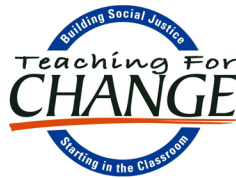


# Inside the Volcano: A Curriculum on Nicaragua

Edited by  
William Bigelow and Jeff Edmundson



This article is offered for use in educational settings from Teaching for Change, a publisher and distributor of social justice educational materials. Contact Teaching for Change directly for permission to reprint this material in course packets, newsletters, books, or other publications.

**Teaching for Change**, PO Box 73038 Washington, DC 20056  
Phone: 202-588-7204 Fax: 202-238-0109 Email: [info@teachingforchange.org](mailto:info@teachingforchange.org)  
[www.TeachingforChange.org](http://www.TeachingforChange.org)

**Teaching for Change**  
Washington, DC

# Teaching Nicaragua: The Choices We Face

In some respects this curriculum arrives after the tardy bell. No foreign policy issue was more divisive in the 1980s than the question of Nicaragua. Nicaragua stayed on the nightly news and the front pages for what seemed like every day of the Reagan presidency. Television viewers witnessed the astounding spectacle of the U.S. Congress openly debating whether or not to vote money to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. Contras and Sandinistas became household words.

Delayed arrival notwithstanding, the lessons in this booklet still have relevance and urgency. The tension between rich and poor nations is growing, and regional challenges to U.S. power and influence will persist. Nicaragua's recent history holds fundamental lessons about the relationship between the United States and all of Latin America.

As we write, Nicaragua prepares for elections, attempts to cope with economic crisis, and negotiates the demobilization of the contras. Whether events in Nicaragua continue to capture headlines, the social drama there will not have ended. It will remain a story that raises important questions for students about underdevelopment and social change.

We have tried to design a curriculum as exciting and provocative as the history on which it draws. Calling for active student participation and critical thinking, these lessons prompt students to examine their own lives so they can understand the experiences of Nicaraguans. Rather than presenting a string of names and dates to memorize, we've designed lessons that challenge students to dig for explanations, to dissect official doublespeak and to project how change might occur. As the title indicates, these lessons take students inside the social volcano of Nicaragua: Why was there a revolution? What were the revolution's goals? Who are the supporters and opponents? And what difference does Nicaragua make in our lives? Virtually every lesson is structured as a kind of visit to Nicaragua.

In preparing this guide, we investigated several global studies and world history textbooks to see what students learn about Nicaragua from traditional sources. What we discovered was discouraging, so much so that it seems to us these books actually promote a type of social and historical illiteracy. We believe the content and teaching methodology in our curriculum stands in sharp contrast to the learning-as-spectator-sport approach taken by most of the books we reviewed. Throughout these introductory pages we tour a number of popular textbooks to indicate some of the problems and possibilities in teaching Nicaragua.

## Nicaraguan Voices

Textbooks don't allow Nicaraguans to tell their own stories. Instead, Nicaraguan society and Nicaraguans' experiences are interpreted for students. Nicaraguans may be quoted, but their ideas are clipped; no one is allowed to express a complete thought. In **Global Insights** (Merrill), a widely used high school textbook, the section on Nicaragua is excerpted from an op-ed piece in the **New York Times** written by the Peruvian novelist and politician, Mario Vargas Llosa. (1) This twice-removed account of Nicaraguan society is riddled with innuendo and half-facts, but the first question we asked ourselves was, Why did this excerpt appear at all? Perhaps the editors at **Global Insights** felt that fluency in Spanish was sufficient qualification to speak on behalf of Nicaraguans. The

simple fact that Nicaraguans don't speak for themselves communicates to students at least as much as what actually appears in the article. As Adrienne Rich reminds us, "Lying is done with words and also with silence."<sup>(2)</sup> And the silence of Nicaraguans in textbooks suggests many lies to students: Nicaraguans aren't capable of interpreting their own social reality; outsiders know best what is good for Nicaragua; Nicaraguans are unable to make political choices regarding the direction of their own society. Of course, many textbooks totally ignore Nicaragua — which is an even simpler way of silencing a people.

Throughout this curriculum, Nicaraguans speak for themselves. The stories, poems, and interviews give students the chance to hear what some Nicaraguans think of events in their own society. Perhaps even more importantly, the implicit message of these lessons is that the people of Nicaragua can think and speak for themselves. Through role play and imaginative writing, the lessons call on students to empathize with the choices facing Nicaraguans — through their imaginations, to "become" Nicaraguans. In this way, students give voice to Nicaraguans in the classroom discourse itself.

