Teaching Across Borders

Jeffrey W. Rubin and Emma Sokoloff-Rubin

Introduction (Jeff)

In 2004, my daughter Emma and I traveled to Ibiraiaras, Brazil, with an unconventional goal: Design a curriculum about a rural women's movement that would teach high school students in the US about citizenship and democracy. Over the past twelve years, we have crossed international borders and borders between different kinds of pedagogical practice. As we used our ethnographic research to challenge the direction knowledge usually takes in communities in Brazil and the United States, we found our scholarship transformed as well. We no longer see a clear border between being a father-daughter team and scholarly researchers, writing for middle school students and for peers, or grappling with curricular development and academic theorizing.

This project began when our family lived in the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre for a year so I could research social movements that had been transforming the country. When we returned to the U.S., Emma, then thirteen, began lobbying to go back to Brazil for another extended stay. We came up with an idea for a project: Emma and I would videotape interviews with women in the movement (originally the Movement of Rural Women Workers, now called the Movement of Peasant Women), and then she would teach a class about the movement in her school. We went ahead with this plan and spent a month of the summer of 2004 in the small rural town of Ibiraiaras, attending movement meetings and interviewing women in their homes. The next academic year, Emma taught a course about Brazilian social movements, incorporating our videotaped interviews into lessons on citizenship and social change. Over the next two years, we turned Emma's course into a curriculum and presented it to teachers in workshops at universities across the US.

Then we brought the curriculum back to the women in the women's movement. In church basements, union halls, and the kitchens of small rural houses, we presented the curriculum through photos and videos from Emma's class and from our workshops with teachers. We filmed each step of the project so we could continue to bring our research and teaching experiences back and forth between Brazil and the United States. These border-crossings informed our understanding of the movement and of ourselves.

One: the women's movement (Emma)

In 1986, a group of young women in the southern Brazilian countryside defied their fathers and started the Movement of Rural Women Workers (MMTR). Brazil's military dictatorship had just ended, and for the first time in two decades, citizens could protest without the ever-present risk of violent

repression and torture. Young women with fourth and fifth grade educations learned to lead in the MMTR, inspiring their neighbors to join protests and fending off policemen at critical moments. They mobilized tens of thousands of women to march on the national capital, Brasilia, to demand economic and political rights. And closer to home, they took over the state legislature, streaming onto the Senate floor and camping out there until their elected representatives passed laws guaranteeing maternity leave and pension rights.

Sixteen years later, these same women gathered in a church basement on the outskirts of Ibiraiaras. By now some of them had become union presidents, teachers, and leaders in municipal government, while others balanced work on small farms with participation in the women's movement. As they carried their commitment to their early visions of a different reality for women into new spaces, these leaders found that much of the hardest work of activism occurs after the major days of protest, in battles that take place in public spaces and in women's homes.

The women had achieved spectacular success since they started the movement as teenagers in the mid-1980s. In the church basement in 2002, as my Dad and I listened, they grappled with what to do next. How do you stay an activist and keep coming to meetings, when the person whose mind you need to change isn't the governor, whom you see only at demonstrations in the capital city, but your husband, who sleeps beside you every night? When new legal rights don't translate into changes at home, do you stage demonstrations at the end of your driveway?

We brought these questions to students in U.S. classrooms through portraits of the leaders whose tenacity and openness – and uncertainties – had first captured my attention as a teenager. Here are two examples:

Gessi

In 2001, after leading the women's movement for fifteen years, Gessi Bonês accepted a position as head of the health department in Ibiraiaras, where she lived with her husband and two young children. Gessi left the women's movement meetings and mobilizations, with their long black plastic tents and communal meals, their protest songs and pageants of rural dreams, for a small empty office in the health clinic. The bureaucrats in city hall were openly hostile, telling her that she had no education and knew only how to protest and make trouble, so what was she doing there?

The question of where to do politics—in the streets or in the institutions or in some mixture of the two—confronts citizens and activists all over Brazil and Latin America today. People who fought to bring down a military dictatorship thirty years ago find themselves able to run for local office and win, or to work in a government department and make actual changes in policy and practice. And since the mid-1990s, the Workers Party, a leftist party committed to combating poverty, has been winning elections, culminating in the victories of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, or Lula, in the 2002 and 2006 Brazilian presidential

races, and of Dilma Rousseff in 2010 and 2014.

