

office of **Academic Planning & Assessment**  
University of Massachusetts Amherst

# Faculty Focus on Assessment

*Ximena Zúñiga*, Assistant Professor in the Social Justice Education program at the School of Education, discusses how inquiry into practice informs her teaching and research on diversity themes as well as her mentoring of teachers in training.

## A Multi-faceted Approach

“Assessment, action research, empirical research, and inquiry into practice are tied to what I do as a teacher in the classroom.”

– **Ximena Zúñiga**  
Assistant Professor  
in Social Justice Education

Zúñiga has worked on three different projects focused on what and how students learn in diversity-themed courses and co-curricular activities that encourage interaction across racial and other group differences. She was a member of the UMass team which took part in the Diverse Democracy National Study to assess the impact of diversity practices on all students. Her work with Project Mosaik, situated in three residence halls, centered on identifying which curricular and co-curricular activities and processes influence learning outcomes within multicultural settings. Within the School of Education, she oversees a multi-section undergraduate course, *Exploring Differences and Common Ground*, that uses an intergroup dialogue format to support conversations on issues of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. The seminars provide students and graduate-student facilitators an experience of exploring difficult questions in a sustained process of dialogue to promote awareness of social identity and social justice issues, relationship building, and action taking. Her next project, in conjunction with ten other institutions, is an evaluation of the educational effects of intergroup dialogues,



*Ximena Zúñiga, Assistant Professor, Social Justice Education, Student Development and Pupil Personnel Services.*

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“Assessment, action research, empirical research, and inquiry into practice,” Zúñiga says, “are tied to what I do as a teacher in the classroom. I want to encourage future educators to closely examine classroom practices, particularly when exploring diversity issues in the ‘here and now’. The dynamics of race and exclusion at predominantly white and middle-class institutions often prevent us from understanding what is going on for our students in the diverse classroom.” These various approaches allow Zúñiga to move between theory and practice; they inform her theorizing of pedagogies for encouraging intergroup dialogue and the development of models, curricula, and facilitator training modules.

## What Kinds of Data Emerge

“Gathering the data has to do with procuring knowledge to improve how we work and meet the needs of different types of students. It’s extremely layered.”

– *Professor Zúñiga*

The kinds of data that Zúñiga collects as a teacher-researcher can vary widely and depend on what questions have emerged in the diversity and social justice education teaching and learning contexts. Zúñiga comments, “There’s no way that I can address the concerns of everyone in the classroom and tackle all the questions that arise. For me, gather-

ing the data has to do with procuring knowledge to improve how we work and meet the needs of different types of students. It’s extremely layered.”

To gauge what students learned or grappled with in a particular session, she uses classroom assessment tools such as one-minute papers, free writes, and

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The Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) provides service to the campus community in evaluating student learning and program effectiveness. OAPA can assist departments and individual faculty members in several areas: ■ **Developing evaluation plans** for new programs, grant proposals, and externally and internally funded projects ■ **Exploring and articulating** student learning outcomes appropriate to a course or program ■ **Finding useful ways** of assessing student success in achieving program goals ■ **Developing strategies** for ongoing reviews of program effectiveness for quality improvement, accreditation, and other purposes.

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## What Kinds of Data Emerge, continued

demonstration projects. She may interview individual students to get richer insight into how they responded to an activity. To consider the quality of her own work as a teacher, she may look in depth at a set of student papers for particular characteristics. Before graduate-student teachers begin work in her classes, they do self-assessments of their styles of teaching, learning, and group interaction, as well as their

knowledge of diversity and social justice issues. Zúñiga also acts as a consultant, meeting with the student-teachers as a team and generating focus-group data through such questions as “What did you see happening in the classroom? How did students respond? What might be some reasons for this?”

Zúñiga characterizes these layered processes in terms of triangulation. By triangulating different types and sources of data, a complex and nuanced picture

emerges of what is going on in the classroom from the different perspectives of students, the instructor, and the graduate-student facilitators. “It’s hard for us as instructors to take in, to filter, so much information about what’s happening in our classrooms in the ‘here and now,’” she notes. “But if we gather enough data, or look with an assessment lens at our practices, then we can devise a more systemized process of evaluating the teaching and learning process.”

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## Challenges of Inquiry Into Practice

*“...there may at times be too much information, some of which may be complex and contradictory.”*

– Professor Zúñiga

Zúñiga acknowledges that in this type of assessment “there may at times be too much information, some of which may be complex and contradictory. Sometimes you have information that may take you in many directions so you have to make choices.” Being grounded in existing theory and literature is important, as is always being mindful of local context. Particularly in intergroup dialogues on diversity issues, a conflict or troubling event may happen within the classroom and it’s tempting, Zúñiga says, to make a quick attribution based on a theory, hypothesis or past experience. But an inquiry-oriented practice also considers such contextual factors as the physical layout of the room or the type of activity that day or how discussion questions

were introduced. The teacher-researcher must be able to sort through the paradoxes and contradictions that this rich array of data raises, and establish which aspects reflect general patterns and which are perhaps specific to that situation.

The benefits of using this assessment data are two-fold: the teacher-researcher or reflective teacher can make immediate changes in classroom practices or assignments, and can contribute to ongoing theory-building by writing articles. As Zúñiga notes, though, “In academia there’s a very strong norm that everything you inquire into should be published in a peer reviewed article, but sometimes educators and educational researchers conduct classroom assessment to learn and improve their own practices.”

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## Advice for Other Faculty

*“I think it’s helpful when faculty members choose to study their own teaching and educational practices and share what they learned.”*

– Professor Zúñiga

About inquiry into practice methods Zuniga says, “It helps us to be more reflective as researchers and practitioners. So I would invite anyone who wants to engage in classroom assessment practices to join in with others who either have the expertise or the motivation. More and more we’re trying to understand what and how students learn, especially in the context of diversity issues.

We know that classroom diversity positively impacts student development; we don’t know all we need to know about how, or in what way, or to what extent. I think it’s helpful when faculty members choose to study their own teaching and educational practices and share what they learned in faculty seminars, professional conferences, and with their students.”

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