However, we've been careful not to "homogenize" Nicaraguan consciousness. There is no one Nicaraguan voice. For example, in Lesson #6, **Dialogue Poem: Two Women**, we encourage students to imagine how people of different social classes would experience and understand the same event or action. One of our students used the point/counter-point style of the poem, "Two Women," to show conflicting views of a young Sandinista organizer prior to the 1979 revolution:

... who wanted people to get enough to eat,  
to sleep with a roof over their heads,  
who wanted to overthrow the government  
and give power and money to the peasants,

but that meant taking from the needlessly rich  
and giving to the needlessly poor.  
and that meant stealing from the wealthy  
and giving to the worthless beggars...

Lesson #11, **A Plastic Kid**, shows how the literacy crusade was a once-in-a-lifetime educational experience for young Rene Escoto, although for his parents it was a communist campaign to brainwash the campesinos. Bringing Nicaraguan voices into the classroom means breathing life into the conflicts in Nicaraguan society.

### Social Choice

Too often, textbooks offer a tidy world of conclusions and facts to be memorized and regurgitated in end-of-the-chapter 'check ups'. In the pages of their textbooks students find the world finished; decisions made, deeds accomplished — and thus unchangeable. Nicaraguan society — indeed, every society — is far from finished. In these lessons students learn some of the context within which Nicaraguans have maneuvered to create their society. For example, in Lesson #8, **Sandinista Policy Dilemmas**, students assume the role of Sandinista organizers who have just come to power in 1979. The new government confronts defeated, yet still armed national guardsmen, tremendous physical destruction and widespread economic sabotage by certain sectors. What should the

new leaders do? Through role play, students begin to understand that the direction Nicaraguan society took, after the overthrow of Somoza, was not inevitable. Some students-as-Sandinistas may propose to shoot all the former national guardsmen, others may counter that this path violates the generous and forgiving premises of the revolution. By stepping into the positions of Nicaragua's new leaders, students can see that consciousness and human choice play a significant role in history; events do not march on inexorably without people having something to say about them. From this activity we hope students will realize that what happens in their society depends in large part on the collective role they play in analyzing and changing it.

### A People-centered Curriculum

The empathy we're aiming for in these lessons is not simply intellectual. We want to touch students' hearts. What has occurred in Nicaragua since William Walker declared himself president in the middle of the last century has been a sometimes-agonizing, sometimes-inspiring drama. It would be unfair not to give our students the opportunity to involve themselves emotionally as well as intellectually. This is one of the reasons we frequently use poetry. (See Lessons #6, 7 and 13.) Through poetry students enter aspects of Nicaraguan life and describe them with economy and passion. One of our students addressed a poem to Ben Linder, the U.S. engineer killed by the contras in April of 1987, and read it at a city-wide peace festival:

You measured  
the stream's depth,  
while the hidden ones  
measured your time.  
While you sat  
on your porch,  
sipping morning coffee,  
these men  
were... in a  
military camp  
learning to kill,  
learning to cut  
all the flowers of spring.(3)

Textbooks are much more likely to encourage empathy with policymakers in this country than with policy-recipients in the Third World (see below.) We turn this tradition around and ask students to imagine the struggles of those on the periphery of power. Sergio Ramirez's story, "**Nicaragua is White**" (Lesson #5), exposes students to a sardonic allegory about cultural domination, about people who measure themselves against foreign standards. In a follow-up writing assignment, students draw on their own experiences for a more intimate understanding. In Lesson #13, **The Honduran Connection**, students meet Elvia Alvarado, a passionate and articulate Honduran peasant leader. She describes life in a country occupied by two sets of foreign soldiers: contras and *gringos*. The reading and subsequent activities help students see how the war in Nicaragua has spilled into the lives of people in other Central American societies.

Ironically, a number of textbooks virtually ignore the fact that there are people living

in Central America. In **Latin America and Canada** (Allyn and Bacon), aimed at a middle school audience, students are offered an almost animistic account of Central American social development: "Coffee growing began in Costa Rica in the 1700s. By 1850 coffee had begun to dominate the country's economy. Plantations then sprang up in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala."(4) In this textbook, action is undertaken not by people, but by things. "Coffee" dominates economies, not the wealthy landowners who grow rich off the cheap labor of their workers. It's as though the coffee beans themselves had consciousness and will. Plantations "sprang up" all on their own. Our students will be forgiven if they have difficulty grasping how and why societies change when they are confronted with this kind of mystification. About Nicaragua today, students learn only that the country is Central America's leading cotton exporter. That's it. The book reports nothing about the conditions of people's lives, their struggles, their conflicting interests. We seek to challenge this kind of presentation by putting people at the center; in this curriculum people feel, think and choose — not coffee beans.

