

TRANSFORMATIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING: HOW TO BRIDGE SPANISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND LIVED EXPERIENCES IN A LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE CLASSROOM?

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Abstract

This study examines students' perspectives on Latin-American identity literary representations. Experiential Pedagogies emphasize the importance of bridging students' voices through dialogue. This empirical project explored how dialogue encouraged reflection, and collaboration as community-based practice. The dialogic activity facilitated a space for students' linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence, and personal growth. The anonymous students' data from 16 self-reflections in the circle of voices was analyzed qualitatively based on experiential practices through descriptive interpretative analysis. The findings indicate that students perceived discussions as space to express their feelings on identity. Also, the students' essays' analysis focuses on guided questions to identify skills and themes illustrating their progress in spoken language. These findings contribute to deeper understanding of students' perceptions on identity and practice of Spanish as a foreign language in higher education.

Keywords: *Linguistic and cultural competence, dialogue, Ikeda/Soka studies, experiential learning, identity.*

1. Introduction

In higher education, experiential learning practices extend to the Spanish learning classrooms. Experiential learning is a process through which students develop knowledge, skills, and values from direct experiences outside a traditional academic setting. As society evolves toward global citizenship, the design of experiential learning activities focuses on students' agency and cultural awareness to engage with other cultures and in dialogue with people's stories.

This approach encompasses various activities, including research and creative experiences. In teaching and learning the Spanish language, Latin America literature has been a tool to connect with the narratives on identity. Cultural background contextualizes situations for students to practice reading, writing, speaking and listening at the Intermediate Spanish language. Students incorporate Latin American narratives into their own world with the purpose to make connections with their personal stories.

Within Ikeda/ Soka Studies education, experiential learning enhances students' happiness, knowledge, and a sense of contributing to the world by connecting theory to tangible experiences. When discussing transformative education approaches, value creating pedagogy is "a knowledge system comprising methods for cultivating individuals capable of creating value" (Goulah, 2021). The goal of education, as aim of the value creating education, is "to enhance this value of human character" (Goulah, 2021). When people are empowered to realize the full scope of their possibilities, willingly unite in solidarity to confront global issues.

Dialogue as a means of interconnectedness and coexistence to restore humanity (Urbain, 2010; Goulah & Ito, 2012; Bradford, 2018, 2021; Sharma, 2018; Rita, 2021; Goulah, 2009, 2010). The Japanese educator, philosopher, poet, and peace maker Daisaku Ikeda (1928-2023) attributes dialogue as the way to connect with other cultures "by immersion in the ocean of language and dialogue" (Ikeda, 2008). Ikeda advocates and demonstrates a broader vision of value creating education through dialogue, global citizenship in the context of "human education" and the mentor relationship (Goulah, 2012). Overall, education fostering dialogue and conversations, "is far more than the mere transfer of information and knowledge; it enables to rise above the confines of our parochial perspectives and passions" (Ikeda, 2008).

Experiential learning emphasizes the importance of cultivating connections with the community. In particular, the Kolb (1984) experiential learning theory proposes four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Students' perceptions on

their surrounding are engaged with the readings stories to reflect on the identity experiences read in unfamiliar Latin American narratives with the purpose to apply what they learned after self-reflect on different situations. Kolb (1984) states. “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”

Experiential learning practices have been researched in the context of foreign language education based on providing authentic and immerse language experiences by doing active engagement, and real-world application (Toledo, 2024). Community experiences among Spanish learners are related to the use of the language. In most cases, students mention the lack of vocabulary as a communication problem. However, the importance of connecting among peers is reflected in community engagement and politics related to different identities. To bridge the gap, the focus on dialogue as a circle of voices aims to create connections among different individual experiences with other classmates to later connect similitudes and differences identified on representations in Latin American literary works and in real life communities in the United States.

2. Design

In teaching and learning languages in higher education, literature courses frame the practice of spoken and written Spanish language discussions. According to the American Council of Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL), Intermediate students achieve language proficiency by immersing themselves in interpretative, interpersonal, and presentational modes of communication. Discussions take the form of simulating a circle of voices. Within this technique, they could practice with classmates.

Mapping on experiential learning Kolb theory (1984), the designing of the discussion project Circle of Voices facilitated students’ interactions. The circle of voices is a technique used by First Nations people to discuss issues of importance to everyone. Brookfield & Preskill (2005) in *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* note that for some students, the circle can be liberating, for others, it can be an ambiguous or humiliating experience. The circle of voices can help mitigate power dynamics in the classroom by providing equity in time and Student to speak.

In an asynchronous classroom environment, the variation is to video themselves reflecting posed guided questions from which they choose the one that relates to firsthand experiences. Students reply to different students weekly, trying to simulate a circular conversation. After listening to the video, they talked. Expressing thoughts is an opportunity to express how they feel about different topics. The video time is 3 to 5 minutes, allowing students time to express ideas without reading. The listener replies start with outlining ideas that connect or contrast with personal situations. Then, the listener adds related information to engage in meaningful dialogue, as a soft skill. The frequency of the circle of voices happened six times during the 15 weeks semester.

