, my mental

health, and also how it helped me improve and become a better version of myself.

What We Learned and What We Want

Table 1. Student Researcher Self-Identified Learnings

	Live Through Loss	Recognize Personal Strength	Appreciate Loved Ones and Familial History	Recommit to Personal Passions and Desires
Carolina		X	X	X
Hugo	X		X	
Izchel			X	X
Marí			X	X
Marina	X	X	X	
Ronel			X	X

1. Amidst conditions of social and economic inequality, personal losses related to the pandemic have resulted in transformative learning experiences that have altered students' life values and desires.
2. Their learning stems from experiential knowledge shaped by students' cultural and social histories and activated outside of school settings.
3. Their experiential knowledge should be recognized, valued, and leveraged within formal education settings to 1) expose the diversity within and connection across Latinx and Latin American learners' experiences and 2) challenge pandemic alienation connected to conditions of social and economic inequality.

Even though this study started by foregrounding our role as custodial staff, our testimonios highlight our humanity, first and foremost. Our testimonios demonstrate the overlapping and complex identities that are shaping and shaped by our experiences learning. Failing to acknowledge the multiple identities, relations, and positions we simultaneously hold obscures our learning as well as our broader personhood. Our testimonios demonstrate that personal storytelling and researching is a humanizing approach that is not supplementary to academic education but central to exposing and valuing the education already happening in our daily lives. K-college teachers and administrators should recognize that students have learned through pandemic loss and create spaces for students to bring this knowledge into the classroom by reflecting, identifying, and expressing experiential knowledge as it connects to our broader social histories and guides our learning lives. These experiences and connections are always present, we just need the opportunity to leverage them—to position them as knowledge. In line with the way our stories center contexts beyond school, we also believe students should have the opportunity to design and share their stories with audiences beyond school to reach communities that matter to them. It is important to us not to limit our audiences to teachers, but to expand our educational audiences to families and other students experiencing similar economic and transnational social and cultural conditions. Overall, we testify how, in a time of vast isolation, a pandemic education teaches us to connect settings, relations, and identities through our experiences. We learn by making these connections experientially and then communicating those experiences through our compositions. As pandemic conditions continue to ebb and flow, our work is far from over. We call for opportunities to further bring those connections into being so that we can share and extend the knowledge growing out of this precarious time.

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