

Weaving the Web: An online reader for Spanish 1 and 2 at Dartmouth

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This project is the continuation of my doctoral dissertation entitled *Incorporating Authentic Literature and Art in Elementary Foreign Language Instruction*. Building literacy and critical thinking skills and enriching cultural connections are the principle concepts supporting my work. It has been repeatedly stated in professional literature that reading authentic texts represents a difficult hurdle for foreign language students as they move from the more oral-based language courses to the more text-based bridge and literature/culture courses. Appropriately designed pre- and post-reading exercises have been shown to be effective in aiding students through this transition; this project, thus, presents six primary cultural capsules which focus on reading but bring together speaking, listening and writing skills as well. All activities carefully build on foreign language development as it is presented in the course of study at Dartmouth; at the same time, these activities incorporate authentic literary texts, art, and video as a context to support meaningful learning and communication.

The design of this project incorporates the multiple possibilities which technology can offer educators and students today and transforms what was once limited to paper into a multidimensional, multifaceted cultural tool where students can engage in interactive reading, writing and listening skills. In-class oral activities complement the work students perform outside of class in the effort to provide content-based learning revolving around authentic texts and cultural icons.

The institutional impact of this project is very broad in that it is being created for use by all Spanish 1 and 2 language faculty and students. One completed, it can serve as a model and provide an infrastructure for other foreign language reading projects at Dartmouth

Project design

The following initial “culture capsule” reading units have been designed to supplement the textbook currently used in our department.

Spanish 1 texts

Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer: *Rimas*

José Martí: *Versos sencillos*

Juan Ramón Jiménez: *Platero y yo* (Spain)

Francisco Jiménez: *Cajas de cartón* (Mexican-American)

Spanish 2 texts

Don Angel Lobo: *Los dueños de la Zafra* (Argentina)

José Pacheco: *Aqueronte*

Jorge Luis Borges: *Borges y yo* (Argentina)

(Alternates under discussion)

Online design

Each “culture capsule” is designed with the following components:

1. Biography: A short biography in Spanish is provided in order to introduce students to the author of each work. Basic comprehension questions are included, as is a map of the country with a focus on the region from which the author comes. Links relating to the author and/or geographical region will be provided so that students can access further information if they wish.
2. Pre-reading unit 1: There are three sections to this first pre-reading unit: 1) three or four short “projecting” questions which ask students to reflect on the possible theme or organization of the text before reading; 2) vocabulary building exercises which require students to guess at word meaning through context; and 3) syntax exercises which recycle the vocabulary and require students to pay attention to larger units of meaning such as phrases or complete sentences. Part 1 will be part of a bulletin-board posting so students can read each other’s responses, and parts 2 and 3 have been designed with self-assessment measures and provide systematic feedback.
3. Pre-reading unit 2: Description writing. In this section, students are offered authentic photographs or artwork from (relatively) the same time period and country as the author in order to again recycle the vocabulary and syntax work previously completed. Students work in pairs (which promotes “community learning”) and the paragraphs will be posted to a bulletin board in order that peer reading become part of the FL experience.
4. The Text: Texts (or fragments) are presented in authentic version (not adapted). A tape-recording of each text (by native speakers from the Dartmouth community) in the regional accent of each author provides students with an auditory component that facilitates the listening to reading connection and introduces students to the many regional accent variations in Spanish. This auditory component also helps students hear (and see) how speech is naturally grouped into “breath patterns” or “chunks” within both written and spoken discourse. The texts are glossed, with more problematic lexicon cited in a linked glossary. External links such as a bilingual Spanish / English dictionary and a grammar review will be made available so that students may access these tools as they wish/need. Other links are envisioned for the future – email pals, and virtual Web sites, which will encourage direct communication with students and professionals from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries.
5. Post-reading 1: Comprehension / interpretation questions which recycle grammar and lexicon focused on in the texts make up this section. These exercises are automatically sent to the individual professor for evaluation.
6. Post-reading 2: A five minute video tape focusing on the theme of the text will be filmed by a team comprised of myself, native Spanish speakers from the Dartmouth community and technicians from Dartmouth’s Curricular Computing Department. The segments will be digitized and comprehension activities will be prepared to accompany each segment. This portion of each unit provides additional listening comprehension practice and encourages students to compare and contrast similarities and differences between the U.S. and the many Spanish-speaking countries.