But what can come of such within-the-system maneuvering, when the odds are still against significant reform? Gessi's administration lost the elections in 2004, and she discovered that the hard work of incremental change in the health department can be undone with by the next municipal government. Something about working in government had grabbed Gessi, however, and she went on to win an elected position as an advocate for children in Ibiraiaras. In contrast, many leaders of the women's movement, who opposed Gessi's decision to join the health department, argue that investing in incremental reform means limiting yourself from the beginning, and that when Gessi joined the government, she took on the task of governing at the expense of truly reforming the world.

Mônica

When we asked Mônica Marchesini what she thinks about while she milks the cows on her farm, she answered that she thinks about the contribution it makes to the family economy—it provides milk for the children to drink and, after her morning work, cream and cheese to sell. Mônica doesn't lead a union or a health department; she makes all her own food and travels ten miles from her farm into town three times a week to work with the women's movement. The ideas and hopes that come out of her activism often stand in stark contrast to the realities of her everyday life.

Showing us around her kitchen, Mônica explained that both men and women eat meals and track dirt into the house, so they should clean up together. She said that boys and girls should both do household chores, then added that she can't wait for her daughter Milena to grow up, because then she'll have someone to help her around the house. Mônica told us that she can work until late into the night, doing dishes and washing clothes, because women have more stamina than men. Her husband Joacir, she explained, likes to watch TV, and to corroborate, he winked at us and kicked his feet up onto the coffee table.

Mônica's statements don't line up, I remember thinking. She's contradicting herself. She just said that both men and women eat meals and track dirt into the house, so they should clean up together, but Joacir's place is on the couch. She said she works through the evening, but that her husband is tired, so he needs to watch TV. She said that she can't wait for her daughter to get older so there's someone to help, even though she has three sons and believes that boys should help too.

Watching Mônica wash dishes and talk about her family, it struck me that the contradictory things she was saying were deeply true. She was saying one thing and doing another, but she wasn't being hypocritical. Mônica lives in this space of contradiction. This is perhaps what the women's movement in Ibiraiaras asks women most persistently to do: believe in a vision of a different world while living immersed in the reality of this one. We've come to call what Mônica does "holding paradox:" holding the paradox of what her life is against what she

hopes it might become.

Two: creating the curriculum (Emma)

When Dad and I first decided to make a curriculum about the women's movement, we didn't know if it would work. To suggest that American students have something in common with, and something to learn from, the efforts of women in Brazil is to go against the direction knowledge usually takes. It's more common to teach about developing countries through the lens of U.S. foreign policy, or to teach about the civil rights movement or early women's suffrage movmeent as part of a narrative of improvement that loctates injustice solidly in the past. We wanted to use examples of Brazilian social movements to teach students about citizenship and democracy.

The summer before my sophomore year of high school, Dad and I spent a month in Ibiraiaras interviewing leaders of the women's movement. The curriculum began to take shape the following year, when I taught an elective course to middle school students at my school.Week-by-week, watching my students' reactions and bouncing ideas off my dad, I put together a series of lesson plans. Each lesson connected examples of Brazilian social movements to social issues and political activism in the US. For example, my students read letters Brazilian activists wrote to President Lula, then wrote letters of their own. Some wrote to President Bush, others to their mayors or to the principal of the school. They debated whether landless workers should be allowed to take over idle land, and, in a parallel, fictional debate that brought the issue closer to home, whether Americans with third homes should be obligated to allow victims of Hurricane Katrina to move in. The names of MMTR activists became common terms in our classroom, as students watched video clips of the women speaking and read early drafts of the profiles I later brought back to Ibiraiaras with me.

"I don't know if I would be that brave," a sixth-grader said after hearing Gessi's story of facing dogs and guns. Dad and I were teaching an afternoon workshop on the women's movement at the elementary school I had attended. In the video, Gessi remembers how "…we started moving and the dogs and policemen started to walk backwards, walk backwards, and we kept walking forwards."

