

I have two reasons to teach. One reason is noble: contribute to the development of other human beings. Another reason is more selfish: collaborate in the dissemination of my people's language and culture. In order to do this well, I need several conditions. First, I need to keep learning to improve my teaching, and I do learn a lot from my colleagues and my students. For example, in one of my classes, some time ago, a student read a short story by Julio Cortázar ("La salud de los enfermos") and she came up with a very interesting similarity between that narration and the plot of a German movie she had seen ("Good bye, Lenin"). She had a provocative point, and I encouraged her to write a research paper about it. Later, she looked for funding in order to travel to Berlin and interview the director herself. By the next semester, I had incorporated her suggestion into my course, and now when I teach that Cortázar story, I show my students 10 minutes from the German film: my class has definitively been enriched, no matter where the incentive comes from.

Secondly, I maintain a constant flow of communication between me and colleagues & students. This is fuelled by enthusiasm and cross-cultural curiosity. Students repeatedly mention my energy and enthusiasm in their evaluations, and many confess that in my courses they have actually discovered how interesting Spanish is, and have decided to pursue Spanish majors. I lived in the Netherlands for three years and have lived in the United States for fifteen years; I have taught English and Dutch to Spanish speakers and Spanish to English and Dutch speakers. I am familiar with the structure of various languages and am often a more understanding teacher because I know why a student makes a given error. I speak Spanish, English, Dutch and Italian, some Russian and French. I have published works of fiction, translated three Dutch novels into Spanish. I have taught at colleges and in high schools. I have played my guitar in several bands, and worked in radio station broadcasting: all this has further improved my communication skills.

Thirdly, I develop empathy and observe the perspectives of others. When I started teaching introductory courses to Spanish literature, many students looked scared as they learned they would have to read classic writers. I insisted that, with my help and guidance, they could read Cervantes, enjoy Don Quijote and even write short research papers about it. Using movie clips from several films based on the novel helped a lot, and by the end of the course not only had I achieved my goal, but they were also proud of themselves. I also found that in my classes the best learning takes place when the students are not consciously focused on the act of learning. An example is the activity I created for defending a position that they are assigned. (Juego: "No es culpa mía, señor Juez"; see it on my webpage in "Original Materials"). In this activity I spend some time reviewing the grammar, vocabulary and expressions, followed by some accuracy-based exercises. Only then we play "Neighbourhood Trials", so that they can practice what they have learned. While playing the game, their attention is on their defence of funny situations they have to explain to another student-judge. Grammar is no longer utmost in their minds and they end up using the grammar in such a way that they forget about it. In this sense, tolerance is vital to work on a team, and to encourage others to join the conversation. Aggressive and overly-competitive environments are not productive for learning.

To conclude, whether it is language, culture or literature courses, I am dedicated to bringing the best out of students so that they can keep learning for the rest of their careers, and, perhaps, carry my people's language all over the world.