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Teaching Latinx Traditional Medicine *Curanderismo* in Higher Education

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Abstract: For more than 20 years, traditional medicine of Mexico, the U.S. Southwest and other countries has been taught as a series of academic course at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque in the United States. These courses focus on traditional uses of healing plants and rituals for students in higher education and the community. These courses discuss the incorporation of diverse Hispanic and Indigenous ancestral methods of healing based on experiential learning through a series of traditional medicine classes offered at the University of New Mexico. This pedagogy is a unique approach to the reclaiming of ancestral perspectives into the university curriculum that have an enduring impact in the students enrolled in these courses. This article provides a definition of *curanderismo* and mentions three major historical figures that have impacted traditional medicine in Mexico and the United States. The article also discusses the impact that these classes have on the diverse students at a Hispanic-Serving, Level I Research American university. Finally, we discuss the development of these courses in the university system and how a program has been created that also allows community members and staff in diverse health professions to enroll in the summer face-to-face institute through the Center for Continuing Education.

Keywords: Curanderismo, Traditional Medicine, Higher Education, Latinx.

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Introduction

It is a pleasure for us, Dr. Eliseo Cheo Torres and Dr. Mario Del Angel-Guevara, professors in the academic department of Chicana/o Studies at the University of New Mexico to discuss a series of unique courses on “*Curanderismo*, Traditional Medicine of Mexico”, the U.S. Southwest and other countries. In this article, we will address our personal experience with traditional medicine that has been institutionalized in the university curriculum, the history of the teaching of *Curanderismo* at the University of New Mexico, publications for the *curanderismo* classes, free coursera courses on this topic, the translation and dubbing of these courses to Spanish, and the future of *curanderismo* in higher education.

Personal Experience with Traditional Medicine

Both of us, authors of this article, grew up with a knowledge and experience of traditional medicine, *curanderismo*, in South Texas and Northern Mexico. I, Eliseo Torres, grew up in rural South Texas and my mother, Olivia, treated all 8 members of the Torres' family with herbal medications and healing rituals since our home was about 40 miles from the nearest health clinic. "Cheo" was my nickname given at birth by my mother. At the age of 8 she said "You are ready to learn the usage of medicinal plants" and I was taught how to prepare the many medicinal plants in my mother's garden such as chamomile *manzanilla*, rue *ruda*, basil *albahacar*, peppermint *yerbabuena*, and rosemary *romero*. Most of the time, these plants were boiled and given to the family for different ailments. At times, the plants such as *ruda*, rue, as well as cannabis, were placed in alcohol and used for my father's arthritic pains. In addition to the plants, my mother explained the many rituals that she used for various ailments such as the evil eye, *mal de ojo*; magical fright, *susto*; and constipation, *empacho*. Later on, I met Cresencio Alvarado, known as *Chenchito*, who was one of the well-known *Fidencista* healers (a movement of followers of the late healer *Niño Fidencio*) from northern Mexico. *Chenchito* was my teacher and mentor for over 30 years before his death at the age of 90 in 2018. These experiences allowed me to continue the teachings, research and writings of traditional medicine of Mexico and the Southwest.

I, Dr. Mario Del Angel-Guevara, Assistant Professor in the department of Chicana/o studies came to the United States in 2013 to study at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Before coming to the United States, I was a resident in the city of Monterrey, in the state of Nuevo León, Mexico. Traditional medicine was part of our life on a daily basis. Since I was a child, my mother would take me to the local market *Mercado Juárez*, in downtown Monterrey, where hundreds of medicinal plants, votive candles, amulets, oils, and magical potions could be purchased. This experience was part of our daily life in Mexico. Even though my mom is a university graduate specializing in psychology, her strong belief system was engrained in the usage of rituals and plants for healing. After performing a ritual with an egg for the evil eye, *mal de ojo*, my mother would break it in a glass of water, and I would question why this was done. Being a psychologist, she would tell me that the egg was one of the largest living cells absorbing the negative vibrations of the body and that the form of the egg and the water was a way to discover what was causing the illness. My grandmother, also, strongly believed in the traditional medicine system and would explain to us why it was important to keep it in our culture. Not far from Monterrey, is the town of Espinazo, state of Nuevo León, where the famous *curandero* traditional healer Niño Fidencio lived and practiced his healings in the early 1900's. He was considered by many "the healer of healers". Living in Monterrey, I would hear about the festivals in honor of the famous healer from the small community of Espinazo, about 40 miles from my hometown, to celebrate his birth and his death, and about the people and believers that would attend these festivals. Even though El Niño Fidencio died in 1938, like the *Fidencista* followers, I was part of the Mexican norm of using two types of medicine in Mexican culture healing through traditional methods in addition to seeking the advice of allopathic doctors and physicians. These experiences motivated me to work and research with Professor Torres in developing academic courses in traditional medicine, *curanderismo*, taught completely in Spanish at the University of New Mexico. This may be

