

## Reflections on Spanish Language Programming

Many things can derail a student's commitment to a postsecondary education or any ambitious goal, but for many of the students we serve – students from rural areas, who may come from families who do not have a lot of wealth, whose parents may not have attended college or even completed high school – stereotype threat or some version of imposter syndrome is too often the reason.

When students decide to pursue postsecondary education, they often are leaving their peers and family members who may not be following a similar course, behind.

Many of these students, often from Hispanic families, where the home language may be Spanish, however do not finish their postsecondary pursuits because they get pushed off their goal at any number of points along the way.

For one, there are too few role models they can look to who have made the similar sacrifice and faced the daunting challenges to complete a postsecondary course of study. Few if any of their teachers are also Hispanic and Spanish-speaking despite the fact they are likely to be attending a Hispanic-majority school. They have no mentors to help them believe this course of study is doable, and they have no one to help them when times inevitably get tough. Faced with their internal lack of confidence and lacking conviction and role models, they may have taken out loans to fund their education but leave with the debt and no degree.

Altera (formerly known as NLA Group) staff have watched this dilemma as we have worked for 25+ years helping rural students from these backgrounds prepare for postsecondary education. Working from our headquarters in Wapato in Washington State's Yakima Valley whose economy is heavily agriculture dependent (fruit crops and viticulture), we have worked to help students believe they can complete a rigorous course of study and give

themselves and their future families a way out of the poverty in which they might have been raised.

One of our early observations from the research literature was that it was important (An<sup>1</sup>, others) for students who are anticipating going to a postsecondary program, to have completed at least two highly rigorous, preferably college-credit bearing courses. The research indicates that completing these two courses was correlated with higher postsecondary completion rates. Although not stated in An's research, a supposition of counselors and teachers with whom we spoke was that it was important for students, while still in the protected environment of high school, to struggle with the more rigorous content of a college class but taking more time (a semester versus a quarter) to complete the work, with support of a trusted teacher to ensure students were successful in completing the class. Teachers can help struggling students develop needed study skills and various ways in which to engage the materials so that when students enrolled in college, they would have the confidence and strengthened study skills, to help them succeed.

Our challenge was that these rigorous courses were going to be difficult for some of our English learning students to complete as their English language skills were not as sophisticated as the AP courses or the dual-credit (high school and college-credit earning) courses the literature indicated was necessary. One way we supposed this could be addressed was to make sure that each of our rural schools offered AP Spanish; we would enroll our Hispanic students in this coursework which would bag them one of the two requisite rigorous courses. With this one course on their transcript, we could work to support them in another.

However, when we were awarded the grant, and began to implement this strategy we learned some interesting things. First, the vast majority of the students in the existing AP Spanish classes were Anglo students who were

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<sup>1</sup> An, Brian,

first-time Spanish learners. There were no 'heritage' Spanish students of the group we were hoping to help. Administrators spoke glowingly of the students in these classes, noting that they did very well except on the verbal sections of the tests and program. This astounded us as there were so many Spanish speakers in the building, but the two groups – Spanish learners and heritage Spanish speakers did not necessarily mix.

Few Spanish-speaking students were in these classes, and when asked, both administrators and students alike wondered why we would expect them to be in this class. After all, they already spoke Spanish. What point would there be in them taking more Spanish?

What we at ALTERA knew was this: if English speaking students in the UW take an English (or Language Arts) class annually, it was reasonable to assume that unless Spanish-speakers also took a Spanish class yearly, they would not attain a sophisticated level of Spanish. Indeed, we had found in our offices that many of our Spanish-speaking staff were very unsure of their 'academic' Spanish and were loath to translate something from English into Spanish if readers were going to include proficient Spanish speakers.

But it was also difficult to enroll these very conversationally competent Spanish speakers into the existing array of Spanish language classes which were very structured and not motivating for Spanish speakers. However, some of our Spanish speakers were not literate in Spanish – and many were not aware of the rules of grammar, and their vocabulary might have been of a limited workplace caliber. Even if students came from a family whose level of Spanish spoken in the home, it was likely they did not specifically study the grammar and learn additional vocabulary outside what they might have heard their parents or extended family members speak.

