

[Teacher's Guide One: Crossing the Borders from Immigrant Poverty to Education: Family Values, Opportunities, Obstacles, and Lessons](#)

[Teacher's Guide Two: Changing Gender Roles, Different Gender Roles](#)

[Teacher's Guide Three: Sense of Self across Borders and Transitions](#)

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Crossing Borders: Personal Essays, by Sergio Troncoso

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[Teacher's Guide One: Crossing the Borders from Immigrant Poverty to Education: Family Values, Opportunities, Obstacles, and Lessons](#)

For Discussions with Students:

Sergio Troncoso writes about making the transition from being poor along the Mexico-United States border to the Ivy League and higher education. In several essays, he explores how particular family values he learned in Ysleta helped him to become a reader and a writer and how teachers helped him to improve his writing and opened his eyes to other places and possibilities. Also, Troncoso writes about what character traits helped him with obstacles he faced in this transition, and what lessons he learned about creating a reading culture at home, which he applies with his children.

In “Finding our Voice: From Literacy to Literature,” the author writes about how many Puritan immigrant values are similar to the Mexican immigrant values he learned at home. Troncoso lists three values from his family—unconditional love with personal responsibility (pgs. 171-2), self-discipline about work you love (172), parenting as spending quality time with children (173)—as the groundwork of his literacy. With these values, Troncoso as a child was encouraged to read at home by his mother and father (173-4) and took advantage of the free El Paso Public Library (176-8). Finally, Troncoso writes about how good teachers who knew he would do the work and be responsible also helped him to find educational opportunities beyond Ysleta (181-3).

As a parent, Troncoso argues that reading to your children, and how you do it, can instill the love of books and learning at an early age (179-181). In “Chico Lingo Days: Encouraging Kids to Read, Encouraging Kids to Excel,” Troncoso writes about how the academic success of his children was connected to the reading culture he and his wife created at home (145-7).

The author discusses how his character—*terco*, *enojado*, and *orgullosa* (stubborn, angry, and proud)—helped him to overcome obstacles in the Ivy League and beyond (186-7). These character traits and family values also helped him to work hard to overcome his deficiencies in English, in “Literature and Migration” (5-6), and to adopt a critical outsider status, instead of being overwhelmed by alienation (7-10).

In “The Father in the Details,” Troncoso writes about how difficult it is for working parents to create a reading culture at home with their children (83-87), but that being a good father is about the kind of sacrifices his mother also made for their family every day (“Chico Lingo Days: Bertha E. Troncoso,” 148-9).

Questions for Discussion:

1. Think about Troncoso's life as a child in his neighborhood of Ysleta and the city of El Paso, Texas. What family culture did his father and mother create amid poverty that would later help the author to overcome that poverty? What difficulties did the family have to create a culture of hard work, personal responsibility, and parental involvement with an openness to welcome opportunities beyond Ysleta? How important was it for Troncoso to have two parents at home, parents who fought against the drug and gang culture of Ysleta, and parents who were hard workers and disciplinarians? What role did his mother's fervent Catholicism play in creating that culture?
2. What important family values did Troncoso use in school and translate for academic success? How did his parents' self-discipline and self-reliance help him to pay attention to good teachers, how did these characteristics help him to discover the El Paso Public Library? How did his parents' "tough love" help him to have a strong sense of self, which was necessary when he faced obstacles? What about the example and value of sacrifice that Troncoso writes about when discussing his mother? How did this help him as a student and as a parent?
3. How did reading affect Troncoso's sense of self? How did reading broaden his imagination to see beyond Ysleta? How did reading strengthen his solitary nature and "outsider status," yet also allow him to communicate his ideas to a broader audience and to become a public intellectual? How is reading a mode of self-education for the author?
4. How important was Troncoso's character (stubborn, angry, and proud) in making the transition from the border to the Ivy League? Were the character traits of adaptability and risk-taking also important for overcoming alienation and obstacles and for seeking new opportunities? How? Also, the author was often aware of his limitations and mistakes: how important was this self-awareness in finding solutions to problems in places beyond Ysleta?