the first course on traditional medicine in the United States completely taught in the Spanish language at a university.

Definition of Curanderismo Traditional Medicine

Curanderismo is a holistic approach to healing the mind, body and spirit that includes various treatments, rituals and elements of nature such as plants, resins, smoke, earth, fire to treat the patient (Torres, 2019). *Curanderismo* derives from the Spanish word *curar* which means “to heal”. Treating the spirit can be used in a religious context, however, it is also used to refer to the person’s energetic field, and/or vibrations within and around the body which are believed to be disrupted or affected (Torres & Del Angel-Guevara, 2023). A person can become a *curandero/a* by being an apprentice of someone else who practices this medicine. It is also believed that a person can possess a gift, *un don*, to heal. There are also schools in other countries that specialize in the teaching of traditional medicine. In Mexico, various schools provide certifications on Mexican traditional healing oftentimes with the state and/or the federal government’s recognition. Some of these schools are CEDEHC, *Centro de Desarrollo Humano hacia la Comunidad*, an institute of human development in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico; Institute Tzapin and Chapingo University in Texcoco, Estado de Mexico, Mexico; and Intercultural University (a tribal university) in San Felipe del Progreso, Estado de Mexico, Mexico.

Some of the courses offered at the University of New Mexico focus on *curanderos/as*, traditional healers, who have had an impact in two countries, Mexico and the United States. According to Torres & Sawyer (2014) the following are considered great *curanderos/as* in history who have impacted both countries and who are included in the courses offered.

Teresita Urrea is one of the early great *curanderas*, female healers, who became internationally known and whose life has been documented mainly as one of the earliest feminists, known advocate, for female and indigenous rights in Mexico (Torres & Del Angel-Guevara, 2022). She was born in Sonora, Mexico, practiced in Chihuahua and was exiled to the United States at an early age by Mexican President Porfirio Díaz who expelled her from Mexico for her political involvement with the Yaqui and Mayo natives of Sonora. Teresa lived in El Paso, Texas as well as Arizona, California, New Mexico and New York where she attracted a following of people seeking healing. Teresita’s fame ended at the early age of 33 in 1906 when she died and was buried in Clifton, Arizona.

Don Pedrito Jaramillo came from the state of Jalisco, Mexico to the United States at an older age and settled in Los Olmos Ranch outside of the town of Falfurrias, Texas. He had thousands of followers and his methods of healing included prescribing the use of simple elements such as water and plants which were free and available to most people during a time of a great drought and poverty. Don Pedrito died in 1907 and he is buried at his shrine in Los Olmos Ranch next to the town of Falfurrias with the first bilingual historical marker in the state of Texas that reads “The Benefactor of Humanity”.

The last of the three great healers, José de Jesús Fidencio Constantino Sintora, known as El Niño Fidencio, is considered the “healer of healers” in Mexico. He became famous after healing the President of Mexico, Plutarco Elías Calles in 1928. Currently, there are two celebrations to honor his birth and death in the small town of Espinazo, Nuevo León, Mexico. He currently has thousands of followers called *Fidencistas* throughout northern Mexico and the United States. There are religious temples in many Mexican and U.S. communities to honor the famous healer. Although El Niño Fidencio never visited the United States, his movement and followers are found in many major cities throughout the United States with a large Latinx population. El Niño died in 1938 and was buried in Espinazo, Nuevo León, Mexico.