The course included 14 literary Latin American works (poetry, short stories, drama, and film) during fifteen semester weeks. The focus was to practice close reading, analytical, and critical thinking, and open questions focused on individual experiences related to literary works themes. The main themes on different identities (ethnicity, race, class, gender, existentialist (-ism), temporal, spatial, political, and sexual) guided the spoken discussions. Lived experiences were the starting point before starting the readings.

The assigned readings were 14 found in the textbook *Cien años de identidad en la literatura latinoamericana del siglo xx* by Kelly Comfort (2018). The selection of texts to discuss on different forms of identities were the short story “La muñeca negra” by José Martí, the drama *El delantal blanco* by Sergio Vodanovic, the poem “La historia de mi cuerpo” by Judith Ortiz Cofer, the short stories “Axolotl” by Julio Cortázar, “La noche boca arriba” by Julio Cortázar, and the film *Fresa y chocolate* by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea y Juan Carlos Tabío.

3. Objectives

Academic programs pursue a highly engaging traditional undergraduate experience with emerging job markets and sustaining a thriving community outside of the classroom. The purpose of this study aims to reflect on how transformative pedagogies can bridge the Spanish language learning in these times to create social awareness and engage actively in the community by discussing different topics in a safe space. The objectives were, to identify, reflect and comment on:

- lived experiences related to race, social class, and colonialism.
- perceptions on social class, gender, and patriarchy in your community.
- different forms of prejudice when you move to another place.
- feeling trapped in small, new, or different spaces.
- sexual, religious, or political discrimination.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

The sample size consisted of 16 participants of an online courses of Intermediate Latin American Literature, taking Spanish as part of their Minor or Major in Spanish from a public regional comprehensive institution in the South of Georgia, United States. The student's demographic makeup in 2024 was 49.40% White, 34.70 African American, 9.50 Hispanic, 3.50 Multiracial, 1.80% Asian, 0.20% American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.10% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. The 16 course participants did not identify themselves by race or identity during the first discussion; nevertheless, class discussions were oriented towards ethnicity and race.

4.2. Data collection and analysis procedures

Data was collected anonymously as part of the essays completed at the end of the semester for Experiential Learning courses as part of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP-VSU2030) data at the end of the Fall 2024 semester.

Data was collected from reflective essays designed with three questions directed to soft skills that can be articulated or translated into different fields of study. As part of the Experiential Learning course, students complete a pre- and post-survey addressing different skills based on other courses and experiences. Additionally, at the end of the semester, students were asked to write an anonymous three-paragraph essay with at least 6 sentences in response to each prompt.

Prompt #1, Did you develop a new understanding of your topic (on identity) as a result of this [discussion] activity? What about your values and perspectives? Did this activity [in the form of Circle of Voices] challenge your perspectives? If so, how?

Prompt #2, Did you take the initiative for this activity? If so, how? What decision did you make with respect to the [discussion] activity? How were you held accountable for completing the activity on identity?

Prompt #3, Did you experience growth intellectually, creatively, emotionally, socially, or physically as a result of the discussions? Please explain how this activity helped you to experience this growth. Were there any unexpected challenges or problems? If so, how did you overcome them?

Qualitative data were analyzed using interpretative analysis to identify patterns and perceptions on identity and the idea of engaging in dialogue with different students following the circle shape. The first step was asking the Assessment Committee Chair for the surveys. However, a sufficient date was not found. Only one student completed the survey. Essays, in contrast, were available. After reading comments, topics related to different forms of identity (ethnicity, race, class, gender, existentialist, temporal, spatial, political, and sexual) were identified.

5. Discussion

After the descriptive-interpretive analysis focused on lived experiences in the circle of voices before the readings, and guided self-reflections with open-ended prompts, different forms of identity were discussed. The discussions and self-reflections around identity reflect how questions were asked on identity. Participants identify how they gained awareness of everyday life social constructs on other cultures and within their own culture.

5.1. Circle of voices

This study examined how college Spanish students perceived themselves and others. The emphasis on connecting literary narratives with students lived experiences aligns with transformative learning and experiential learning theory in the sense that it is not enough to gain awareness but to self-reflect and engage in dialogues with the Hispanic/Latinx community. Discussions on how different experiences of identity (ethnicity, race, class, gender, spatial, and political) also shape the participants' perceptions of these topics.

Students reported gaining awareness early in childhood on discrimination due to the lack of diversity awareness represented in many toys such as the title of the reading, "La muñeca negra" by José Martí. For example, one participant pointed out how toy companies were involved in the lack of diversity fostering discrimination in early childhood: ["Has proveído muchas opiniones interesantes y importantes en tu video. Cuando hablamos de discriminación y una falta de diversidad en muñecas, mencionaste que hay una falta en diversidad de tipos de cuerpo. Es muy interesante que, en vez de incluir todos en muñecas, las compañías son tercas y trata de evitar diversidad en una manera que no beneficia nadie"]. Another

participant pointed out that today's dolls are more diverse and inclusive. Other participants reflected on childhood friends' connections by groups, [Para mi, yo aprendí sobre raza muy joven. Fui a una escuela predominantemente negra con algunos latinos. Había una clara división racial. La mayoría de la gente sólo hablaba y se hacía amiga de personas que se parecían a ellos]. Regarding social class, participants' opinions interconnected with social class, gender, and space. For example, women have rights comparing to other places in Latin America based on parents and family members stories.