Writing Assignments for Students:

1. Write about the opportunities and difficulties you have transitioning from high school to college. What family values and practices are helping you to make this transition? What values and practices have you invented or discovered yourself to help you succeed in higher education? What has helped you to adopt these new values? What role have friends and teachers (people not in your family) played in introducing you to a new way of doing things that is helping you in school?
2. What values and practices that you learned from your family (or in your home country) are giving you the most trouble as you make the transition to higher education? Why? How have you navigated these difficulties? What new values and practices have you introduced to your family, because these values and practices have been beneficial to you in school and beyond? That is, are you influencing your family too?
3. How has reading in school changed your life? What does reading do to your sense of self, your confidence, and your ability to defend yourself in arguments inside and outside of school? How has reading changed your vocabulary and even your writing? Has reading in school helped you to imagine a new opportunity for yourself—say, a job or a profession—that you had not imagined before? How does reading widely take you beyond your space and time to consider new possibilities for yourself or for your community?

4. Think about your many different character traits. Outgoing vs. Shy. Loud vs. Quiet. Pliable vs. Stubborn. Confident vs. Unsure. Adventurous vs. Timid. Generous vs. Selfish. Adaptable vs. Inflexible. There are of course many others, and you may have a mix of these in your personality. Which of your more important character traits are helping you to succeed in school, and which are hindering your success in school? Why? Can you change, or lessen the effect of, the character traits that do not help you to succeed in school? How do you do that?

Teacher's Guide Two: Changing Gender Roles, Different Gender Roles**For Discussions with Students:**

Sergio Troncoso writes about his grandmother, Doña Dolores Rivero, and his mother, Bertha Troncoso, and how important they were for him. These women were in many ways his role models, and he even calls them his heroines. The author writes about how he learned the values of courage and honesty from his *abuelita* and sacrifice from his mother. Troncoso also discusses his uneasy relationship with his father and how the author struggled against machismo. As an adult, Troncoso was the primary caregiver to his children and became a devoted father heavily involved in their lives. When his wife Laura had breast cancer, the author also took care of the household and nursed her back to health.

In “Fresh Challah,” Troncoso writes about how important his headstrong grandmother was as a role model for righteousness, honesty, and courage (pgs. 13-14). He also discusses how Doña Dolores’s oral storytelling encouraged him as a child to appreciate stories and his Mexican heritage (15). In “Chico Lingo Days: Bertha E. Troncoso,” he describes the sacrifices his mother Bertha made for the family by taking care of her parents and husband, despite being a very intelligent woman (147-9). He also mentions how his relationship with his mother was “like a verdant branch on a tree” because she loved to read and was intellectually curious (136-7).

Yet Troncoso’s relationship with his father, Rodolfo, was often fraught with tension and conflict. In “This Wicked Patch of Dust,” the author writes about a fight with his father over a trivial matter that explodes into an awful argument, unearthing the author’s disdain for his father’s machismo and authoritarianism (128-130). It takes them three years before they speak to each other again (“Chico Lingo Days: An Ysleta Christmas,” 139-141).

In New York, Troncoso writes about how he was the primary caregiver to his children, Aaron and Isaac, in “The Father Is in the Details,” (81-92). The author had a coequal partnership with his wife: he took the kids to school and picked them up every day, helped them with their homework, shopped for food, and so on, while working on his literary career. Troncoso also writes about the loneliness and frustration of being a ‘modern father,’ in “Trapped” (102-5).

In interviews, Troncoso has discussed why he wrote the three-part “Letter to my Young Sons:” *“My wife would come back from her breast cancer support group of women, and tell me story after story of men who had abandoned their girlfriends and wives during the worst health crisis of their lives. I thought that was awful and cowardly. I wanted to provide another example of being a man.”* When the author and his wife discussed a possible mastectomy, the author declared that her body was not who she was nor why he loved her (25). Troncoso became an active participant in his wife’s care (35-6, 41-3, 63-4), and took care of the children while she recovered from surgery and chemotherapy (49-50, 59-61).

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why did Sergio Troncoso identify more with his grandmother and mother than with his father? How was the author’s character similar to their characters? How was it different? Are there ways in which

the author was like his father, even though he did not principally identify with him? What role did Troncoso's love of storytelling and reading play in his identification with his grandmother and mother?

2. Why do you think the author really fought with his father? How much was it Troncoso's dislike of his father's authoritarianism when Troncoso was a child? How much was it the father's machismo? What role did the parent-child relationship play in their argument, particularly when the child is no longer a child but an adult? Why do you think the author's mother acquiesced to the role of a 'traditional stay-at-home wife' even though she was intelligent and hardworking?

3. Why do you think it was important for Troncoso to be a good father to his children? How did he interpret this role differently in New York than how his father was in Ysleta? Why? What role did the author's job as a writer play in adopting this nontraditional gender role as a father? What role did the author's wife play in their creating and maintaining a coequal relationship? How important was it that the author and his wife lived in New York rather than in El Paso? What do you think the author lost in terms of creativity, time or writing because of his nontraditional gender role? What did he gain?