History of Teaching Curanderismo Traditional Medicine

For more than 20 years, I, Eliseo “Cheo” Torres, Professor in Chicana/o Studies at the University of New Mexico have taught a series of courses on traditional medicine of Mexico and the U.S. Southwest. After retiring from the university, I continue co-teaching this course with my colleague Dr. Mario Del Angel-Guevara. These courses started with about 30 students during the summer of 2000 as a two-week intensive class. Online credit courses for university students were offered in the Fall and Spring semesters a few years later. In the summer of 2019, the summer face-to-face course grew to almost 200 students coming from throughout the United States. In the summer of 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Del Angel-Guevara and I decided to offer a summer online course. After the pandemic, we have returned to the 2-week summer face-to-face course in June and continue offering to the community a 3-week online continuing education course in July. The contents of the online courses include a number of videos recorded in the university media studios during previous summer classes of well-known traditional healers from Mexico, Peru, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Africa, and the United States. Other videos emphasized modules of famous healers from Mexico who had impact in both countries Mexico and the United States, such as; Teresita Urrea, Don Pedrito Jaramillo, and El Niño Fidencio, who lived and practiced in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s.

The high demand for the courses taught in English allowed us to create and offer a Spanish course under the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. The Spanish course was well-received by students who speak and/or are learning the Spanish language and are interested in reclaiming their roots and learning about Hispanic traditions and culture. Therefore, in 2019, I, Dr. Mario Del Angel-Guevara, began developing a Spanish curriculum for *Curanderismo* traditional medicine and expanding the existing English courses.

For over 20 years, the summer course, “Traditional Medicine without Borders: *Curanderismo* in the Southwest and Mexico”, has grown in popularity throughout the United States and other countries (see figure 1) such as Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Brazil; and efforts to offer a certificate program and academic minor have started. The Fall and Spring semesters offer degree-seeking students at the university two additional online courses that enroll over a hundred students and are cross-listed with a number of academic departments including: Chicana/o Studies, Language, Literacy and Sociocultural Studies, Anthropology, History, Latin American Studies, Native American Studies, Religious Studies, Women and Gender and

Sexuality Studies and Africana Studies. The Fall semester courses is, “*Curanderismo* I: The Art of Mexican Folk Healing” and the Spring semester course is “*Curanderismo* II: Global Perspectives of Traditional Healing”.



Figure 1. Dr. Torres with students of *Curanderismo* at UNM (Courtesy of Curanderismo Program)

Publications for the Curanderismo Courses

In the early 1980's, I, Professor Torres, sent a manuscript to a number of publishing companies in the United States for a book on herbal remedies. I was denied the publication of this short book, and I decided to self-publish and created Nieves Press. The first book was “Green Medicine: Traditional Mexican-American Herbal Remedies” and was a complete success. This publication discussed the preparation of medicinal plants, highlighted cautions, and provided a glossary of more than a hundred popular plants used in traditional medicine. A second self-published book was “The Folk Healer: The Mexican-American Tradition of *Curanderismo*”. This book included a history of *curanderismo*, ailments, rituals, folk beliefs, and a biography of healers including Don Pedrito Jaramillo, Niño Fidencio, and Teresita. In 1996, I was employed at the University of New Mexico, where both of these publications were combined and updated into a new book called “Healing with Herbs and Rituals: A Mexican Tradition” published by the University of New Mexico Press. Soon after this publication, a second book was written on my personal experiences with traditional medicine called “*Curandero: A life in Mexican Folk Healing*” also published by the University of New Mexico press. Many students whose parents only spoke Spanish requested that I considered publishing a book written in their native language. Again, no publisher was interested in publishing the book in Spanish, therefore, the translation and publication of this book was done in Mexico and called “*Curandero: Una vida en la medicina tradicional mexicana*”.

