

My classrooms are a landscape reflecting on humanity's life cycle. My learners are composed of various generations including adolescents to mid life. My students are usually North Americans who have lived their lives entirely in the United States and speak English as a first language. On occasion I have a learner who spoke another language during their early childhood; German, Swedish, Russian, and Spanish. More commonly, though, these learners were exposed to second-language study during middle school, high school, or other college courses. All of my learners are here in this learning environment because they want that special community college experience. The high school students who have dual enrollments in both settings are looking for an academic challenge. The traditional age students are looking for a place where they can receive the necessary support to establish themselves as students in good standing. The untraditional age students are preparing for either a career or a life change. Five years ago, I was one of them, formerly a housewife, a full-time mother, and a community activist. I returned to school as a community college student wanting to rebuild my life, as I became a soon-to-be-divorced single mother of three adolescents lacking the necessary skills or education to be a productive and responsible head of household. Today, I am there again, in these same classrooms and my purpose is clear; to give to my learners what was given to me, an opportunity to learn.

Having an active involvement in the development of opportunities for my learners while studying Spanish as their second language I have made certain commitments. Since anxiety and inhibition are the enemies of language acquisition, I commit to the goal of encouraging and modeling positive attitudes among my students and by reinforcing this outlook by allowing them to enjoy their active learning experience because this is the way I also like to learn.

I believe when students are actively engaged in studying, solving problems, discovering new ways to perceive their world, this learning occurs naturally in a classroom that promotes active learning. To begin to establish an environment of trust and confidence, I help my students develop a family-like community where they learn to rely on each other in their pursuits of studying, learning, and discovering. Through the experience of cooperative learning we keep the small-group context, even when the class size is large. My goal is to create an environment for my students and with my students that promotes active learning. In order to achieve this goal, my students and I are required to commit to a partnership in which we all share a vision of and responsibility for instruction and learning because we realize that we are both learners and meaning-makers. **By granting everyone in our learning environment the freedom to make mistakes, to learn from our mistakes, and to feel comfortable about making mistakes I believe that my students begin to understand that we are all learners and meaning-makers.**

**In addition by moving our lessons and activities from the position of teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning when my students take the responsibility to lead the class they experience the feeling and understanding that we are all learners and meaning-makers. After all doing activities teaches us so much more than talking about our lessons.**

Our active learning requires that we support opportunities for authentic communication and critical pedagogy instead of rote language drills and that we integrate connections from home, community, and culture.

Our authentic communication, critical pedagogy, and personally meaningful learning in our positive, active learning classrooms connect to the learner's prior knowledge. My approach to teaching involves fostering connections in order to build on their own knowledge base. I find reassurance in learning that cognitive psychologists' theories are grounded in this concept; that we learn by connecting new knowledge to what we already know. It is both exciting and satisfying to witness my students' aha moments through lots of rich clues to meaning, connecting with what they already know. My definition of culture also reflects on what my learners already know.

Language is a key component of culture, but in order to learn to speak a second language we must also learn to understand aspects of the target culture. Understanding the target culture, to an extent, will allow us to operate in the target language. If we are choosing to learn to speak a language spoken by another group of people, we need to learn to understand that group of people, also to an extent. Culture is alive and is practiced by real people, together or alone, everyday. Language helps people to practice their traditions, ideas, and values, other components of culture. At times I believe that culture is passed on from generation to generation transmitted through behavior and the products of the behaviors. This is a form of inheritance, but not through a biological process. I can relate this idea to an example from my cultural background, Jewish life. In my culture there are thousands of people who represent figurative links in an unending chain of humanity and generations because all over the world, often at the same period of time, we are behaving in the same manner through the transmission of our traditions. This is especially noticeable every Friday evening, or the beginning of the Sabbath. Before we share a festive meal with family and friends we bless and light candles, bless the weekly holiday of Shabbat, and then bless the meal with the bread, Challah. While studying a target language, I believe that it is helpful to study certain culture-specific views of the nations where that language developed. **In order to help my students explore the target cultures as multivariate processes and not just entities for transmission I have been asking them to connect with their own cultural knowledge and experience first, then we can compare what we know to what we are**

**exploring. We come to realize that our own lives and cultures are complex processes. This realization teaches us lessons about the target culture because it can be transferred. Through this learning my goal is to have us understand that cultures are powerful human creations, affording their members a shared identity, a cohesive framework for selecting, constructing, and interpreting perceptions, and for assigning value and meaning in consistent fashion. Among the many approaches to integrating culture into language curriculum, it is valuable to include the “big C” cultural achievements of the people as reflected throughout their history as well as their “small C” cultural practices of daily life. The inclusion of this cultural information in our group discussions helps my students to acquire more of the target language. In fact, it can be stated that including many different aspects of culture in our learning expands our opportunities to acquire the target language because we are experimenting and discovering with the target culture.** In order for me to be able to explain how this definition of culture translates into teaching goals, I have to give you some background information on how we were learning in our classrooms before I started to understand the importance of integrating culture into the language curriculum.