Indeed, in many families, especially those agriculturally connected families who might have 8 or more siblings, it was often the case that the youngest of the offspring were the ones that had a chance to consider college or a

postsecondary degree. In these families, these youngest 'golden' children were expected to speak English only; in this way, their families believed they would have the greatest chance for success in the world. Often these students would understand the Spanish spoken to them by their grandparents or aunts and uncles, but the Spanish they spoke was minimal and often very transactional.

So the idea that we would enroll these students in the AP Spanish classes was more complicated than we realized. Enrolling them in the existing Spanish 1, 2 or 3 level classes was a non-starter because these Spanish-speakers felt awkward and resisted enrolling in the classes.

The other challenge was that it was difficult for these districts to recruit Spanish teachers. Because of small district enrollments, and the few students (mostly white Anglo students) enrolled in the classes, it was not likely that we could design a program of study for the 'heritage' speakers in the school. In 90% of the schools we served, the Spanish teachers were Anglo, former Spanish-learners, although over time there have been more heritage Spanish speakers teaching these classes.

We had to recast our approach to find a way to engage the many students who would benefit from additional instruction that would enable them to be world-class Spanish speakers. The following set of questions spurred us to further investigate our options:

*Was it realistic that our Spanish-speaking students could, in fairly large numbers, complete the AP Spanish test?* Yes, we found out, but only if they engaged in additional study.

*What kind of study would prepare these students to pass the AP-Spanish test? Further, what level of Spanish-language proficiency might a student realistically hold if they believed they would be competent to be a globally-competent Spanish speaker, a skill that would be increasingly valuable in a world where the Spanish-speaking population was growing dramatically?*

The Spanish language skill levels of students varied broadly. Some students were quite well-spoken, others came from Spanish-language households but had minimal academic vocabulary and no real understanding of Spanish grammar. Many had not read in Spanish, and did not recognize a word they knew in conversation from words they newly saw written in Spanish.

There were no additional teachers who could organize additional training sessions, but there were many Spanish-speaking peers who – it was imagined – could become a peer learning group in an elective class or an afterschool program, if there was a curriculum that could be pulled together that over time could help them become more proficient Spanish speakers.

*Could such an approach enable these students to pass the AP Spanish test?*

As dominant English-speakers, we were aware that we could not ‘hear’ the caliber of the students we were potentially recruiting to be in these groups.

*Were there Spanish-proficiency tests we could administer that would help us ‘level’ the groups we might pull together?* Just like in English classes in a regular US high school, a mix of abilities, if carefully managed, could provide a powerful learning environment.

An early challenge was in presenting our case to the Spanish-speakers we were hoping to recruit. Washington State had recently instituted a 24-credit college-preparatory mandate. There was some room for electives but not a lot. We could not set up a teacher-led class; we envisioned instead starting Spanish-language reading groups. We would test all students for their skill levels, and provide a variety of Spanish-language books they could read in groups. We would provide them ways in which all book clubs work, where students would read portions and then discuss the works, calling out new vocabulary words and using the stronger Spanish-speakers to help translate to those who struggled.

It was still a challenge.

*Barbara Peterson*

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Part of the challenge of providing reading material in Spanish, was availability of works that were written by native Spanish speakers rather than translated from another language. So often translations are inaccurate and we did not want to confuse our Spanish heritage speakers or Spanish learners.

We also wanted to address cultural authenticity, looking for books produced by Spanish speaking authors and illustrators and that featured Spanish speaking culture and characters from all over the world.

As a librarian, I was able to apply for the American Library Association (ALA) Free Pass program to attend the largest annual Spanish language book fair in the world, in Guadalajara, Mexico. Guided by a bilingual graduate student, we were able to purchase almost \$4000 of short novels, comics, popular literature, non-fiction, picture books, and a variety of myths and legends from the Mexican Ministry of Culture office. We had titles from five different Latin American countries which were brought back to the U.S. to be used in our programs.

We have now been to the book fair twice to bring back the newest titles for our students. (In spite of the large numbers of Spanish speakers world-wide, titles in Spanish are only produced in small numbers and are limited in their distribution due to trade restrictions.) The books we bring back to the U.S. are unique and often out of print within a year.

We also applied for and received curriculum for Spanish speaking students from the Mexican Consulate for grades 1 – 6 in all content areas.

*Tiffany Coulson*