In 2015, I was encouraged to offer the traditional medicine courses online. I was fortunate to record a number of videos in the university's production studios of the many *curanderos/as* that present topics of traditional healing

during the summer class. Therefore, in addition to the face-to-face summer classes, the videos of *curandero/as* and their healings were used for the two online courses, one in the Fall and the second one in the Spring semester. The online courses allowed me to publish two additional books by Kendall Hunt Publishing Company called “*Curanderismo: The Art of Traditional Medicine without Borders*” and “*Curandero: Traditional Healers of Mexico and the Southwest*”. Dr. Mario Del Angel-Guevara who is faculty and a certified translator and interpreter, expressed interest in offering the courses in Spanish. These two books were translated by him and published for his courses. As interest and demand from students for these courses and materials to be available in Spanish grew, I, Dr. Mario Del Angel-Guevara, collaborated with Professor Torres in the translation of both books in order to develop two new courses to be taught in Spanish for a growing Spanish-speaking student population and Spanish language learners. Many of the students who were interested in taking these courses in Spanish were seeking to reclaim their cultural roots, practices, and rituals from their ancestors (see figure 2). Other students sought to gain an appreciation of Hispanic culture through the knowledge of their traditional medicine heritage. For this reason, two new courses in Spanish were developed which are currently offered online to students at the University of New Mexico. The Spanish publications are now shared with the extended families of Hispanic students. Class evaluations indicate that the students are pleased with all of the publications and that they feel a pride and awareness of their traditional medicine *curanderismo* culture.

Community courses on Traditional Medicine

The summer two-week intensive credit course is also offered for a modest fee through the University of New Mexico’s Center for Continuing Education. This center offers continuing education units, if requested, for community members from New Mexico as well as other states and other countries. The Center for Continuing Education registers the students, and the course curriculum is the same as for those enrolling for credit hours with the exception of not requiring exams or term papers for the community members. In the past, students from throughout the United States and other countries have expressed a desire to attend the classes offered in Albuquerque but do not have the means for transportation to New Mexico and 2-week lodging. Therefore, community members now have the option of enrolling in a fully live online summer course in the month of July. Information can be found at curanderismo.unm.edu. The university also contracted through the international Coursera platform to offer a number of free, if audited, short traditional medicine courses under an agreement with the University of New Mexico. These courses emphasize traditional healing of the body; traditional healing using plants; traditional healing of the mind, energy and spirit; global and cultural influences of traditional medicine; and a Spanish course focusing on global influences, (Curanderismo courses, n.d.) Plans are to add additional Coursera online Spanish courses.

Traditional healing of the body includes educational modules that emphasize a number of traditional methods impacting illnesses of the body such as intestinal blockage, *empacho*, which involves a stomach massage and a pulling of the skin in the back of the body in order to dislodge what is blocking the intestines and causing the constipation. There is a *manteadas* module, which is manipulation of the body using a cotton cloth such as shawl, *rebozo*, or any cotton fabric that manipulates the body to alleviate certain symptoms. This is effective

with special populations such as the elderly whose bones are brittle and skin is sensitive or pregnant women who may have a breech baby that needs to turn in a proper position before birth. Another module is on the traditional bonesetter, *huesero*, a profession that was popular in earlier years, but is now almost extinct. Some say that the *huesero* was the first folk chiropractor before this profession was recognized. The *huesero* is still found in certain regions of Mexico, Central, and South America in order to meet the needs of the Latinx populations especially in rural areas. There are other videos that discuss Mayan abdominal massage, body adjustments, spinal alignment, healing with water called Hydrotherapy, and treatments for infants and the aging community.



Figure 2. Dr. Del Angel-Guevara at the course closing ceremony as a way to reclaim cultural practices.

(Courtesy of Curanderismo Program)

The second Coursera class focuses on traditional healing using plants of the Southwest, and those for the digestive and nervous system. A popular module is one that demonstrates how to prepare alcohol-based tinctures and water-based microdoses using fresh or dry herbs for healing purposes. Additional themes in this class include the preparing of juice and clay therapy. This class ends with the usage of herbal oils and herbal smoke (moxa) to address certain ailments.

