

Beyond Basement Walls: Lessons from a Foreign Language Classroom

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Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness—all foes to real understanding. Likewise, tolerance or broad, wholesome charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in our little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.

—Mark Twain

The day is clear in my memory. It was a cold, windy day in November, and I was hurriedly packing up my things after teaching a Spanish 102.66 class when one of my students, Ken, asked me if he could chat with me as I walked back across the Oval to Hagerty Hall. Ken is a graduate student in economics who was taking my class for fun as well as in anticipation of a future trip to Puerto Rico. While we were walking, Ken wondered aloud about my ability to maintain my high level of enthusiasm in class. Comparing my teaching situation with his, he said, “It’s one thing to teach an economics class because the students there can actually use the information that you are providing. Students spend and earn money and pay taxes; they participate every day in common economic processes. Isn’t it hard to motivate students when they don’t have a reason to use Spanish and can’t interact with it on a daily basis or see evidence of it in their lives?” Ken’s question, which I know is shared by others, led me to a brief, off-the-cuff response to him on that cold, November day, and it leads me now to the fuller response of this essay. I have found that a successful (and fun) foreign language classroom broadens cultural perspectives, increases communication, creates community, and provides the challenges of dealing with constant change. It is my hope that the lessons I have learned in the basements of Derby and University Hall may be extended to classrooms in other buildings occupied by teachers and students from a wide variety of disciplines and departments.

Mark Twain warns of the consequences of hiding out in the safe places of our lives and never letting new challenges make us better people. In introductory Spanish class, my students (many of whom have never traveled outside Ohio much less to another country) raise their arms like airplanes and fly with me in their minds and imaginations from their basement classroom (where they often leave their stale prejudices) to Spain, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay (where they encounter linguistic and cultural differences that require them to stretch and grow).

One goal of teaching that continually motivates me is the desire for a culturally challenging classroom. As a language teacher, I've found it easy to fall into the trap of having "Culture Fridays" or some similar routine in which a certain country's "culture" is lumped into a few extra minutes of class or only explained in the special colored inserts in the margins of the textbook. Teaching Spanish means teaching more than pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax because most native speakers of the language live and communicate in ways that are different than most OSU students. For that very reason, teaching Spanish provides a natural bridge to teaching culture. Culture in my classes is integrated into almost every lesson and can take the form of learning numbers and counting in Mexican Pesos or of role-playing how to properly order authentic food in a Chilean restaurant. Students often view another country's culture as an abstract and exotic idea that has little or no connection to the way we live in the United States. I rival this conception by constantly asking the students to think about their own, personal culture and how it compares or contrasts with the culture of the country we are studying. For example, when we talk about open-air markets in Guatemala, we think about the places where we buy and barter for things outside in the United States like flea markets, car dealerships, farmers' markets, and garage sales. When we talk about sports in Ecuador, we practice cheers and chants in Spanish for soccer games and then discuss how they are similar and different from our Buckeye traditions at football games. In sum, the culture I teach in my class is not a separate topic from the Spanish language or from the culture of the United States. I have learned that incorporating a real-life culture or context into everyday lessons not only gives students a valid and logical reason for learning the material but also encourages them to learn about and manipulate situations from a different world-view or perspective.

Similarly I have found that relating to the students' culture helps animate the classroom environment, pique interest, and add humor. I try to keep up with the popular media, technology, and sports important to a typical college student, and then try to find ways to integrate them into the course. Here are a few examples: (1) Students make their own Facebook page in Spanish and then learn about their other Facebook friends in the classroom by asking questions

related to information normally appearing on the Facebook Home or Profile page. (2) For homework students read a blog entry written by a Spanish-speaking student on a theme related to a class discussion and then respond by creating their own blog entry or email. (3) In another homework assignment students watch a YouTube video displaying either a song or skit in Spanish and then write a response to it. (4) For a lesson on furniture and common home supplies, we pretend we are new roommates appearing on MTV's *the Real World* and have to pick out and buy supplies for our new apartment. (5) To practice common verb tenses I use the context of OSU football or basketball games and ask students to describe what we are going to do before and during the game or what we did after the game. (6) In a lesson on language about clothing, we draw and label models and then have them participate in a competition similar to the show *Project Runway*. (7) In a lesson on body parts and the vocabulary of diseases, we set up small groups modeled on Fox TV's *Dr. House* and his team, and we too try to solve a mystery medical case. This strategy of using students' popular culture as a bridge to the language and culture of Spanish-speaking countries typically generates excitement and high levels of participation among the students.

