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Discovering the Creative Side of Writing in the Spanish Classroom

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“This is really cool Ms. Brown. I like it when we do stuff like this,” responded one of my students to an assignment requiring them to write Spanish poetry. As a high school Spanish teacher one of my goals is to have my students writing in Spanish as much as possible; after all, our intention as teachers is to have our students apply what we have taught them. Actually utilizing what they have learned makes it real; in addition, it gives them a sense of accomplishment at seeing what they have created. Students can employ their knowledge base to produce assignments that are tangible, that improve cognitive functions, and that drive students to attempt tasks that cultivate their capabilities in Spanish, writing, and utilizing their creative facets. Through various assignments my students are able to flaunt their creative sides while displaying their grasp on writing the language. Their ability to apply their knowledge never ceases to amaze them or me.

I must admit, however, the first time I ask my Spanish I students to write a sentence, let alone more, they tend to stare at me with the clichéd deer-in-the-headlights looks, followed by a whole lot of whining. To combat this, I have implemented *Diarios*: they are simply little journal activities that I can use to get my students comfortable writing sentences, that work up to being paragraphs, that in turn become multiple paragraphs. On the Colorado State University website, Kate Kiefer (quoting Toby Fulwiler and Art Young’s book *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*) notes:

we write to ourselves as well as talk with others to objectify our perceptions of reality; the primary

function of this “expressive” language is not to communicate, but to order and represent experiences to our own understanding. In this sense language provides us with a unique way of knowing and becomes a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding.

Through *diarios* my students become comfortable using the language. Because this is an activity that they do at least twice a week, the students are used to writing in their journals and are more likely to take risks with the language. Mistakes are inevitable, but in reality that is how they learn. They will get nowhere if they don’t take chances.

According to the University of Idaho’s web site on Gardner’s multiple intelligences, “Teachers tend to teach in the manner in which THEY learn best. Since vocabulary must be heard between 40-80 times (depending on the complexity of the word) before it is stored in long-term memory, language teachers must create learning experiences for their students that are centered around many different activities ...” One of the activities I use to incorporate different intelligences allows my students write about something they like. I use this activity for beginning language learners — writing captions for pictures in magazines. Students can choose pictures of things that they like to write about. For the student who enjoys cars, for example, she can choose pictures and write captions that relate to this topic. This smaller activity is not overwhelming but accomplishes its function of having students writing sentences in Spanish, while exploring their interests.

My students write Spanish love poetry! I do this around Valentine’s Day to go with the overall theme of *amor*. We read various love poems as well as poems about lost love written by famous Hispanic poets. My students and I then create a list of Spanish words and phrases that describe love, as well as a list of words and phrases that are antonyms of love. Using the words on these two lists, my students then

create found poems. Producing found poetry allows students to take responsibility for the writing process. "Too often, teachers let their expertise, their need for control, or their well-wishing interrupt the time students need to experience the challenges and rewards of writing" states John Hundely in his article, "Uncovering Truths Beneath a Found Poem." I encourage my students to step away from structure, and to unlock their minds, lose their inhibitions, and simply write. Opening their minds to what they already know releases their intellectual strengths that they may not even realize they have. Kate Kiefer (quoting Syrene Forsman in *Writing to Learn Means Learning to Think*) writes

But if students are encouraged to try a variety of thought processes in classes, they can, regardless of their ages, develop considerable mental power. Writing is one of the most effective ways to develop thinking.

The students really take pleasure in writing *Poemas de amor* because, like most teenagers, they feel that they are either completely in love, or, more likely, have been scorned by it. It is an activity to which they can relate.

A much more in-depth activity relies on the fact that high school students love to be dramatic and comical; I recognize this, and try to use it to my advantage. One way is through the writing of plays or vignettes. After the necessary instruction and discussion on direct commands and essential vocabulary, students are required to create Spanish cooking shows. They choose a recipe that they will demonstrate and then write a script based on that. This project is done cooperatively in groups; cooperative learning fortifies their ability to write, in that they all bring their own strengths. Kiefer outlines the following collaborative writing goals:

Collaborative groups draw upon the strengths of all their members. Although one student may be stronger in critical thinking skills, another may excel in organizing. By working in groups, students learn from each other while they complete assigned tasks.

More and more workplace activities involve project teams. Giving students opportunities to work collaboratively on academic projects can help prepare them for the advantages and pitfalls of collaborative work on the job.

Students working in collaborative groups can take advantage of group members for built-in peer review as they complete writing projects.

Not least important, collaborative writing assignments usually entail much less grading time for the instructor.

The task, though a big one, does not seem so daunting when others are there to share the duties. Of course they are all required to have an equal amount of lines, so that one person in the group is not doing all of the work. When asked about what she learned from doing the cooking shows one of my students responded, "Acting out our cooking shows really helped us with pronunciation. It also made us understand the meaning because we had to write the script." Upon completion, the shows are videotaped, and we spend a class period watching everyone's productions. My students love to see and to show what they have accomplished. The productions are always extremely creative and hysterically funny. To conclude the activity we have our "Cooking Show Academy Awards," where everyone receives a *premio* or award for something in which they have shown strength. Every student has something to be proud of, which adds to the overall atmosphere of acceptance in my classroom; this, I believe, is the basis for an effective learning environment.

Implementing writing in my Spanish classes is something that I try to do daily. My students will not get very far if all they can do is conjugate verbs, and memorize vocabulary, activities that do not promote critical thinking. While these skills are important and build a foundation, it is what the students do with them that is key. Writing is a function that is necessary in all aspects of our lives; it cultivates higher-level thinking and the learning

process. Through writing my students become more competent speakers of the Spanish language. Writing helps them to see structures that they can in turn incorporate into their speaking. Writing also encourages students to create pieces of work that they can be proud of and encourages them to take risks. When asking what one of my students felt about writing poetry, she responded, "I didn't think I would be able to come up with a poem, but then I ended up coming up with a really good one." Students use foundational knowledge to create something substantial that they can see and that has meaning, motivating them to strive for excellence and to develop their competence in Spanish, in writing, and in creativity.

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About the Author:

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