

# USING IMMERSION EXPERIENCES AND COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING TO PROMOTE THE PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING IN AN ECONOMICS COURSE

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*I hear and I forget  
I see and I remember  
I do and I understand*  
(*Sophocles, 400 BC; as quoted in Gentry, 1990*)

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss a pedagogical model that provides an opportunity to promote the principles of Catholic Social Teaching in a Catholic business school. I provide evidence from student reflection papers that students appear to have become sensitized to the seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching through their interactions with and exposure to the people of Tijuana, Mexico. Student evaluations from fall 2005 indicate that the Tijuana immersion experience was the highest-rated component of the entire course.

## I. Background/Motivation

The principles of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), while central to Catholicism, often remain on the fringes of Business school education. Catholic business school educators may be tempted to view the inculcation of CST principles as merely the responsibility and domain of the theology department—or perhaps the Business and Society courses. However, I would argue that creating multiple opportunities of exposure through various business disciplines (e.g., economics) is a preferred method of delivery, creating—as it were—multiple portals of entry into the realm of CST. While some students may indeed come to appreciate and support CST principles through passive learning techniques (e.g., reading and/or listening to lectures on pastoral letters from the US Conference of Catholic Bishops), pedagogical research in business education (see Hamer, 2000) has found that experiential learning can enhance learning. I have incorporated service learning—immersion experiences to Tijuana, Mexico and more traditional community service learning with local microfinance organizations—into my economics courses. In what follows below, I offer these experiences as a potential model to teach the principles of CST in a Catholic business school.

## II. Experiential Learning and Service Learning

The literature on experiential learning is quite robust (see Kolb, 1984; and Gosen and Washbush, 2004 for a more recent summary) and the evidence—while not completely one-sided (see Gosen and Washbush, 2004)—seems to support its pedagogical efficacy. The AACSB Task Force in 1986 (as quoted in Gentry, 1990, 10), defined experiential learning in business education as, “A business curriculum-related endeavor which is interactive (other than between teacher and pupil) and is characterized by variability and uncertainty.” Hoover and Whitehead (1975, as quoted in Gentry, 1990, 10) define experiential learning as (existing) “when a personally responsible

participant cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement.”

While there is not universal agreement (Stanton, 1990, for example, actually considers service learning as more of a “program emphasis” than a “type” of experiential learning), service learning is commonly viewed as a form of experiential learning. Sigmon, (1997), Stanton, (1990) and Eyler and Giles (1999) each present different definitions of service learning, but what each has in common with the rest is a connection of community service and learning. Furco (1996) provides a “pictorial” definition in which service-learning is at the apex of a pyramid, with volunteerism and community service on one side and internship and field education on the other. (Note the “high level of involvement” and the combination of affective and cognitive processing associated with both.) In any case, service learning has been shown to provide a number of advantages over traditional (passive) learning, including an opportunity for deep learning through personal connections and providing learning that is perceived as useful, developmental and transforming (Eyler and Giles, 1999).

### **III. Catholic Social Teaching**

In 2004, Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, presided over the publication what is now one of the foremost sources of Catholic Social Teaching (Doctrine), the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. In its introduction, this document states the following:

Discovering that they are loved by God, people come to understand their own transcendent dignity, they learn not to be satisfied with only themselves but to encounter their neighbour in a network of relationships that are ever more authentically human. Men and women who are made ‘new’ by the love of God are able to change the rules and the quality of relationships, transforming even social structures. They are people capable of bringing peace where there is conflict, of building and nurturing fraternal relationships where there is hatred, of seeking justice where there prevails the exploitation of man by man. Only love is capable of radically transforming the relationships that men maintain among themselves. This is the perspective that allows every person of good will to perceive the broad horizons of justice and human development in truth and goodness. (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Introduction (4), 2004.)

According to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, “The Church’s social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. Modern Catholic social teaching has been articulated through a tradition of papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents.”

(<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/excerpt.shtml>) They summarize these teachings into the following seven broad themes:

1. The life and dignity of the human person
2. Call to family, community and participation
3. Rights and responsibilities
4. Option for the poor and vulnerable
5. The dignity of work and rights of workers
6. Solidarity with the human family
7. Care for God’s creation

Each of these themes reflects a profound collection of teachings that are rooted in the gospels and fleshed out in subsequent writings by the Church. Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) is commonly viewed as the first papal encyclical to explicitly address issues of Catholic Social Teaching.

