

RECONCEPTUALIZING HUMANITIES PEDAGOGY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES: CULTURE, LITERATURE AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN TRANSITION

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Abstract

American universities are undergoing a significant pedagogical shift, particularly in literature, cultural studies, and foreign language programs. Rapid technological change, evolving cultural landscapes, and the educational disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic have intensified longstanding debates about the place and purpose of the humanities. At the same time, changing student expectations, new administrative models, and the decline of strictly lecture-based instruction have reshaped how we teach, interpret texts, and define intellectual authority in the classroom. This paper situates these developments within a cross-disciplinary dialogue that connects institutional restructuring with classroom practice. Focusing on English literature, cultural studies, and foreign language instruction, it examines how cultural and linguistic interpretation, especially through themes of ethnicity, gender, migration, and multilingualism, can foster deeper literary understanding and civic awareness. Drawing from both pedagogical theory and sustained classroom experience, the study explores the intersections of curricular reform, translanguaging pedagogy, and institutional change. It argues for student-centered models that sustain critical inquiry, interpretive rigor, and social responsibility in today's university environment.

Keywords: *Higher education, curriculum design, inclusive pedagogy, multilingual learners, instructional innovation, institutional reform, teaching and learning, language education.*

1. Introduction

American higher education is in the midst of reassessing not only what the humanities teach, but how and why they teach it. Literature, cultural studies, and foreign language programs, once viewed as foundational to the development of ethical reasoning, interpretive skills, and civic awareness, now face renewed scrutiny regarding their relevance in a rapidly changing social and political climate.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated trends that were already underway. Digital learning environments, hybrid instruction, and technological mediation have permanently altered classroom dynamics. At the same time, political tensions surrounding diversity, equity, and the value of the humanities have intensified public debates about the humanities' role. These pressures converge with generational shifts: students increasingly seek interactive, culturally resonant, and personally meaningful educational experiences rather than passive absorption of canonical knowledge.

Traditional lecture-centered models and hierarchical structures of university administrators and professors' authority, while historically significant, often fail to address these evolving expectations. Moreover, students shaped by pandemic-era education and their digital immersion approach to learning, through frameworks of relevance, collaboration, and reflexivity, are constantly seeking a space for dialogue about identity, gender, language, power, media, and lived experience.

This paper argues that the future of humanities pedagogy lies not in abandoning interpretive rigor, but in rethinking how interpretation is practiced. By integrating textual, linguistic, and cultural analysis within participatory frameworks, educators can cultivate both intellectual depth and civic engagement.

2. Methodological approach

This paper draws on sustained teaching experience across literature, cultural studies, and foreign language classrooms in in-person, online, and hybrid settings. Rather than proposing an abstract pedagogical model, it reflects on concrete instructional practices implemented in cross-listed courses, multi-level language classes, and stacked undergraduate seminars.

The analysis is grounded in experiential and participatory learning approaches that emphasize dialogue, collaborative interpretation, and multilingual engagement. By situating everyday classroom practices within broader institutional transformations, this paper demonstrates how pedagogical innovation often emerges from necessity: enrollment shifts, departmental mergers, technological transitions, and changing student demographics.

These developments have reshaped the classroom from a space centered on authoritative transmission into one oriented toward collaborative meaning-making, because the student population is constantly changing. It states that students increasingly see themselves not only as learners of texts, but also as interpreters whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds inform their intellectual inquiry.

3. Institutional restructuring and program transformation

Across American higher education, English, Cultural Studies, and Foreign Language departments have been restructured, merged, or redefined. While budgetary pressures and enrollment decline frequently motivate these changes, they also reflect a broader disciplinary evolution. Programs are moving away from strictly national or canonical frameworks toward transnational, multilingual, and interdisciplinary models.

Such restructuring can generate anxiety about disciplinary identity. Yet it also creates opportunities for curricular innovation. When culture, English, and language programs collaborate, courses naturally expand beyond single traditions and begin to foreground migration, diaspora, translation, and intercultural exchange.

Boyer's (1990) reconceptualization of scholarship provides a useful lens for understanding this transition. By valuing integrative and applied knowledge, institutional restructuring has encouraged Cultural Studies, English literature, and Foreign Language programs to emphasize intercultural competence, translation, and global literacy. While such changes may challenge traditional disciplinary identities, they also create opportunities for pedagogical innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration.

3.1. Classroom example

Following the merger of English and Languages into a single department, at Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania, new literature courses were designed around themes such as ethnic identity, emigration, Caribbean writing, and international short fiction. Students compared texts across linguistic traditions, engaging questions of postcolonialism and displacement. The institutional change, initially administrative in nature, ultimately broadened interpretive possibilities in the classroom.

4. From separation to integration: Language, literature and culture

Foreign language curricula have traditionally separated grammar instruction from literary and cultural study. Lower-level courses emphasized structure and communicative competence, while advanced courses introduced canonical texts. This division often reinforced the idea that language is merely a technical system, detached from cultural meaning.