I am responsible for teaching the beginning and the intermediate levels of Spanish as a foreign language at North Shore Community College. In the introductory study of this target language the emphasis of how to learn has been placed on the students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills through dialogues, conversations and role-playing situations. The assignments for this course consist of interactive exercises designed to develop an understanding of the structure, pronunciation, and comprehension of the spoken language. In comparison with the beginning level, in the intermediate study of the target language the emphasis of how to learn is placed on reading, writing, and conversational assignments that will develop incremental skill levels in the process of acquiring Spanish as a second language. This goal is achieved through expanding vocabulary, reviewing grammatical language structures, improving listening comprehension and oral ability with more lengthy conversational experiences. The reading materials selected for this course contain cultural information about Central and South America. **Thanks to our class, the readings, and the activities I am learning how to make the most of the cultural information contained in Panorama de las Americas. Once again, doing hands-on activities enhances learning so much more than merely discussing the material. Ever since we shared the activity of observing and reporting what we see in a photograph, I have been able to take advantage of the photos in our textbook in order to enrich our lessons. I have discovered how much learning can be accomplished by using the photos for pre-reading activities and for teaching vocabulary. I have watched my students comprehend**

**new vocabulary words that they have shared with each other in brainstorming sessions. It is true that their comprehension of new vocabulary is being acquired through the context of the discussions about the photographs because the photo provides them with a source of input.** Since we do not have a language lab at our school and I realize that laboratory practice is an important component of language practice, In order to provide all my learners with a living language lab, replete with opportunities for exposure to bilingual native speakers, I have implemented an optional service- learning component to these courses.

To fulfill this option, students from NSCC will volunteer 15 hours during the semester for an organization that provides after-school supervised activities for bilingual middle-school students whose first language is Spanish. My learners are expected to develop a positive relationship with these middle-school students that involves a two-way cultural and language exchange: 1. by helping them with their homework and participating in recreational activities, and 2. by allowing them the opportunity to teach Spanish language and culture to my adult learners. These adult learners are expected to write reflective journal entries for each time they volunteer. These entries must include some new Spanish words and concepts that they have acquired in their interactions with their new friends. Upon the completion of the 15-hour time period these adult learners are expected to prepare a brief oral presentation **in Spanish** for their classmates about their experiences, the target language, and the target culture. **If the students seem to be struggling with their efforts to communicate in Spanish, they have permission to use a few English words when necessary.** Now that it is nearly the end of the first semester of this service learning option in our classes, I can share with you what I have learned from their journal entries. **Among the group of students who chose to participate in the service learning component, one is in the beginner's class and the other three are in the intermediate level class. One of the intermediate level students has chosen to write all of her journal entries in the target language while the other four write their entries in English. All four students have done a terrific job collecting new Spanish words and phrases to teach to their classmates during their oral presentation. I have had the pleasure of reading how my students have learned how to work through difficult situations with middle-school age students, including both behaviorial problems and scholastic challenges. The middle-school students have demonstrated their enjoyment in teaching my students words and phrases from their first language. Most of the time the lessons have been appropriate. The strongest theme that emerges from most of the journal entries is about the bonding my students have formed with these middle-school students. All four of my students want to continue their involvement with La Vida following this semester.**

The goals of the beginning level course include enabling the learners to master the variety of grammatical and structural topics presented in class meetings, the textbooks, and ancillary materials. The analysis of the grammar will provide the learners with an understanding of the Spanish structures and the English equivalents. From the sound of the target language the learners will develop the recognition and knowledge of how to pronounce Spanish. From the readings, written assignments, dialogues, conversations, and role-plays the students will grow to understand the target language. However, the goals of the intermediate level course involve different expectations.

Each of the readings selected for the intermediate course will be read, discussed, and analyzed by the learners. During class meetings our discussions will help make meaning of the readings while the learners demonstrate their ability to read, interpret, and translate. **The requirement of learning how to translate is a piece of the already existing curriculum that was developed by the previous department chair. It is interesting to observe that Spanish is his first language and he values the skill of translating Spanish readings into English. Since he was my former professor, I realized that he wanted his students to recognize how to compare and contrast the linguistic structures between Spanish and English.** The activities at the end of each chapter in our textbook provide us with the opportunities to prepare responses orally and in writing. The analysis of the readings allows us the opportunity to continue our studies of grammatical structures as a part of the whole experience. The goal of the class activity is to motivate questions and answers in the target language. In order to accomplish all of these goals, for both levels of learning, I have a set of expectations for my learners.

Consistent attendance is encouraged and expected for the success of the class' learning experience because all of us, learners and instructor, are a part of the whole learning environment. Active participation is crucial to the nature of these courses. Participation involves volunteering answers and contributing to class discussions. As I mentioned earlier, since anxiety and inhibition are the enemies of language acquisition, I commit to the goal of fostering and modeling positive attitudes among my students by creating an enjoyable learning experience. I expect that my learners will come to class meetings prepared to participate so that they can demonstrate knowledge of previously assigned and discussed work by actively taking part in our discussions, and submitting their work on a timely basis. We are using various forms of literature in our courses of study and efforts to acquire a second language in order to have a starting point for our class discussions.

