

The Power of *Plática*

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Francisco and Miguel's research agenda is centered in educational leadership and community development. Their work is interdisciplinary and is situated within the intersectionalities of identity formation, race, class, gender, plática and story. In operationalizing this work, Guajardo and Guajardo employ an epistemological construct congruent with their research partners that challenges higher education to engage in research that privileges the lives of youth, elders, and the organic leaders from the community.

PLÁTICA AS ETYMOLOGY

We haven't shared a permanent residence in more than 30 years, since we were kids growing up in the rural town of Elsa, a few miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. We've been teachers during most of that time, living hundreds of miles away, working in both K-12 and higher education institutions in rural and urban environments. We can draw discernable differences from our personal and career

trajectories, but there are mostly commonalities palpably tethered through an elongated *plática* we've been engaged in since we were very young. We talk daily, *platicamos*, on the phone; we travel to the same conferences; and we pursue similar research, service, and teaching agendas, all of which we develop together through *plática*. We tap *plática* as a chief modality for our work, because it makes sense to us culturally, politically, ontologically, and epistemologically. It is at the root of how we work and live our lives.

We learned *plática*—an expressive cultural form shaped by listening, inquiry, storytelling, and story making that is akin to a nuanced, multi-dimensional conversation—from our parents, Angel and Julia¹. We find the formative learning moments in our childhood, as we recall being awakened through the stimulation of two important senses: one was the aroma of coffee, as Julia devotedly prepared the daily pot of coffee for herself and Angel; the other was the sound of their sweet mellifluous voices, as they engaged in their daily *plática*. Angel was a laborer: he dug ditches, plunged us into the migrant labor stream, worked at a sugar mill, and finally retired as an elementary school janitor. Julia stayed at home, raised four boys, and nurtured the neighborhood support system for us, and for other children. They conducted their business as a *matrimonio*, as parents, and as members of the community through *plática*; that's what they modeled.

To be sure, our academic training has yielded good skills in forms that closely resemble *plática*; there are examples such as the Socratic method and critical conversations. Our socialization through *plática* shaped us differently, however, as cultural, historical, and political beings. The process wasn't simply to help us understand how to think critically, how to ask the right question, or how to find the logic in an argument. Rather, it was to help us understand why we lived part of our childhood in the migrant labor stream, why we lived in federal housing for eight years before our parents bought a lot in a start up colonia on the outskirts of our rural hometown. *Plática* injected stories that made historical characters come to life. When engaged in *plática*, we learned you have to pay attention to the story, to the form of the story, to the environment surrounding the story; you have to pay attention to the question, to the form of the question, and to context. *Plática* helped us get to know our parents

1 In this text we use Papi and Mami interchangeable for Angel and Julia.

well, ourselves well, and our neighbors well. We believe it was the best training for how to build healthy relationships, how to work well in the community, and how to work in higher education. We see plática as personal, relational, provocative, and dynamic. Plática poses opportunities to co-construct spaces and to explore important issues as we work on getting to know each other. The way our parents taught us, plática was not typically used to fix issues but to learn about them, as we learn about ourselves and about each other. Plática spaces are co-constructions, where conditions are manifest as collaborative and interdependent. Our parents showed some urgency about these conditions, because they were key to allow relationship to flourish, and trust to build within relationships. When the climate is created, plática brings relationships and issues to life.

PLÁTICA AS INQUIRY

In our brand of research we use plática as a tool for collecting data; some data sets come as stories, as cuentos, or other narrative forms. Because plática requires a level of relationship building, we enter community in a way that honors community member stories, rather than through the classical approach of moving into a community to extract information. Our approach to inquiry is based on invitation first, followed by multiple one-one pláticas, then by small group pláticas. We find that pláticas beget other pláticas.

We recently organized an oral history project on living braceros—Mexican laborers who came to the United States as part of an international guest worker program between 1942 and 1964. Our father was the lead researcher on this project, as he taught college students how to find braceros that resided in communities across South Texas. He taught students that through plática they could gain leads to braceros. When students found the braceros, they were then taught to fashion oral histories through the use of plática. Faculty members, students, and elders engaged in more than 25 oral histories, or pláticas, for this research project. We subsequently organized a conference to celebrate the life and legacies of these laborers, produced a documentary, published findings, and most importantly built relationships between college students and braceros.

Our father was the quintessential community based researcher; he understood history, learned context, and knew how to make himself vulnerable enough to invite open and honest *plática* that yielded stories with depth. He did this by sharing his own stories, while he framed insightful questions that took *plática* to specific moments in history. Through this process, *braceros* shared many stories in public for the very first time. The *plática* method has been a powerful tool for a relational inquiry process.

PLÁTICA AS PEDAGOGY

Our parents were at their best when they were teaching. They were our best teachers when we were kids, when we were in college, and they continued when we raised our own children. As master pedagogues, they had critical tools within reach. Mami would use the word of the lord, *la biblia*, as the text to inform the latest lessons; and in case this did not cover all experiences facing mankind. Papi would privilege the lessons he had faced *en la universidad de la vida*; in an autobiography he penned in 1988, Papi wrote about having been a student in the greatest university this world has to offer, La Universidad de la Vida.

It's important to note that Mami never went to school, while she was raised in rural Tamaulipas, Mexico, and Papi went up to the 4th grade in a rural school in San Felipe, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. But their understanding of literacies through the Bible and through lived experiences shaped their curriculum and instructional approaches. These sources provided the materials for the next lesson. The constant pedagogical tool was the *plática*, which made sense to us at every level. *Plática* was performed in language we understood, through an expressive cultural form that felt natural, and in a way that was respectful and affirming. It was a teaching and learning experience that conferred great privilege to our lives, the lives of our children, our students, and our communities.

Plática becomes critical pedagogy when it yields action. The deliberations and lessons developed through *plática* emerge as new knowledge that informs the work we do as we engage in a process for community change. This can manifest itself in the form of

curriculum development, community planning, or simply supporting students in preparing for college.

PLÁTICA FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING & DEVELOPMENT

¿De que te sirve la educación, hijo? As kids we were frequently prompted to reflect on the question: what is the use and utility of your education and development? As we have reflected on our years of learning, we have understood that *la educación* was much more than what we experienced in classrooms at the schoolhouse; to the contrary, much of our deepest learning took place around plática. The question of utility pushed us to the realization that there is a purpose for the knowledge being created and shared, the ideas being provoked, and the relationships that became products of the daily plática. These realizations place the question of “so what?” at the core of our development. The plática and its product become what inform the emergence of a community building and development framework that informs our service, teaching, and research agenda. The origin and purpose for our personal and professional work are apparent. Our parents laid the groundwork by modeling the importance of plática. It’s akin to a family heirloom, but this is an intensely functional heirloom, even transformational, as we employ it as a principal tool for how we lead our lives as brothers, husbands, fathers, teachers, and citizens.

In other contexts we might call it dialogue, conversation, or perhaps storytelling; all important modalities we also use. But in our Mexican American cultural and historical context we are much more drawn to plática. It makes more sense, feels more real, and speaks to us in ways that helps us build relationships and community more respectfully. We have used this practice to guide organizations, lead public information campaigns, shape school curriculum, and even push higher education institutions to behave more humanely. But the most important reason to use plática is to honor the memory of Papi, to help Mami live her life with the dignity she deserves, and to help our students and their families experience the same privilege we have been blessed to know.



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