The lessons of our curriculum are open-ended. We present compelling but incomplete representations of political activism—video, music, a written excerpt from an interview—and invite students to make sense of what they are seeing and to relate that back to their own communities. We took a similar approach to workshops we ran for teachers the following year, in which we asked teachers to take on the role of students and participate in lessons they could later teach. Teach for America Teachers in Miami related the violence and deprivation in Brazilian favelas to the poor African-American neighborhoods in which they taught, where fifth graders had trouble reading and new highways destroyed local economies. Teachers in North Carolina told us that materials on countries in the Global South always look at huge problems like hunger, ethnic killing, or

environmental destruction, with local people presented only as suffering victims. In contrast, our curriculum shows ordinary Brazilians actively solving problems in their communities.

Teachers in San Diego saw their own stories and those of their female students in the interviews with women's movement activists like Mônica. After reading an interview with Elenice, a former movement leader whose father forced her to quit school after eighth grade, a Latina teacher in San Diego said that she had won a full scholarship to UCSD, but her mother refused to let her go to college. "If you do that," her mother said, "no man will ever marry you." The young woman turned down the scholarship, then, years later, paid her own way through college.

Three: bringing our curriculum back (Jeff)

In the summer of 2007, we brought our curriculum back to the women in Ibiraiaras to show them what we had done with their stories. We presented our work in the same kitchens and union halls where we had first learned about their organizing and ideas. At home, we had gathered together everything we could find related to the curriculum, so we arrived with a binder overflowing with lesson plans, letters to the women from students who had taken the course, photos of workshops we'd run for teachers, and videos of classes.

Many of the women thought the curriculum was subversive, in its aim of exposing students to activism. They also saw how much work had gone into it: the interconnected tasks of coming up with ideas, translating them into lessons, learning from everyone you can get to talk to you, and transforming all of that into a physical product, with tabs and a binder, unit outlines and lesson plans, so that you can place it in someone's hands, and they can use it to teach.

Because the women in the women's movement were organizers, and this is what they do—gather and present information effectively, using stories and ideas and song to move people—they recognized this aspect of their work in our own. "It's a concrete thing you've done," Rosane Dalsoglio said in the union hall in Sananduva, "showing something that really happened. You're taking to the United States concrete and practical experiences that we created here."

The women we'd met over the years gathered around our laptop, watching videos of themselves that we used in our lessons. Their responses reminded us that we were also bringing back representations of a history that had been forged in struggle, with little time for documentation. After Emma and I walked the women through the materials we had brought, the youngest in the group leaned forward, opening her hands. "My God, I also lived this," she told the group. "But we didn't save anything . . . a photo here, a photo there, like souvenirs."

In one of the videos we brought to Ibiraiaras with us, we use segments of our interviews with the women to get sixth graders in Massachusetts talking about what it means to form a movement. At the end of the lesson, a student who had

barely spoken in class all year summed up the lively discussion. The student spoke softly and slowly, much as the women in Ibiraiaras might speak at a meeting, and her teacher leaned in from the back of the room to hear. "Each woman," the student said, bringing her hands from beneath her desk and folding them neatly on its surface, "is motivated by one thing, but they all connect to women's rights. Gessi's is being a leader and getting women's rights. Gessi wants rights, but she also wants to help her family. Elenice, she wants an education, and she wants rights. And it all combines together, and if all women do that, they're probably going to get rights, if they keep working at it. They can't give up."

We taught the same lesson we had taught in Northampton, twenty minutes from our house, to students in Ibiraiaras. To our surprise, the lessons worked, eliciting many of the same responses, even though this was a lesson about women who lived around the corner, whose history had taken place in this very location—but whose lives and activism were never spoken about in the schools.

Four: new methodologies and new insights (Jeff's voice)

In the process of analyzing and teaching about the women's movement, Emma and I came to approach the task of scholarly research in new ways. This led us to write a book in two voices about the women's movement, bringing into our scholarship concepts developed in workshops with high school teachers and discussions with rural women as they commented on our curriculum.