#### **IV. Description of Pedagogical Experiences**

Beginning in the fall semester of 2005, I took my principles of microeconomics (ECON 101) class on an immersion experience to Tijuana, Mexico to visit the “poorest of the poor” in a *colonia* (*El Ranchito*) located on the eastern side of the city. Student reaction to this experience—which was almost uniformly positive and profound—spurred me to expand the experience the following year and then to incorporate service learning into my managerial economics (ECON 373 and GSBA 509) classes in 2007/08.

The main thrust of the ECON 101 CSL experience has been a combination of immersion and service learning experiences in Tijuana, Mexico. Located only 20 miles from the international border with Mexico, the University of San Diego is perhaps uniquely situated to take advantage of this opportunity. However, many other universities also have unique and rich cultural opportunities available within driving distance.

In 2005, I took students to visit poor neighborhoods or *colonias* that had no modern infrastructure (e.g., plumbing, electricity, paved roads) and whose housing stock was comprised predominantly of simple, wooden or even cardboard housing structures. Students were asked to take a survey of people living in the *colonias* to learn about their income sources, assets, demographic information, as well as sources of electricity, cooking and heating material, transportation, etc. What began, ostensibly, as a lesson in economic development or economics of poverty ended up being something much more. Struck by the profound poverty of their subjects, students—in their post-experience reflection papers—translated their experiences into the language of CST, even without any formal discussion of the CST principles themselves. However, I also noticed that students left with a one-sided view of the Tijuana economy and they did not experience the “business” or “production” side of the economy. Thus, the following year (fall 2006), I expanded the experience to include (a) a tour of a *maquiladora* (assembly plant) and subsequent economic/political conversation with the *maquiladora* plant manager about Mexican labor conditions, benefits, etc., (b) dinner in the commercial *Zona Rio* section of the city (for balance to see another side of the city/economy), (c) spending the night in a community center hosted by the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, and (d) a six-hour service or immersion experience the following day either painting a community service center, repairing a family’s house, or visiting residents in *Colonia El Ranchito* (see writing assignment “prompt” in Appendix).

In fall 2007, I also offered students in my graduate managerial economic decision making (GSBA 509) course an opportunity to volunteer with two local microfinance institutions (MFI’s), ACCION San Diego and Women’s Empowerment International. I followed this up in spring 2008 with a similar opportunity for my upper-division economics course, managerial economics (ECON 373). Results from these experiences are preliminary, but student response has been very positive. I will focus the analysis of this current endeavor on my principles of microeconomics classes.

## V. Results from Student Reflection Papers

Upon reading the reflection papers from the Tijuana immersion and service learning experiences, it became clear that students had been profoundly influenced—“touched”—by their experiences—and not merely in concrete, academic terms, but spiritually. In what follows below, I provide some representative comments from students. The connection to the seven CST themes is provided in brackets below each comment. (The student names have been changed to provide anonymity.)

According to “Linda”:

Once the van crossed the Mexican border there was an immediate and noticeable change in the infrastructure and the physical attributes of Tijuana, Mexico compared to the United States. The extreme gap between the wealthy and the poor in the Mexican economy became noticeable once we passed the well-off side of the city near downtown and continued on to the poorer and less attractive neighborhoods of Tijuana. There seemed to be no middle between the rich and the poor. Of the three families I visited, two were extremely poor and lived in one room houses with next to nothing. [#4 Option for the poor and vulnerable]

She continues, “Of the three families I visited, the most important assets were health and family. The people rely on their health to be able to work and receive income and they rely on their families for support and financial aid, especially when they are unable to work.”

[#5 The dignity of work and the rights of workers; #2 Call to family, community and participation]

“James” wrote, “Unlike the Americans, the people of Tijuana’s happiness does not come from wealth and riches, rather their happiness stems from God’s grace and gifts of life, health, and family.” [#1 The life and dignity of the human person—divine origin]

He continues, “Some hope to get across to the United States to take up residence, but the majority of the people we visited were satisfied living in Mexico.” “In one particular house, children started working as young as 8 in order to help families with income.” [#3 Rights and responsibilities; #6 Solidarity with the human family; #5 The dignity of work and the rights of workers]

“As far as waste disposal goes, I never did see a dumpster or dump truck. I did see many fires, and the priests informed me that those were garbage fires. Clearly, Mexico has very lax or even nonexistent environmental laws. This is even further confirmed by the noisy traffic. The lack of mufflers on many cars I noticed points to a lack of emissions controls on cars.” [#7 Care of God’s creation.]

## VI. Popularity of Student Immersion/Service Learning Project

At the end of the fall 2005 semester, I asked students to rank each of the components of the course on a seven-point Likert-type scale, with 1 being the lowest and 7 being highest. Summary results are presented below in Table 1. Notably, the “Community Service Learning Project in Tijuana” was the highest-rated component of the course.