4. What do you think of the author's response as a husband and father to the diagnosis of breast cancer for his wife? In what way did this health crisis test their relationship? How would you define how the author 'loved' his wife? Did they have different kinds of love? Materialistic? Spiritual? Practical? Friendly love? Passionate love?

Writing Assignments for Students:

1. Do you identify or look up to a member of your family that is the opposite sex from you? Why do you identify with them? Why do you look up to them? Is it strange or normal for you to have a role model that is not the same gender as you are? What are the important factors in your mind with finding and believing in a role model?

2. Have you ever argued with a member of your family about the 'traditional role' they play in that family? For example, have you argued with your father about his being the head-of-the-household, or his machismo? Have you argued with your mother about her being the stay-at-home spouse? Did you disagree with the traditional role they have in your family? Or did you want them to know you don't necessarily want to repeat that role in your life, in your family? What was the argument about, and how did you resolve it, if you did? Do you think it's disrespectful to question your parents' roles when you are no longer a child but an adult? What is the best way to discuss difficult issues such as this one?

3. What kind of parent do you envision yourself to be, if and when you have a family? What role do you expect your partner to have? What kind of role should you have? Who will work and who will stay at home, or will both of you work? Who will take care of the children, if you have children? Who will buy groceries? Who will clean your house? How will you divide the many household chores and responsibilities?

4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a coequal relationship with your partner? List them. What kind of character traits should a partner have so that both of you can have a successful 'team relationship'? What kind of character traits should you have? Flexibility or adaptability? Strong sense of self? Supportive (or at least not a hostile) community? Willingness to be wrong and admit mistakes? Practicality? Parents or grandparents who have been nontraditional role models?

5. Discuss nurturing fathers. Do you have an example of a father (either your father or somebody else's father) who is happy to take care of the children, who doesn't mind shopping for food or helping to clean the house, who seeks opportunities so that his partner has the time and space to have a successful career too? Why is he like that? Is it his personality? Does he sometimes have to deal with others who are not as nurturing as he is, particularly other men? How does he do it? What have you learned from watching his example?

6. Think about a crisis in your life that tested the relationship you have with someone. How did this crisis force you to define what kind of relationship you have? How did this crisis also force you into a gender role that perhaps was new to you? Was it difficult for you to do what was necessary when you were doing a role you never thought you would be doing? How did this crisis change you and what you see as a 'good relationship' and a 'good role for you' with someone you love?

Teacher's Guide Three: Sense of Self across Borders and Transitions**For Discussions with Students:**

Sergio Troncoso writes that he has crossed geographic, cultural, religious, educational, and economic borders from Ysleta to New York and from being poor to the middle class. He also questions whether a person loses their sense of self as he or she crosses multiple borders, although he also details the difficulties of these many transitions. The author discusses what helped him traverse so many different borders, what hindered him, and what advice he would give to others making similar journeys.

Troncoso writes about how his tough character, willingness to work, and ability to adapt to new situations helped him to overcome deficiencies in his “literary English” (“Literature and Migration,” pgs. 6-9). At Harvard, many told him he did not “act like a minority,” (“Finding our Voice: From Literacy to Literature,” 184-6). Also, in “Chico Lingo Days: Traveling Alone Together,” he discusses how writing is a solitary, thoughtful activity that helps you make sense of the world, instead of being overwhelmed by it (166-8). Yet in “Trapped,” he argues that this solitary effort to bolster your sense of self through writing is often a struggle (98-101).

In “Crossing Borders” and “Fresh Challah,” Troncoso writes about the interfaith marriage with his Jewish wife and his appreciation of Judaism, although he was raised a Mexican Catholic in Ysleta. His in-laws did not initially accept him, because he did not convert to the Jewish faith, but later he won acceptance by caring for his wife through her fight with breast cancer (2, 12, 45-6). In “Chico Lingo Days: Latinos and Jews on Hanukah,” Troncoso lit the Hanukah candles when his wife wasn’t home, because he loved her (156-8).

As a board member of the Hudson Valley Writers’ Center in New York, Troncoso was immediately treated like “a token minority” by one person, yet the author argued and successfully fought to have more power and greater influence by learning to be effective (“Apostate of my Literary Family,” 115-7, 121-4). As a father on New York’s Upper Westside, he also learned from the positive examples of teachers at Bank Street about how to be a better father (31, 84-85, 146-7).