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Another lesson I have learned in the basement of Derby Hall is the value of basing my pedagogy on the tasks and challenges of communication. In my class, students learn how to express their thoughts and ideas in a new way, which affects and enriches the way they think and communicate in their native language. I conduct the class entirely in Spanish in order to emphasize the need for clear and realistic communication. Most of the

activities are based on real-life scenarios and example conversations. We ask each other about the weather and about our families; we make vacation plans and talk about our past experiences. At least half of each session is set aside for student oral communicative practice and interaction. Instead of conjugating verbs simply to memorize them, we conjugate verbs because we need them to convey a certain message or meaning. When the topics of conversation are relevant and real, such as university life, hobbies, sports, and weekend activities, the students' motivation to communicate in Spanish increases. For example, on a Friday I will use the context of needing a date for the weekend. To find a date the class participates in "speed dating" conducted entirely in Spanish. It is exciting to watch students learn to communicate in a new way, learning which also enhances their ability to say what they think or feel in their first language.

In addition, I have found that a successful language classroom creates community. Since languages require people to speak them, relationships naturally form between language-learners. In addition, meeting every day of the week for forty-eight minutes forms a bond among us that rivals that between college roommates. I see my students almost more than I see my friends and family. By the end of the quarter, we have formed a tight and safe community through the sharing of experiences, both fun and difficult. Students work with different partners and groups every day and learn about each other's likes and dislikes—and, indeed, about each other's lives. They work in groups to solve problems and debate issues. We listen to each other laugh, make jokes, form opinions, make grammatical mistakes, mispronounce words, and share personal problems. I have had many students comment to me that Spanish is their favorite class not because they like the material but because it feels like "home" or "therapy," and that it's a place where "other people actually know my name." In a university as big as Ohio State, a community where one feels safe to make mistakes and share feelings is a valuable and necessary thing.

My language students have taught me that one of the most important tools for a successful classroom is variety. Since language classes meet every day, boredom and routine are constant and frustrating demons. Using different teaching methods and activities not only keeps everyone awake and interacting but it also addresses different learning styles. If students know that my classroom is always changing, they never know what to expect and are more apt to pay attention and wonder rather than

succumb to routine. When I plan my lessons, I try to incorporate at least one change every day. Some changes might be as simple as requiring a change of seats or partners or rearranging how the chairs are formed from a block to a circle or vice versa. Other examples of variety include showing a relevant video clip, listening to a song, acting out skits, and playing a game. It helps to simply vary the way material is presented by switching from the chalkboard to an overhead or PowerPoint. Another effective strategy is making the students get up and move around whether it be to participate in a communicative activity, play “Simon says,” act in charades or draw on the board for Pictionary. Adding humor to the class not only gets everyone laughing but can also reinforce language skills or points about cultural differences and similarities. This use of humor can involve telling simple jokes in Spanish or looking at comic strips from other countries. I also add variety by using realia (actual material/items from another country) or bringing in examples of things that students can touch and examine. For example, for a lesson about job vocabulary, students work with partners to search through a Spanish newspaper to find job ads and then use a similar format to create their own ad for a dream job. In another lesson with realia I bring in actual items from a South American market as well as real coins and bills from other countries. During class we talk about how our currency is the same and different and then have our own market in class in which the students barter to compete for most items bought or sold.

Conducting a class that changes every day doesn't have to be difficult or elaborate. It can involve a plan that simply includes different modes of communication or that varies the format by mixing up and utilizing the four main forms of communication—reading, writing, speaking and listening. I have found that students' attentiveness and interest stays high when I constantly change what I do and how I teach in class. The variety not only makes having class every day enjoyable for the students but refreshing and more fun for me as well.

But to be honest, in addition to the aforementioned lessons, I have learned that for a foreign language classroom to be effective, the instructor has to be completely enamored with the topic and enthusiastic about sharing it. For me, most days, teaching Spanish is just plain fun, and I've noticed that my excitement is contagious. Teaching Spanish is a way for me to show my passions and interests and then watch while my students communicate their own passions and share about their personal lives. Some days, though, it's hard, and I get discouraged. But when I see

Kevin reconsider his assumption that all Mexicans live in mud houses and Ravyn and Dan chat animatedly in Spanish about their weekends or when I hear students making plans to go get breakfast after class together, I know I am doing what I was meant to do and that the lessons I have learned while teaching in the basement of Derby Hall are working after all.

An anonymous author once wrote that, “Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy.” In my introductory Spanish classes we stretch our minds to new cultures, open our mouths to speak Spanish, lower our guard to new relationships, and leave our shoes outside the door.