Constructing a Counternarrative: Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Reframes Immigration and Education in the United States

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Neidi: So, you’re an AB 540 student?
Pedro: Yeah, that’s why I’m living off campus with Lupe, she doesn’t charge me rent.
Josefina (pseudonym): I’m an AB 540 student too. I had to work two jobs this summer to save up since we don’t qualify for financial aid.
Luis: I can’t apply to most scholarships either.
Renato: I understand, I had to find a sponsor for my books.
Linda (pseudonym): Yeah, I don’t qualify for work study, and it’s hard to find a job without a social security number.
Everyone: I’m an AB 540 student!

The preceding text is an excerpt from Voces S.I.N. Vergüenza (Shameless Voices), a theatrical show produced in April 2008 by Students Informing Now (S.I.N.), a student group at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). It is possible to say that S.I.N. made history by fearlessly claiming they were undocumented in front of an audience of peers, family, administration, and mostly strangers. It was not an act or a performance; it was personal and political truth on stage with lights shining on the faces of these citizens of the world who decided to no longer stay in the darkness of silence.

What is S.I.N.?

S.I.N. emerged from the lived experiences and struggles of its founding members, UCSC undergraduates who were confronted with the fact that their campus was doing little to facilitate the entry and retention of undocumented students like themselves, known as “AB 540 students” in California. The AB 540 law was passed in 2001 in California. It allows any student, including undocumented immigrants, to be exempt from paying nonresident tuition at public colleges and universities in California if they have attended a high school in California for at least three years and graduated, or obtained a GED. Not all AB 540 students are undocumented; approximately two thirds of AB 540 students are U.S. citizens.

Although AB 540 students are eligible for in-state tuition rates, undocumented immigrants cannot apply for government-sponsored financial aid or...
loans. Many students, staff, and faculty were unaware of the AB 540 law and did not know that undocumented students were among them in their classrooms. Therefore, in late 2005, a group of first-year students decided to become their own leaders and build S.I.N., a nonhierarchical organization dedicated to educational justice and immigrant rights. They created a mission and vision statement, and even a slogan—S.I.N. Vergüenza (without shame)—that became a part of many of the members’ identities. Although not all members are AB 540 students, everyone is personally committed to the struggle for educational equality for all students. Every member is also connected to the immigrant experience, and their different legal statuses are not an obstacle to working together but rather a strengthening factor.

Within S.I.N., members come together to discuss and critically analyze the social world as it shapes their lives, a process that fosters critical consciousness (for more detail, see The S.I.N. Collective, 2007). As such, S.I.N. members read the world and the word (Freire, 2000). They also write against the world as they read it, producing new texts that challenge dominant narratives about immigration. Some of S.I.N.’s textual products include an audio segment for radio, a video documentary, an academic article (The S.I.N. Collective, 2007), and the show Voces S.I.N. Vergüenza. In this column, we discuss S.I.N.’s work as an example of a counternarrative that reframes the debate about undocumented students. We argue that S.I.N.’s diverse activities and textual products challenge dominant frames of education and immigration while constructing new, alternative ones.

As the two previous policy columns in this journal have discussed, dominant media frames often contain unexamined assumptions and implicit value judgments; restrict what can be said, thought, or practiced with regard to a particular issue; and may shape or legitimize particular policies. In the immigration debate, the “illegal” frame prevails (Lakoff & Ferguson, 2006). This frame defines the issue of immigration as one of law enforcement and criminality—it positions immigrants as criminals, “illegal aliens,” and even “terrorists” in a post-9/11 world. In this frame, immigrants are viewed as a problem. As one member of S.I.N. testified:

I get bothered when the media and politicians say that my parents are criminals. I do not accept that, even as a method toward getting support for undocumented students. Our parents aren’t criminals, and there are other higher powers that have led them to migrate to the U.S. I am betraying my parents if I support that ideology.

Research that uses frame analysis helps us deconstruct and problematize dominant frames, like the “illegal” frame for immigration. However, research rarely shows us how to construct a new frame or a counternarrative that can successfully challenge and transform dominant media frames. This is because living counternarratives—those that take shape in the real world—cannot be constructed and sustained only by scholars working in theory, but rather in practice by grassroots action and collectives of people whose work is driven primarily by lived experience and necessity. S.I.N. members did not sit down one day and say, “We need a counternarrative, let’s build one.” Instead, S.I.N.’s counternarrative emerged organically from the necessity to survive, heal, and reclaim their humanity.