Since literature is an example of a "big C" cultural achievement and it can enhance second language study for adult learners, one of my teaching goals is to make our readings come

alive and enrich our language acquisition experience. I see literature as a vehicle to help us study the meaning of its words in their contexts, its language. From that point on more elaborate explanation and word recognition leads to interpretation and understanding. These readings will not only teach language, but they will also teach aspects of “big C” and “small C” cultural achievements and practices by illustrating the history of ideas or the theories of society. **Relying on the information that is presented in our textbook, I can choose where to initiate a discussion point either with an example of “small C” or with an example of “big C”. Not only have I witnessed my students’ quest from the history of ideas or the theories of society presented. Due to their desire to discover more about what they are learning, they are willing to do additional investigating outside of class and then bring their findings to their classmates and share. As they are realizing that everyone’s lives and cultures are complex processes, they are learning about the target culture because it can be transferred. This textbook, Panorama de las Americas, allows us to experiment with critical pedagogy due to the nature of some of the readings. In their quest for information my students are not afraid to react to the harshness of the lives of the people we are studying. We have been able to experiment with critical pedagogy because the opportunities for their participation are open to them with the invitation to share their likes and dislikes. They are also encouraged to explain why they react the way they do. If there is an aspect of the learning that they do not like, their explanation becomes part of my foundation for re-creating the lessons. I save my students’ suggestions in writing and whenever I am able to create a written document to serve as a support in their ability to understand, if the information included in the document emerges from their ideas I maintain the integrity of their contribution to learning by keeping their names on these hand-outs.** At the same time, this product or material serves as the means for studying the living language of many speech communities. I learned from teaching that often times my learners may not remember so much of what I say, but they clearly remember what they say. By having them interact, role-play, and read and dramatize portions of the assignments aloud in class they begin to build on their second-language acquisition and expand their curiosity about learning. They ask questions that help them discover lessons about the target culture and language. These discoveries are invaluable because they lead to the development of a motivation to learn more.

It is important to engage my learners in the process of finding answers and discoveries by allowing them the opportunity to **demonstrate, describe, and teach the rest of us about** their own cultural achievements and practices in order to compare them with the target culture. With this approach the process of learning another culture is both cognitive and psychological.

Literature can help us learn about culture cognitively and psychologically. In fact, I have an example of this learning that occurred in our intermediate class this past week.

Recognizing that literature has many forms including proverbs, jokes, music, stories, poems, and more, I pass a pad of lined paper around my classroom at the beginning of our meeting time and invite my students to write a quote from something that left an impression on them, a joke, a proverb, or anything that spontaneously comes to mind in the target language. Their contributions receive chalkboard recognition and immediately become launching points for our class discussions. Last week a student wrote that she remembered a childhood rhyme in Spanish, "*Que es eso? Eso es queso.*" I wrote her rhyme on the chalkboard and asked everyone else if they could remember an equivalent rhyme in English from their pre-school years. I shared a rhyme in Yiddish that I remembered. Our comparison led us to the discovery that rhymes are an example of a daily practice that is part of childhood development that exists in many cultures. I want my learners to be successful in our learning environment and this is why I strive to provide them with connections from their homes, communities, and cultures that will enable them to build on their already existing knowledge base.

Finally, after having learned some very valuable lessons about integrating culture into language curriculum, I can begin to visualize how to organize the teaching of culture in our classrooms. I want to expand our horizons to include more songs and music to give my learners a view of how the people live their lives by the expression of their art, while at the same time we will learn more language. **When I placed a video on reserve in the school library recently I had no idea how much we were going to learn in our class about how to expand our students' cultural learning experiences with a video. Just as we learned how the use of photographs can prepare the learner for turning an authentic document into comprehensible input, so can we use videos for a similar purpose. In addition to the learners gaining an opportunity to see culture as a living entity and acquire more of the target language through activities with the video, making them conscious of what they already know that is pertinent to the video helps them to connect the known to the not yet known. Developing these connections are the key cognitive principle. In the many lessons on how to integrate culture into the language curriculum we have learned that experiencing and recognizing conflict are crucial conditions for cultural learning to take place. How the conflict is resolved provides the learners with the real challenge of intellectual growth. In fact, it can be argued that how students learn is more significant than what students learn. My role as the instructor throughout this journey of learning and discovery is to serve as facilitator and supporter of my students while designing a progression of tasks and activities**

**that can provide the learners with the security that they will need while engaging in the risks of experimentation and discovery. It is my responsibility to attend carefully to the learner's existing cultural background as I learn from their opportunities to share.**

**Through our own classroom activities I have come to realize that tasks that focus on what is known and recognizable foster a sense of faith in their own capabilities.**

My Teaching Philosophy: How to Integrate Culture and Language  
Teaching

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All revisions are typed in **bold** ink.

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