### Description or Explanation?

An account such as the one above eschews explanation in favor of description. There is not even an attempt to account for why the society changed, only a few lines reporting that it changed. We encourage students to probe beneath the surface, to ask why. In the very first lesson, **Before the Revolution: Land Distribution in Nicaragua**, our goal is to engage students in a simulation where they confront first-hand the social conditions producing the alienation and outrage which led to armed revolt. Lesson #2, **Imagine You Were a Nicaraguan...**, asks students to put themselves in the positions of poor Nicaraguans under the Somoza dictatorship and to visualize the social changes they would like brought about in their country. Most textbooks make no more than passing effort to account for why the revolution occurred — if they even bother mentioning it. Without a sense of the causes for and objectives of the revolution students are poorly equipped to evaluate its accomplishments or shortcomings.

Often, by using the word "because," a textbook will lead students to think they are getting an explanation. Listen to **Global Insights** tell students why there is a war in El Salvador: "There's no peace because of those... automatic weapons..."(5) [ellipses in original]. In other words, there is violence because there is war — or, if you prefer, there is war because there is violence. This tautological silliness is often what passes for explanation in textbook-speak. Notice, too, the consistent absence of human agency: in the earlier excerpt, coffee beans had brains, in this excerpt, automatic weapons are the social actors.

### United States Policy in the Region

When it comes to describing and analyzing the recent United States role in Central America, the textbooks we have examined are uniformly inadequate. **Global Insights** opens its section on Nicaragua with the following:

The Sandinistas promised to put an end to the civil war that was raging, revive the economy, and hold free elections. By 1984, however, conditions had worsened rather than improved, and a rebel group known as Contras were trying to overthrow the Sandinista government.(6)

This is an historically twisted passage, made unavoidably so by the authors' refusal to discuss the role of the United States. First, the contras are portrayed as if their activities were a *response* to civil war rather than a *cause*. The passive construction, "conditions had worsened" allows the authors to ignore the causes for worsening conditions: What role did the contras have in sabotaging economic and social development? The contras appear as if by magic in the passage, their origins never questioned. Who were the contras? Who organized them into an army? Who paid their salaries and supplied them with weapons, uniforms, food and medicine? To answer these questions would necessitate a discussion of the United States role in the war in Nicaragua, and textbook publishers seem unwilling to initiate such a discussion. It may be that publishers simply want to avoid controversy, but whatever the reason, this avoidance results in a deficient and misleading historical portrait.(7)

A premise of this curriculum is that the United States has been so deeply involved in events in Central America it would be impossible to understand Nicaragua outside of its relationship with the United States. We've attempted to be both descriptive (as in Lesson #3, **The United States in Nicaragua: Timeline**) as well as explanatory (see Lesson #4, **Reasons for United States Involvement in Latin America**.) Instead of telling students what we think are the roots and purposes of U.S. involvement, we present conflicting interpretations from a number of scholars and officials and allow students to decide for themselves. For example, according to then-Secretary of State George Shultz, the United States "will honor our commitment to promote economic growth and social justice in the region." But the writer, Eduardo Galeano, counters that "when economic crisis in the United States begins..., the pillage of poor countries must be intensified to guarantee full employment, public liberties, and high rates of development in the rich countries" (from Student Handout #4-B.) Well, which is it? Together, students poke through contradictory claims to arrive at hypotheses. In Lesson #9, **U.S. Policy Towards Nicaragua**, we present sharply opposing viewpoints on recent U.S. involvement in Nicaragua. However, as often as possible we've tried constructing the lessons to offer students a 'view from the South': putting them in the positions of Nicaraguans.

In the rare instances when U.S. textbooks do discuss U.S. policy in the region, students are asked to identify with the U.S. government, rather than with people in other lands who are affected by that policy. **Geography and World Affairs** (Rand McNally) admits that during the "early 1900s" the U.S. military landed in Nicaragua in order to "help collect debts and to maintain order..." (certainly a sanitary description of the long U.S. occupation and bloody counterinsurgency) and that some Latin Americans have been left suspicious of U.S. intentions in the region. The book concludes, "In view of these past events, the United States has found it hard to convince Latin Americans that we do have good intentions toward them. We are trying hard to erase the bad feelings created by our past behavior."(8) The unexamined assumption is that the United States government does have "good intentions" toward Nicaraguans and other Latin Americans. But apart from this questionable starting point, the repeated use of the pronouns "we" and "our" demands that students identify with the actions of their government. Students are not offered the option of choosing to critique and then oppose, if they so decide, the policies of U.S. political leaders.

Our concluding lesson, **A North American in Nicaragua: The Life of Ben Linder**, is about just such a person who chose to question his country's foreign policy. Linder was recently graduated from the University of Washington in Seattle, when he decided to move to Nicaragua and put his engineering skills to work in the young revolution.