Constructing a Counternarrative

The S.I.N. show, Voces S.I.N. Vergüenza, notably exemplifies how S.I.N. constructs counternarratives that challenge dominant frames on immigration and education. One S.I.N. member wrote:

It was from a personal juncture of social consciousness and a necessity to heal that we put together a theatrical show where we were the protagonists and the stories shared were our own. On stage we became more human than ever to others by baring naked memories of pain, rejection, love, and hope with a bit of humor. Creating this show was challenging—society had successfully kept us silent; conditioned us to believe that we had nothing important to say in the U.S. American eye. We were scared and challenged to perform our life experiences in front of an audience for the first time in our lives. What would our parents say? We even thought about the possibility that someone in the audience could contact Immigration and Customs Enforcement and report us.

We knew that this show was going to revolutionize the way our administration, faculty, friends, and families perceived us. This show challenged well-digested ideas and beliefs held about undocumented people in
the United States. It testified that we were complex humans who deal with more than our “illegality.” We deal with the fact that we are students of color in a university from poor working class families; we deal with our bodies, our sexuality, and memories.

The S.I.N. show reframes the debate on immigration by constructing a new frame of humanity, global migration, oppression, survival, and collective interdependence. The following monologue from the show is just one of many examples:

Go ahead. Paint a picture of me.  
Give me a big mustache, a huge sombrero,  
And make me sit next to a cactus...  
But one thing is certain: I won’t stay quiet.  
I speak because I live.  
Because every word comes from the heart.  
Today I need to speak loud,  
Because if you can’t hear me, it’s as if I never lived.

Today I speak as an immigrant.  
Not as an alien.  
I don’t come from Mars, as your government makes you believe.  
As a matter of fact, the land you are now stepping on belonged to my ancestors.

I speak with an accent that once in terror kept me quiet.  
And when I speak in my tongue I can see your faces frown.  
—¿Por que te da miedo no entender lo que digo? ¿Por que crees que cada que hablo en español estoy hablando mal de tí?  
Tengo cosas más importantes que hacer.

Today I speak as a man.  
I’m reconstructing my macho self.  
I don’t need to use violence, and yeah I like pink, purple, and flowers!  
Today I speak as a gay man.  
Learning to love my self, my surroundings, and other men.  
I am more complex than you thought...

This monologue testifies to the fact that immigrants are complex humans who deserve to be treated with dignity and that only they can validate who they truly are, not the media.

S.I.N. also counters the mainstream belief that anyone who works hard enough can succeed in the United States. The media and theories that promote meritocracy fail to mention how immigrant communities are faced with institutionalized racism that makes it almost impossible to achieve the so called “American dream.” Immigrant children face many struggles in the U.S. school system. A member of S.I.N. recalled her high school experience:

When I was in high school, I had a very hard time in math and science. I had a verbally abusive algebra teacher who said there was no way I would ever be able to reach a university. I felt like a failure and was deeply affected. Applying for college was one of the most depressing times in my life as I realized most doors were closed to me as an undocumented student. I resented myself for not being the exceptional undocumented student.

There are some cases of valedictorian undocumented high school students who are offered a full scholarship to a distinguished university based on their academic achievement, but this is not the case for many undocumented high school students. However, even AB 540 advocates imply that it is those valedictorian undocumented students who deserve sympathy and rewards for their achievements, but they ignore the miseducation, hopelessness, discrimination, and poverty that affect students’ access to higher education.

S.I.N. exists because all students deserve access to an education regardless of their immigration status. In its fourth year, S.I.N. continues to challenge racist ideologies that shape education and immigration issues. By producing community texts like the show Voces S.I.N. Vergüenza, S.I.N. members not only read the world and the word (Freire, 2000), but actively read and write against some of those texts to build a counternarrative about immigration and education. One of the things that the system has not been successful at is stripping these students completely of their cultural roots and memories. For this, S.I.N. thanks their families, their desires, and their love for humanity. As one S.I.N. member explained in his monologue,

Yes I am an immigrant.  
But I want to make you an invitation...  
Forget the stereotypes and recognize yourself as a fellow human being,  
Recognize the immigrant within you.
Notes

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References


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