The third Coursera course addresses spirituality as a means to meet the patient's energetic psychological needs. The students are able to view a number of energetic and spiritual cleansings, *limpias*. A traditional healer from Oaxaca, Mexico, Laurencio López Núñez, demonstrates this kind of cleansing using an egg to absorb negative vibrations; aromatic plants to sweep away unwanted vibrations; and copal incense to allow the smoke to carry the negative spirits to the heavens. A second curandero from Cuernavaca, Mexico, uses the sound of a conch shell called *atecocolli*, in the native nahuatl language. These sound vibrations are part of the cleansing ritual. A comprehensive class addresses the traditional Mexican sweat lodge, *temazcal*, and how the ceremonies inside this sweat lodge are effective in addressing the individuals' spiritual and psychological needs. The *temazcal* has been revived not only in Mexico but throughout the Southwest as a way to rid the body toxins and address

psychological problems, and substance abuse such as alcoholism.

The fourth class addresses global and cultural richness and begins with the influences of *curanderismo* in the African and Afro-Latinx cultures. Two modules describe traditional medicine in the countries of Uganda and Gabon, Africa, and how they have used their healing methods for centuries. Two additional topics are Afro-Latinx medicine from Cuba and Puerto Rico and address how the healers from these countries use elements from their islands to perform their cleansings. A healer from the Amazon jungle of Peru, Mino Asheninka, uses sacred tobacco as a means to perform his own type of cleansing and healing. The Native-American influence in this class is the use of feathers to sweep away negative vibrations used by Native-Americans in the Southwest.

Finally, the Spanish course incorporates different elements and topics from the previous four English courses and enhances the new theme such as the Fidencista healing movement and creates a new module on traditional Guatemalan treatments for women.

Courses in the Spanish Language

In 2019, the Spanish and Portuguese academic department was approached by Professor Torres in order to offer the previously mentioned educational modules totally in Spanish. After meeting with the chair of the department, Dr. Mario Del Angel-Guevara, in the same department, was contacted as faculty liaison and translator for all the modules in order to adapt these classes in Spanish. Currently, Dr. Del Angel-Guevara teaches three courses in the Fall, Spring and Summer semesters totally to Spanish with excellent results as measured by student class evaluations.

For more than 20 years, the course on Traditional Medicine of Mexico and the Southwest was taught to thousands of students at the University of New Mexico in the English language. Students from different disciplines distributed across different academic departments and colleges enrolled in the class for credit and additional community members registered through the Center of Continuing Education during the summer session. These courses allowed community members to learn and experience several exceptional presentations and demonstrations that *curanderos/as* perform. Since most of the *curanderos/as* who present in class only speak Spanish, there was a need to utilize professional interpreters to be able to have a communication between the students and many of the healers that presented from Cuba, Guatemala, Peru and Mexico during the summer face-to-face course. Therefore, the summer courses now provide Spanish-English interpretation for credit-seeking students and community members enrolled in continuing education.

Initially, the traditional medicine courses were only available in the English language; thus, preventing students majoring in Spanish from practicing and improving their Spanish language skills and learning about the healing practices of their ancestors. For native Spanish-speakers and many Hispanic/Latinx students with limited Spanish proficiency, the course in English did not allow for a connection between the language of instruction and the manner in which they learned many of these practices and acquired this knowledge in their family

setting. In many instances, Spanish-speaking students would know the Spanish common names and were already acquainted with many treatments, maladies, plants, and remedies, but would be completely unfamiliar to the English terms used in the course. This may have caused some Spanish-speaking students to believe they did not know a lot of the content of the class, when, in fact, they had been exposed to much of this knowledge within their communities and families. Keeping in mind the need of students to practice the Spanish language while enrolling in this cultural course, and the connection that Hispanic/Latinx students can create when they are exposed to their cultural ancestry in a school setting, is the reason we decided to make the curanderismo course available completely in the Spanish language in addition to English. This task required intensive translations of texts and dubbing of the presentations from English to Spanish. This intensive work involved translating the required textbook materials, modules, course objectives, assignments, discussion boards as well as dubbing the video demonstrations, interviews, documentaries, presentations, and lectures in the course. A unique module regarding the history and life of “*Los Tres Grandes*” the three major healers in Mexico (Teresita, Don Pedrito, and Niño Fidencio) was also created. A new online course was also adapted, translated, and dubbed to Spanish and made available to students during the Spring, 2020.