7. Post-reading 3: Composition topics. A student composition wraps up each culture capsule. As the final piece in each literacy unit, the composition engages the student in the process of writing. The suggested topics ask students to relate to the theme of the text and/or video in order to prepare a short writing of their own which compares and/or contrasts their experience with that of the characters of the text/video. After a final revision of the composition, students can post their work to a bulletin board on the Web page.

Target audience

The target audience for this project is the students enrolled in the various Spanish 1 and 2 courses during any given term (approximately 500 – 550 per academic year). All Spanish 1 and 2 language faculty (six this term) are currently incorporating paper versions of some aspects of this project (specifically points II, III, IV and VI above). Due to the fact that the culture capsules are not available in a single delivery mechanism, the Web and video activities are not currently being carried out. Once consolidated online, all instructors and students will have access to all materials. In the future it is our hope to have a “bank” of texts available so that instructors can vary the texts from term to term. The conceptual and technical framework of this project can then be used as a model by any and all language faculty at Dartmouth College.

Conceived incorporation of technology

This project is conceived initially to be used by students on their own computers, at the HRC or other Dartmouth College computer terminals. As availability of “smart” classrooms is extremely limited, most of the activities will need to be performed outside of class. In the future, if more smart rooms were made available, pre-reading Web activities and the video segments could be incorporated into in-class activities as well.

Benefit to students

The benefits of establishing such a program are many. In a study I recently conducted with Spanish language faculty at our peer institutions, one of the most cited desired elements of future pedagogical tools is the incorporation of Web activities. The ability to participate in authentic language through the Web provides students with real language opportunities as opposed to the scripted language of most texts and ancillaries.

The tape recordings of the texts allow students to “listen” to (and read) the texts as many times as they wish or need. In-class time constraints do not often allow for oral reading of texts, and by presenting different accent variations, students are exposed to much more than what is possible in the class itself. The use of scripts along with the listening activities has been cited in professional literature as an aid which can reduce learner anxiety: beginning language students can process spoken speech more readily when they are able to match the oral with the written language. In addition, the consistent incorporation of video materials has been shown to be beneficial to both listening comprehension and oral production. The video segments, thus, propose to present authentic speech in order to provide additional input as a stimulus for language

production. (We currently use a text-accompanied video but would like to see more incorporation of audio-visual materials in the coursework.)

The feedback provided for the various exercises also frees up in-class review of vocabulary, and syntax, leaving more time for communicative activities in class. The posting of the various writing exercises to the Web page will hopefully motivate students to pay attention to both content and form, as classmates as well as the professor will be able to read the student writings.

All in all, this project allows for a greater number of individual learning styles to be included in the scope of the Spanish language courses. Students who move at either faster or slower paces can participate accordingly; students can work together on some of the activities thus promoting cooperative learning, and classroom time can be more adequately utilized to pivot activities around a context rather than merely practice a grammatical point. Student motivation regarding foreign languages and computer use is a highly debated topic in our professional literature; it is my hope that this project will motivate the many students at Dartmouth to more actively engage in their foreign language studies here at Dartmouth.

Personnel

I will enlist the collaboration of Dartmouth Computing Services, the Humanities Resource Center, Instructional Services, one graduate-student assistant, and several Dartmouth students and other native speakers from the community.

Estimated project budget

Student assistant: editing and restructuring of online-ready materials; various computer entry jobs; Web searches; preparing bibliographies; cultural focus feedback and discussion groups with language faculty in finalizing each culture capsule.

\$10.00 per hour @ 10 hours per week for 15 weeks	\$1,500.00
Copyright fees: This amount will cover licensing fees for images and other digital content to be used in the Web site.	\$950.00
Digital camera	\$459.00
Incidentals (taping, software, video purchases)	\$1,500.00
Total	\$4409.00

Implementation schedule

We propose to use these “culture capsules” in Spanish 1 and 2 courses starting in Winter 2001.

In the effort to revitalize the curriculum of the Spanish language courses, this project is proposed not only as a way to actively incorporate technology currently available to us, but to reach out across borders and bring the foreign world into the students’ realm. As technology advances, we hope to remain active in updating the possibilities we can offer to our students at Dartmouth.