Recent curricular models challenge that separation. Increasingly, literary, cinematic, and digital materials appear at all levels of instruction, embedding language learning within historical and cultural contexts. Language becomes not simply a tool for communication, but a medium of identity, ideology, and lived experience.

4.1. Classroom example

In cross-listed Latinx culture and literature courses, students analyzed contemporary texts alongside discussions of migration, bilingualism, and U.S. language politics. Multilingual readings, comparative essays, and digital media analysis allowed students to see language as a dynamic cultural practice. End-of-semester reflections consistently revealed that students experienced deeper engagement when linguistic and cultural analysis were integrated rather than compartmentalized.

5. Translingual pedagogy and multilingual classrooms

One of the most meaningful shifts in recent years has been the emergence of translingual pedagogy. Rather than treating multilingualism as a challenge to be corrected, this approach recognizes students' linguistic repertoires as intellectual assets.

Canagarajah (2013) argues that translingual practice reflects the lived realities of multilingual speakers in globalized academic spaces. In the new Culture, English literature, and Foreign language classrooms, translingual pedagogy reshapes both language instruction and literary analysis by encouraging

students to move across languages and cultural frameworks while learning about cultures and literary productions. This approach not only enhances linguistic awareness but also supports equity-oriented teaching by validating diverse linguistic and cultural identities.

In practice, this means encouraging translation, cross-linguistic reflection, and negotiation of meaning. It also means questioning rigid native-speaker norms and acknowledging that language operates within cultural and political frameworks.

5.1. Classroom example

In a Spanish Caribbean literature seminar, heritage Spanish speakers and English-dominant students collaborated on translating contemporary poetry. Through reflective journals and structured debate, students examined how meaning shifts across languages and how translation reveals cultural nuance. The classroom became a space where multilingual identities were not peripheral but central to interpretive inquiry.

6. Student populations and instructional modalities

Today's classrooms include heritage speakers, multilingual domestic students, international students, and adult learners. These layered linguistic trajectories challenge traditional placement systems and require flexible instructional design. Cultural Studies, English literature, and Foreign Language programs have also been transformed by changing student demographics. Contemporary culture, language, and literature classrooms are increasingly inclusive of heritage speakers, international students, multilingual domestic students, and nontraditional learners. These populations challenge deficit-based placement models and require pedagogical approaches that acknowledge the uneven and layered nature of language development. Simultaneously, online and hybrid instruction has become an integral part of those programs. While culture, language, and literature teaching have traditionally emphasized face-to-face interaction, research on blended learning suggests that carefully designed online environments can support meaningful communicative practice and cultural engagement (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). The coexistence of in-person and online modalities has prompted educators to rethink participation, assessment, and digital literacy.

6.1. Classroom example

During the pandemic, an online comparative culture course incorporated collaborative annotation tools, synchronous discussions, and multimedia analysis of Argentine cultural production, including tango performance. Students engaged in asynchronous reflections and comparative translation exercises, demonstrating that meaningful dialogue can persist beyond physical classrooms.

7. Multi-level and cross-listed models

Institutional pressures and diverse enrollments have led many Cultural Studies, English Literature, and Foreign Language programs to adopt multi-level language classes, stacked undergraduate–graduate courses, and cross-listed interdisciplinary offerings. Multi-level classes bring together students with varying proficiency levels and rely on differentiated outcomes and collaborative learning. On the other hand, stacked undergraduate–graduate classes from different disciplines provide the opportunity to expand course offerings and interdisciplinary collaborations. From a pedagogical standpoint, such models align with sociocultural changes in the population that emphasize scaffolding and peer interaction among different ethnic groups and disciplines.

Stacked and cross-listed courses further reflect institutional goals of efficiency and interdisciplinarity. When thoughtfully designed, these structures can enrich pedagogy by fostering dialogue across academic levels and disciplinary perspectives. However, they also require careful attention to equity, workload, and assessment to ensure pedagogical effectiveness.

7.1. Classroom example

In a multi-level Spanish Business and Law course, heritage bilingual students partnered with advanced non-native speakers to lead discussions and develop research projects. Peer collaboration bridged linguistic differences and reinforced shared intellectual responsibility. When thoughtfully structured, such courses move beyond efficiency measures and become sites of enriched learning.

8. Conclusion

The transformation of literature, cultural studies, and foreign language programs reflects broader institutional and cultural shifts within American higher education. While restructuring and technological change present challenges, they also create openings for renewal.

The central task of this paper is not to defend the humanities nostalgically but to rearticulate their relevance through pedagogies that integrate linguistic diversity, cultural complexity, and interpretive rigor. Student-centered, multilingual, and interdisciplinary approaches do not dilute intellectual standards; rather, they strengthen them by aligning scholarly practice with the lived realities of contemporary learners.

In this evolving academic landscape, the humanities remain essential, not as static guardians of tradition, but as dynamic spaces for critical thought, cultural dialogue, and civic responsibility.

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