Hope emerged while bridging the past and present. Ikeda (2017) adds: Hope is found in committing ourselves to vast goals and dreams – such a world without war and violence, a world where everyone can live in dignity. Participants recognized that gender politics as well as business companies and generations have different life conditions today than in the past. Nevertheless, other participants argued that women's rights have not progressed. One participant mentioned how women participate in protests and walks and nothing happens: [“Estoy de acuerdo con tu decepción sobre no se han mejorado los derechos de las mujeres. Tengo 39 años, y cuando era jovena (como 19 años), fui por una marcha en Washington DC por los derechos de las mujeres. Fue un gran evento, y todos estábamos muy motivadas por eso. Después de todo eso, pensé ¿cómo es posible que la actitud de este país NO cambie? ¿Y cómo podríamos retroceder en los 20 años desde esa marcha? Es una lástima que todavía estamos luchando este pelea.”] Another participant added that it will happen when people and government change [“Creo que es injusto que los derechos de las mujeres hayan retrocedido y no hayan progresado. No creo que las clases sociales sean flexibles en este momento ni que puedan arreglarse fácilmente. La única manera de hacer cambios es si la gente y el gobierno hacen cambios”].

About space identity, the participants moved due to family jobs. Participants traveled to Latin American countries and to various places in the country. They recognized the importance of learning a language while they were abroad. Communication and learning about other cultures resonated familiar with a few readings. Engaging dialogue with different people fosters a broader view on other cultures. [Es importante hablar con personas que son menores, mayores, casadas, solas, con hijos, y más. Puedo tener una perspectiva más vasta esta manera]. On the other hand, frequent moving also was difficult when growing up. [Puedo entender que, viniendo de una familia de militares, se mudara con frecuencia. Me mudé una vez en mi infancia y fue difícil para mí. Tuve que hacer nuevos amigos y perdí contacto con todos mis viejos amigos. Esto fue antes de las redes sociales].

Participants expressed their thoughts on the guided questions for each reading as a pre-reading activity. However, the circle of voices' rule to reply to different people failed. One empirical problem was that most of them waited until the last minute to post a video. Therefore, participants missed the opportunity to comment on other participants' videos. In the use of the Spanish language, the focus was free writing in the replies.

5.2. Self-reflection essays

Self-reflection essays showed a deep awareness of soft skills. A few samples to exemplify were randomly classify on themes such as previous assumptions, new understanding, and connections with the language,

1) previous assumptions, “This project challenged my previous assumptions by highlighting the complexity of social hierarchies and the multiple layers of discrimination that can exist.”

2) new understanding, “Through the works we studied and our discussions in the Circle of Voices, I gained a new understanding of the struggles women have faced and continue to face, both historically and in contemporary society.” “I definitely developed new understandings of these topics and made me take a deeper dive into my personal values and beliefs.” “As a result, I now understand the importance of considering multiple dimensions of identity when analyzing social issues.”

3) connections (language, participants, literary texts), “Engaging in dialogue with the “crítica literaria” and the texts themselves helped me connect these narratives to my own background and experiences, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender and identity.” “They provided a safe and supportive space to explore different perspectives, challenge my own assumptions, and connect my personal experiences with the broader themes explored in literature.” “I especially appreciated being able to hear what others had to say about the specific topics and having an open discussion with my peers. Being professional and having these conversations better prepares us for the “real world” especially with the use of Spanish.”

Participants discussed the lack of engagement and engagement in online settings, “As with most online courses, interaction with everyone is quite stunted: only so much discussion can occur in the digital world. I do not know how to improve that.” Brookfield & Preskill (2005) advised that the circle of voices could also be a frustrating experience.

They also reflected on the impact beyond the classroom and the contributions in their own communities. One participant said: “As a result of this experience, I am excited to find ways to incorporate more diverse stories in my classroom, to read with my students and listen to their opinions about the text.”

6. Conclusion

Overall, the circle of voices technique was a safe space to talk about different topics that usually are silent. The most common were discrimination and gender. Identifying different forms of identity following the Kolb’s stages, facilitated observation, and self-reflection to bridge the past with the present, the individual experiences of childhood, family, friends, and the topics narrated in different literary forms such as short stories, poems, drama, and film. The simulation of a circle of voices was reflected among those participants who created a dialogical rhythm. Dialogue on how lived experiences shape identities allowed an opportunity to reflect on how to foster a global citizenship identity when sometimes there is no hope and that nothing changes. Experiential learning teaching and learning techniques bridge knowledge with lived experiences and constant self-reflection. Transformative pedagogies allow us to create value for challenging situations and obstacles by engaging in a dialogue, by expressing themselves, and by listening to others. As future leaders, world languages (Spanish) students in higher education self-reflected in different forms of identity to further their knowledge and engage with other cultures.

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