The Future of the Teaching of Curanderismo

The Hispanic/Latinx makeup was estimated to be 18.5 percent of the total population in the United States by the Census Bureau in 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States, n.d.) and showed a steady growth of migration of Hispanics from many Latin American countries. Therefore, courses like the one that we offer are in high demand by Hispanics/Latinx individuals. It is difficult to find a *curandero/a* traditional healer in many U.S. communities that are inhabited by a large Latinx population. The courses that we offer prepares many of the Latinx students to reclaim their culture, if they have lost it and empowers them to do their own healings using medicinal plants and rituals.

Introducing courses in traditional medicine empowers uninsured immigrants to treat themselves and their families of minor illnesses and to be able to seek medical attention in urgent care or emergencies rooms for major illnesses. Many second, third, and fourth, generation Latinx students remember their grandmothers, aunts, and other relatives using medicinal plants and performing rituals for certain needs; however, they have not continued some of these cultural practices and are eager to reclaim this part of their culture. Many of the class evaluations in our traditional medicine courses indicate that the students are appreciative of what they learned and are willing to even travel to Albuquerque, New Mexico and to Mexico to continue expanding their knowledge about traditional medicine. In comparing *curanderos/as* from Mexico who perform their healing role as full-time healers, to those in the United States, it becomes difficult to locate *curanderos/as* in American communities who dedicate fully to this profession. This could be due to *curanderismo* not being a recognized or certified profession in the United States or the fear of malpractice suits. Our prediction for the future is that many professions such as physicians, nurses, massage therapists, psychologists, and others, may incorporate some of the traditional medicine techniques into their practice. Also, the courses may empower the average Latinx to learn the rituals and to grow their own medicine plants and create their own medicine in order to meet

the minor health needs of their families.

Recently, there has been exchanges and collaborations between those in the U.S. wishing to pursue the practice of traditional medicine and healers practicing in Mexico and other Latin American countries. The future is to model Mexican traditional medicine practices with that of Ayurvedic medicine from India and Traditional Chinese medicine where patients have choices to use modern allopathic medicine, traditional *curanderismo* practices, or a combination of both.

Conclusion

Curanderismo, Mexican traditional medicine addresses a holistic approach to healing the mind, body, and the energy/spirit. There are similarities between Chinese and Mexican traditional medicine in modules such as acupuncture which was done by the Mayans and with the similar specific stimulation points of the body in both cultures that address chronic pain, especially in the low back, neck, knees, and other parts of the body. Similarities can also be found with Ayurvedic medicine from India which is one of the oldest holistic medicines emphasizing a balance between the mind, body, and spirit (Patwardhan, Warude, Pushpangadan, & Bhatt, 2005). This medicine promotes good health in order to prevent disease. The Mexican traditional medicine modules address similar concepts, preventive medicine with juicing (*Jugoterapia*), a number of seeds, nuts, fruits and vegetables to prevent illnesses. The belief of Ayurvedic medicine in correlating air, fire, water, and earth, is similar to the elements used to describe Mexican energetic/spiritual cleansings performed by *curanderos/as* from Mexico and others Latin American countries in a number of educational modules offered in the *curanderismo* courses.

The interest in the *curanderismo* courses has indicated the need to recognize the importance of the Hispano/Latinx culture and contributions to medicine in the U.S. and Latin American countries. One of the publications for the course is, “*Curandero: Traditional Healers of Mexico and the Southwest*”. This publication summarizes the contributions of *curanderos/as* of yesteryear, recent times, nowadays, and those of tomorrow. We hope that our experiences with traditional medicine and the development of *curanderismo* courses in English and Spanish will motivate Hispano/Latinx students and faculty to continue researching in this field.

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