

Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement: Maria-Nieves Tapia, Founder and Director, Latin American Center for Service-Learning

by Lorlene Hoyt



María-Nieves Tapia is the founder and Director for Centro Latinoamericano de Aprendizaje y Servicio Solidario or CLAYSS (Latin American Center for Service-learning, www.clayss.org). CLAYSS is currently leading the Iberian American Service-learning Network, which includes more than 90 non-governmental organizations, public administrations and universities from Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States and Spain.

Professor Tapia studied history at the National Institute for Teacher's Education J. V. González in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and served as Assistant Professor of Ancient History at Argentina Catholic University in Buenos Aires from 1982 to 2000.

When prompted to explain her commitment to the civic engagement movement in higher education, Professor Tapia replied, "I was a shy teenager, and I was involved in Catholic youth organizations. I believe in civic engagement and service-learning because of the knowledge and skills I acquired as a young leader speaking in public in large theaters, not classrooms." During this time, Argentina had a military dictatorship and Professor Tapia was part of a Christian ecumenical youth movement, the Focolari. In her words, "Being a young leader at that time was by definition a risk" for her safety and future. As she met people from other youth organizations who became the leaders for a democratic Argentina, she learned an important lesson, "You need to trust young people and give them a chance to participate and to lead."

From 1980 to 1987, Professor Tapia was Vice President of the National Youth Pastoral at the Catholic Conference of Bishops. She helped to organize John Paul II's first visit to Argentina (during the Malvinas/Falklands Islands War in 1982) as well as the 1985 National Youth Meeting in Córdoba (a three-day event with more than 120,000 young people). In 1997, working for the Federal Secretary of Education, Professor Tapia organized the first service-learning conference in Argentina. By 2000, Professor Tapia left Argentina Catholic University to be appointed as the first Federal Service-learning Director at the Argentina Secretary of Education. A Presidential Award for Service-learning ("Escuelas Solidarias") was established that year, which continues today. In 2002, the region experienced a financial crisis and most of the federal education programs underwent substantial budget cuts. Professor Tapia and many of her friends and colleagues lost their jobs. This is when and why CLAYSS was born.

Rather than become victims of the national economic crisis, Professor Tapia and five of her friends assembled in her living room. With all of their savings frozen in banks for a decade, they collected their wealth of passion, determination and knowledge and formed CLAYSS in February 2002. "The early years were thrilling in the sense that we had nothing – no money, not office, but we knew about service-learning," Professor Tapia explained. With the courage of their collective convictions, they traveled and spoke at conferences throughout Latin America. Their audiences were keen to learn how universities and colleges could help to "fight poverty and create justice in social relationships." Slowly, they started raising money. Today, CLAYSS

provides economic support to schools and universities throughout Latin America, enabling faculty and students with only modest resources to launch and sustain service-learning programs. CLAYSS also conducts service-learning research, which has proven to be a powerful influence in shaping university programs throughout the region. When I asked Professor Tapia where she's had difficulty, she pointed to the challenge of bringing visibility to good practices. CLAYSS showcases and supports service-learning exemplars and is now "experimenting with social media" to convey stories and expertise from the community.

In Professor Tapia's view, the current financial crises in Europe and the U.S. are very similar to what Latin American countries experienced more than a decade ago. "This is an opportunity," she explained, "to demonstrate how much universities can do to address specific problems." She continued, "Now is the time to say (to university and college leaders), 'You are not serious enough if you are not involving your students in reality and building relevant skills. You are not serious enough if the knowledge you are producing is not relevant to pressing problems.'"

Without prompting, Professor Tapia suggested that the North "is just beginning to listen to the South." She believes that the quality of civic engagement practice and theory is "older and deeper" than what exists in the North. She noted the following distinctions: "We have been dealing with poverty for centuries and have learned a lot about working *with* communities, and not *for* them. We try to work together and consider each other equals. Our experience is extensive and embedded in the structure of our universities; they have been engaging with local communities since 1905, when the extension movement began. In many of our countries, you don't get your degree if you haven't used your knowledge and skills to serve the community."

For several years, the Talloires Network has made South-North dialogue a major dimension of its activities. Indeed our experience to date demonstrates that Northern institutions of higher education have a great deal to learn from the programs of sister institutions in the Global South. We look forward to working with Professor Tapia and others to advance this important dialogue in months and years to come.

Professor Tapia was a founding member of the Board of the International Association for Research on Service-learning and Community Engagement and represented Latin America on the International Association for National Youth Service Steering Committee from 1998 to 2011.

She has served on the Jury for the Argentina Presidential Awards for Service-learning (2000-2012), the MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship and other national and international awards.

From 1997 to 2010, she initiated and led the Argentina National Ministry of Education Service-learning Programs: "Escuela y Comunidad" (1997-2001); she led *Educación Solidaria (Solidarity Education)*, from 2003 to 2010. As Chief of Advisors of the National Institute of Youth, she

directed the research for a Presidential Project on Conscientious Objection and Substitutive Social Youth Service (1991-1992).

For her work in the Youth Service field, Nieves Tapia has been honored as an *Eisenhower Fellow* (1988); *National Service Fellow* (1993), and was the recipient of the 2001 *Alec Dickson Servant Leader Award*. She has published numerous books and articles in Spanish, English, Portuguese and Italian. Professor Tapia teaches a service-learning course at FLACSO-CIEE Program (Latin American Post Graduate School for Social Sciences).