At various points, the author writes about the importance of self-reflection, which bolsters a sense of self-awareness when facing difficult challenges and unfamiliar territories. In “Fresh Challah,” he writes about how his grandmother’s “unflinching self-reflection engendered a simultaneously fearless and vulnerable self,” (17). Troncoso connects this self-reflection to curiosity and literary creativity in the counter-factual “Day Without Ideas” (73-4). Finally, in “Finding our Voice: From Literacy to Literature,” the author writes about how a good writer creates this project of self-reflection in words to communicate a unique message to the reader (189).

Questions for Discussion:

1. Pick one or two of the many borders (geographic, linguistic, cultural, religious, economic) that Troncoso crossed in his lifetime. What were the important factors in his navigating through new places and situations beyond Ysleta? How important was his character, and what aspects of his character were helpful to him? How important were mentors, teachers, and friends in these transitions? How important was his decision-making under pressure? How important was luck?

2. Focus on the different character traits, as you see them, which helped Sergio Troncoso develop a strong sense of self over time. What were these traits? A love of solitude? A desire to read avidly? A contrarian nature? Pride in his heritage? A willingness to work hard? A willingness to ask for help? Adaptability in the face of new surroundings? A tough resiliency? How and why were some or all of these character traits helpful to him as the author found himself in new situations beyond Ysleta?
3. Describe and analyze the situations in which Troncoso was rebuffed for crossing a border, say by his mother-in-law who initially did not accept him because he wasn't Jewish, or by the person at the Hudson Valley Writers' Center who initially treated him like "a token minority." How do you think he handled these situations? What do you think were the most important factors in his succeeding on the other side of this new border? How do you think he changed the new place (or new family) once he managed to become a part of it? How do you think crossing that border changed him?
4. Analyze the role of self-reflection (i.e. brutal honesty, self-questioning, "being critical without being self-destructive," working on your weaknesses and acting on your strengths) in Sergio Troncoso's life. Choose a couple of key moments or situations you think are important, and think about how his self-reflection helped him to solve a problem, or how it helped him to identify what he didn't know, or taught him something new that he didn't expect to learn. How did his incessant self-reflection make him a stronger individual better able to cross more difficult borders? What were any of the drawbacks to Troncoso's self-reflection?

Writing Assignments for Students:

1. Think of a new border you are crossing right now. Perhaps you are learning to cope with a new country, or a new school. Or you are adjusting to learning English, and a higher quality of English for writing and reading. Or perhaps you have a partner who is from a different religion or a different ethnicity. Or another border not mentioned above. You want to go and be in this "new place" with these "new people," yet you are having difficulties. What are those difficulties? What do you think will help you solve these difficulties? What kind of character traits do you already possess that will help you to find a home across this border?
2. What kind of character traits do you possess that help you when you try new places or situations, when you meet new people, when you decide to change in a way that is different from where you began? Name these character traits and how you use them to help you cross borders. What character traits may hinder you from crossing borders? Do you think you can change yourself enough to adapt to a new place or new people? Why or why not? What would be some of the reasons not to change who you are across a new border? How do you keep your sense of self when you cross into a new territory?
3. Describe a situation or a moment when you tried something new, or tried to be with someone new, and you were rebuffed explicitly or not welcomed subtly. Why do you think you were rebuffed? Did others have a stereotypical or preconceived view of who you would be? Did you try to change their minds? Were some people helpful, even if they didn't know you, while others didn't want to be helpful at all, even after you made an effort? Did you try again, or keep working at crossing that border, even though you received negative feedback? Why or why not did you keep trying? Were you eventually successful? What would you do differently after this experience?
4. How do you decide to try something new, or to go where you have never been before? Do you think first of the opportunities you might find, or the adventures you might have? Do you worry first about

the possible problems you might find when you cross a border to a new world? Do you worry about what you might lose, or who you might leave behind, when you go to this new world? What is the last important border you crossed (geographic, linguistic, cultural, religious, economic)? What gave you that initial idea to cross it? What put it in your imagination?

5. Think about how self-reflection has helped you when you have been trying something new, when you have crossed into unfamiliar territory. How has self-reflection helped you “to know who you are” in an unfamiliar place? How has self-reflection helped you to solve problems on-the-fly, so to speak? How has self-reflection and being honest with yourself taught you about what you do not know, and how you could learn what you want to know? Do you think some people are more naturally self-reflective than others? Or is self-reflection a part of your character that you can cultivate and nurture? Why is it important to be self-reflective, but not self-destructive? What’s the difference?

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