Linder was killed by the contras while working on a small hydro-electric project in a sparsely populated, mountainous region of the country. We think this is an important lesson, not because we judge Linder to be one of the most significant people in Nicaraguan history, but because his life allows U.S. students to think through their relationship to government policy and social change. Even more, the lesson asks students to reflect on their life goals and to consider the work and involvements that can help them realize those goals.

We risk contributing to our students' already-substantial cynicism if we expose them to conditions of war and poverty in Nicaragua and then indicate no possibilities for involvement in change. The U.S. government and U.S. corporations have been and still *are* deeply entangled in the affairs of all Latin America. Students have a right to examine critically the character U.S. activities and to act on what they discover. The textbook silence on the U.S. role in Nicaragua contributes to disabling student critique and action. The lesson on Ben Linder is not meant to encourage students to pack up and move to Nicaragua, although, in fact, some of them might be interested in student/teacher tours to the region, or coffee picking and construction brigades (see Appendix A: **Sources for Further Reading and Activity**). Our hope is that through the lesson, students gain permission to adopt an independent, critical outlook on foreign policy and are encouraged to act on that judgment when conscience dictates.

### **The Question of "Bias"**

Because discussion of Nicaragua in the United States has been sharply polarized, the question of bias will inevitably arise. The easy answer is: Of course this curriculum contains bias, all text material is biased; there is an infinity of facts and any presentation must necessarily be partial. However, the question then becomes, which criteria guided the selection of readings, activities and discussion questions included in the curriculum? Underpinning all these lessons is an assumption that countries, no matter how small, have a basic right to self-determination. Ideologies and practices which violate this right are anti-democratic, frequently racist, and always deserving of rigorous critique. Hence, the readings we've selected demonstrate people's potential to direct their own lives and are critical of inequities in political power. Beyond this essential bias in favor of democracy, is the understanding that a central obstacle to Nicaraguan autonomy has been its historic subordinate relationship to the United States. A glance at our table of contents shows that we think the United States government has been a key player in Nicaraguan history and politics. However, we have made efforts to provide students with conflicting interpretations of this involvement. There is no attempt to silence voices in defense of U.S. policy.

Our democratic bias also has a broader meaning. A truly democratic education entails more than teaching students that they can vote every few years. It means helping them develop the tools to be effective, active participants in society. This obviously includes the ability to question assumptions and to make reasoned judgments. But democracy also requires courage: the courage to act on one's convictions, to challenge authority when necessary, to take unpopular stands. We hope these lessons offer students some new ways to think about this kind of commitment. People *can* understand their society and they can change it: a democratic education ought to show our students that they can do both.

## Notes

1. Global Insights, Merrill Publishing Co., Columbus, OH, 1987, pp. 524-526.
2. From Adrienne Rich, **On Lies, Secrets and Silence**, quoted in Michelle Fine, "Silencing and Nurturing Voice in an Improbable Context: Urban Adolescents in Public School," in Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren, eds., **Critical Pedagogy, the State, and Cultural Struggle**, State University of New York Press, Albany: 1989, p. 156.
3. Chelsea Campbell, "Measuring Distances," **Central America Update**, June 1988, p. 9.
4. **Latin America and Canada**, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1983, p. 184.
5. **Global Insights**, p. 526.
6. **Global Insights**, p. 524.
7. Some texts acknowledge a U.S. role in the region, but describe rather than explain: "The Sandinista government also faced opposition from the United States, which sent military aid to the anti-government rebels. In 1983 the United States cut its imports of Nicaraguan sugar, charging the Sandinistas with aiding anti-government forces in El Salvador." [**A History of the World**, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1985, p. 819.] What motivated U.S. actions? Was the alleged Nicaraguan support of Salvadoran guerrillas really behind U.S. hostility or was something else at work? Even texts which admit U.S. involvement offer students no way to analyze and evaluate the reasons behind that involvement.
8. **Geography and World Affairs**, Rand McNally, Chicago, 1976, p. 181. Early U.S. involvement in Latin America, while often presented as a bit heavy-handed, is almost always cleansed with the lofty assertion that the troops had landed "to restore order": "The United States also stepped into Nicaragua and Honduras to set finances in order and to protect American investments. In 1915, internal trouble broke out in Haiti. American marines were sent to restore order." [**History and Life: The World and Its People**, Scott Foresman, Glenview, IL, 1984, p. 544.] "...between 1912 and 1916, the government sent American soldiers to Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti to restore order. After the soldiers left, the United States government still kept financial control and took charge of elections." [**Human Heritage: A World History**, Charles E. Merrill Publishing, Columbus, OH, 1985, p. 600.] What does it mean to "set finances in order," "to restore order," to keep "financial control," or to take "charge of elections"? This gobbledygook seems almost intended to prevent students from understanding what the United States actually did in these interventions.