**Table 1. End of Semester Evaluations from Students**

<b>Class Component</b>	<b>Mean Student Rating (1 – 7)</b>
<b>Community Service Learning Project in Tijuana</b>	<b>6.19</b>
Lecture Handouts (Fill in the blank)	6.09
Reading <i>Freakonomics</i> by Levitt and Dubner	6.06
WebCT	6.00
Quizzes and Exams	6.00
Writing Assignment (Book Review) <i>Freakonomics</i>	5.56
Writing Assignment (Reflection Paper on Tijuana)	5.44
PowerPoint Presentations	5.06
“Chalk and Talk” Lectures	4.97
Writing Assignment (Paper on topic fr. <i>Freakonomics</i> )	4.87
Textbook	4.25
Complete Lecture Handouts	3.81
First Year Experience Sessions	3.41
Aplia for Homework	2.69

## **VII. Discussion**

This paper has attempted to assess the effect of immersion and community service learning experiences in a principles of microeconomics class. While results are speculative, it appears that students—through their exposure to and interactions with the people of Tijuana, Mexico—became sensitized to each of the seven “themes” of Catholic Social Teaching. This approach to learning is offered as one example of teaching CST themes in an economics course. Even though this was not an explicit course in CST or Business and Society (where one might expect these themes to be addressed in Catholic business schools), students appear to have learned these principles—and in a deeper way than one would expect in passive learning experiences.

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## Appendix

### Writing Assignment “Prompt” for Service Learning Experience: Tijuana, Mexico,

The purpose of this experience is to provide a real-world look into another country’s economy. We will spend time in Tijuana visiting with local households to see how their household economies work and visit a maquiladora facility which produces goods for export from the Mexican economy.

Your paper is to be a three to four page (typed, 12-point font, 1.5 spaced) reflective paper on the Tijuana economy, based on your experiences. The purpose of the paper is not to provide a travel log of what happened, though you may wish to comment on specific events that occurred during the trip. Rather, your paper is to be a reflection on the economy of Tijuana—from the perspective of the households and firms that you encountered. To assist you, I have provided a list of questions to use as a guide. Since some of these questions may be sensitive, please remember to respect the individuals with whom you interact. You may be able to glean information from your guides as well.

#### Colonias (Neighborhoods):

- What are the types of formal and informal means of generating income that you observed?
- How much do the households earn per month?
- What types of assets (e.g., cars, houses, bank accounts, etc.) do they appear to have?
- What is the average level of educational attainment in the household? What does this imply about their earnings potential?
- What kind of household dynamics (e.g., grandparents living with children, single parent families, number of children, average ages of children/households) did you observe?
- What kind of infrastructure (e.g., roads, bridges, plumbing, electricity) is available in the places that you visited? Do private firms or governments provide electricity? Water? Sewer?
- How do households acquire the basic necessities of life (e.g. healthcare, food, shelter, water, bathrooms, waste disposal)?
- What are the hopes and dreams of the people with whom you visited?
- What kinds of social networks (e.g. friends, family, church, schools, etc.) do people rely on?

- Generally speaking, how does the standard of living compare to that which you have experienced in the U.S.? Was your experience representative of all Tijuana—i.e., are there sectors of the population that you did not visit?
- Generally speaking, how does the level of “happiness” among the poor in Tijuana compare to that which you have experienced in the U.S.?

**Maquiladora (Assembly Plant):**

- Where did the firm receive its inputs?
  - Labor
  - Raw materials
  - Capital
  - Land
  - Entrepreneurship?
- What were the labor conditions like? Were they uniform for all workers?
- How much did entry level workers earn? Senior level? Those with engineering degrees? To what do you attribute the differences?
- What kind of health benefits are available to workers? How do these compare to the U.S.?
- What is the minimum wage in Tijuana? Is this a “binding” minimum wage for entry-level workers in the maquiladoras? Why or why not?
- What are the firm’s major sources of costs and expenses?
- Who are the firm’s major customers (i.e., revenue sources)?
- Could this firm operate in the U.S.? If so, why doesn’t it? What advantages would it have if it did operate in the U.S.? Disadvantages?
- What do you think is the impact of this firm—and others in the maquiladora industry—on the Tijuana economy? Could the impact be improved in any way? If so, how?
- Workers in the U.S. manufacturing industry earn about \$18/hour. What would happen in the short-term if this maquiladora were forced to pay all of its full-time workers \$18/hour? Long term?

**Overall:**

- What, if anything, surprised you?
- How has this experience affected your life?
- What kinds of questions has this experience raised?