Early on in our collaboration, the idea had been that Emma would "translate" me and make my ideas accessible to a wider audience. At the first meeting we attended in Ibiraiaras, the kick-off for the municipal election campaign, Emma and I noticed very different things. Emma saw who sat where in the room and how Gessi crossed and re-crossed the boundaries between men and women with ease. She noticed who spoke with authority and with what gestures, while I was attentive to speeches and to the political implications of what each person said. I knew how to analyze the words, while Emma could sense the relationships playing out in the room.

When we spoke about this moment in my Latin American History class at Boston University a couple of years later, one young woman shouted from the back of the room, "That's because you're a guy and she's a girl." The class laughed, surprised by her audacity and apparent accuracy. The truth was more complicated. We were father and daughter, professor and student, seasoned ethnographer and young traveler. Eight years later, however, when we were completing our book, the collaboration between Emma and me was no longer about high school teaching or academic scholarship as separate activities, and we have ceased noticing different kinds of detail in predictable ways. Often we observe the same things, holding up words or fleeting images to sharp analysis or uncertain insight. We argue stubbornly and finish each other's sentences, improvise and communicate on shifting planes.

Ideas that Emma and I developed to make ethnographic material accessible for secondary school students have become the theoretical underpinnings of our scholarly analysis. For example, we first used the idea of paradox to capture a central characteristic of each woman about whom we wrote, so she could represent one aspect of the women's movement to students. This worked for teaching, but then paradox went further for us, pressed in new directions by new interlocutors. We realized that the paradoxes we identified were lived as tensions, bringing personal and collective history into the present, and these acute discomforts pressed women to act. Paradoxes, a graduate student colleague observed to me, gave movement to movements, pressed them to bring the future into being as they moved through time. And the idea of paradox presented the notion of "holding" as well, the holding of paradox that gives depth to musical performance, an idea suggested to us by Emma's clarinet teacher, but also makes it hard for an individual to stay in a movement, balancing irresolvable tensions, and hard for a movement itself to hold many different kinds of people.

In the course of presenting our curriculum to secondary school teachers, we learned about graduate level instruction as well. When we taught a workshop for sixth grade social studies teachers at Duke, we invited Wendy Wolford, then a professor in the Department of Geography at UNC and an expert on the MST, to join us and say a bit about the history of the struggle for land in Brazil. When Wendy saw the way we used interview clips of Brazilian women speaking to us about their activism to teach about the women's movement in our lessons, it set off a light bulb in her head. "I do interviews all the time," she told us, "but I've never thought of using them in my classes." The following semester, Wendy designed a methodology course for graduate students, "Ethnographies of Globalization," for which she asked scholars of different parts of the world to submit an interview transcript, a description of the context in which the interview took place, and a published article that resulted from the interview.

Emma and I gained the insights we did into the politics of women's activism because she accompanied me as a co-researcher and because we focused our ethnographic work on creating curricular materials for secondary school students. In Ibiraiaras, we were performing an alternative family relationship in front of women who defined their adulthood and their political activism by having defied their fathers. In turn, women responded to our relationship and to Emma in explaining their political and personal actions.

One evening, Emma asked Ivone (Gessi's sister) and her partner Vania what they thought when I first arrived, a male researcher from the States wanting to study a women's movement. Emma joked that maybe I should leave the room so they could tell the truth. I laughed and walked out the door. Research isn't usually done in teams, and being there together let us ask questions about each other that we couldn't have asked about ourselves. This time, with Ivone and Vania, it was late and cold and I stayed outside for only a moment. But once she started thinking, Vania finished her story with me in the room. She spoke about not knowing at first whether to trust me, if I would indeed come back more than

once and if she would want to have me around.

In the course of twelve years, Emma and I have taken our work back and forth to the women in the MMTR, to secondary school and university classrooms in Brazil and the United States, and to family members and friends, engaging in dialogue that extends outward from the university both transnationally and locally. What Emma and I learned grew out of the observations of women and men, teachers and students in all of these locations, talking to us and each other.

About the authors

Jeffrey W. Rubin (Boston University) and Emma Sokoloff-Rubin (Yale Law School) are the authors of *Sustaining Activism: A Brazilian Women's Movement and a Father-Daughter Collaboration* (Duke University Press, 2013). Contact Jeff at jwr AT bu.edu and Emma at emma.sokoloff-rubin AT yale.edu.