

Title: Redesigning the Final Capstone Project: A Search for Meaningfulness

Author: Amy Rossomondo

Affiliation: University of Kansas

Summary:

A Spanish professor redesigns a semester-long capstone project in order to provide greater opportunity for students to synthesize the skills, knowledge and dispositions that they have developed across the two-semester sequence.

Background:

Course Description

Intermediate Spanish II (SPAN 216) is a three-credit course that is required for all students in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences who have chosen Spanish as their foreign language. It is the capstone course of the proficiency requirement and enrolls approximately 300 students each semester. Notably, the course is taught in a SCALE-UP, media-rich classroom, which facilitates the implementation of the open-access, Web-based learning materials that are the basis of the course (acceso.ku.edu) during class time. Two sections of eighteen students meet simultaneously with two instructors for fifty minutes, two days per week. The third instructional day takes place in an asynchronous, online environment to foster the development of written skills. The instructors are responsible for their own sections, but the students have the opportunity to interact with the other section and both instructors on a regular basis during class meetings. While the development of communicative abilities (speaking, listening, writing and reading) is a primary focus of the course, the approach we employ at KU places equal emphasis on content learning and critical analysis. Students develop communicative abilities through reading, watching and listening to authentic texts that present a wide range of perspectives on current and historical issues in the United States, Spain, the Caribbean and Mexico (3rd semester) and Central and South America (4th semester); students collaborate to develop their oral and written skills by analyzing these multiple perspectives through team-based class discussion and blogging with careful guidance from instructors.

Learning Objectives for SPAN 216

Students will:

1. utilize Acceso to explore cultural aspects of Spanish in Central and South America. Students will work with authentic materials such as music, videos and authentic written texts to negotiate understanding and awareness of the target culture;
2. demonstrate the development of cultural awareness of individuals and groups that share Spanish as a common language and relate this awareness to their own understanding and experiences through interaction with authentic texts, in-class discussion, reflection in the group blogs, and the development of a final project;
3. demonstrate digital literacy through the use of emerging classroom technologies that facilitate the development of oral and written communication (online grammar and vocabulary practice, research of digital realia, online hybridized class sessions and virtual presentations);
4. demonstrate the ability to comprehend Spanish in the classroom as well through interaction with texts that reflect more regionally specific contexts. These skills will prepare students to be effective participants in the international community;

5. demonstrate oral and written communicative ability that align with the Intermediate High level on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines through in-class participation, oral and written examinations, written and oral final projects.

Focus of Redesign

The students in SPAN 216 demonstrate this learning through the realization of a semester-long final project that culminates in a research-informed paper (approximately 1,000 words) and a virtual oral presentation (5-minute narrated visual presentation mediated through Voice Thread) that explore a topic of their choosing. The project is broken into multiple steps with due dates and instructor feedback provided throughout the semester. Despite the employment of best practices in assignment design, instructors (and students) have been consistently dissatisfied with the process and results of the final project. This project *should* be an opportunity for students to synthesis the skills, knowledge and dispositions that they have developed across the two-semester sequence, yet in reality the project does not effectively serve this purpose. Therefore, we decided to make the final project the focus of the Collaborative Humanities Redesign Project so as to benefit from the insights and work of other faculty collaborators with the goal of redesigning a final capstone project that is *meaningful both to students and instructors* and worthy of the course.

Implementation & Student Work:

PHASE 1

The present course redesign project focuses on the capstone assignment: a semester-long research project that requires use of primary source texts and culminates in a written research paper and a virtual oral presentation. This assignment has been modified and specified over the course of six semesters in an effort to elicit the quality of student work that we hoped for. An overview of the project in its Fall 2014 iteration can be viewed [here](#). The project is implemented through a process-driven approach. Each step is clearly explained and due dates carefully spaced throughout the semester to help students effectively manage their time and efforts. The students also participate in peer review and self-editing activities, receiving multiple rounds of feedback on drafts from peers and their instructor to inform the final draft of the project. (Examples of these activities include the Thesis handout worksheet; Evaluation criteria final project; presentation instructions; self-editing checklist; peer review checklist) In the Fall of 2014, the instructional team decided to limit the primary sources ([link to primary source option handout here](#)) to clarify the nature of the assignment because in previous semesters the students had struggled with choosing a topic and selecting valid primary sources to inform their analysis of the topic. Upon introducing the final project in class, the instructors explicitly emphasized that the assignment was designed to provoke critical thought and comparative analysis with respect to a topic that was of interest to each individual student.

Instructors' Perspectives of the Results

Overall, the results from Fall of 2014 were similar to those from previous semester and from the perspective of the instructors still not at all satisfying: the majority of the essays did not push past the summary level (i.e., “book report”), as evidenced by the scores on the content section of the evaluation rubric for the final paper. There was not consistent evidence of meaningful analysis of the primary source texts. For example, a typical essay would provide a summary of two Spanish language films by the same director and make superficial observations about how they were culturally situated without offering meaningful, evidence-based comparisons between the two films. The overall grades on the project were less than optimal, as well, with slightly less than half of the students performing in the “Excellent” or “Good” range. The range of grades primarily reflected the content of the paper because by the time the students turned in their final drafts, it had been edited numerous times to achieve appropriate grammar and vocabulary usage.

Examples of student essays: Excellent, Good, and Acceptable.

Students' Perspectives of the Project

In order to capture the students' perspectives on the final project, several of the weekly reflection assignments (that were created to help students and instructors stay in touch after the transition to a hybrid format) were dedicated specifically to the final project. Instructors reported that students continued to express confusion about the nature of the project and why it was important. Only the highest achieving students reported recognizing the project as an opportunity to synthesize and apply their learning in the course in a satisfying and productive way. The rest expressed frustration and demonstrated limited engagement. Steps that were designed to provide support and structure to the semester-long project were interpreted as over-complicated rather than facilitative. They perceived the project to be both too difficult and as merely the final “hoop to jump through.” After so many iterations of the steps of the project that did not result in the desired learning, we decided to completely redesign its approach to achieve outcomes related to the students' understanding of the purpose of the project. We hypothesized that if students better understood its purpose and

utility, they would more enthusiastically invest the intellectual effort necessary to realize a successful final project.

Goals for Phase 2

1. Students will directly connect their learning throughout the course (and the previous 3rd semester course) with the skills and knowledge necessary to realize the final project so that their learning is visible (to themselves and to their instructors) upon reflection.
2. Students will engage the content of their final project in such a way that its realization will be meaningful and satisfying to them.
3. Students will perceive the expectations of the project to be fair and reasonable and its steps to be clear.

We hypothesized that if students were able to better understand the purpose and utility of the semester-long assignment then they would more enthusiastically invest the intellectual effort necessary to realize a successful final project. We also sought to address complaints that the steps were overly complicated and unclear.

PHASE 2

The instructional team met before beginning the spring semester (2015) to brainstorm how to achieve the goals of the redesign project outlined in Phase 1. First, we decided to modify the nature of the assignment to avoid the generic and superficial projects we had been evaluating. Perhaps one root of the lack of student engagement derived from the generic nature of the assignment itself: the research paper. An excerpt from the original project description from Phase 1 for the purpose of comparison is here.

The focus on the need to conduct research and explore primary sources in Spanish is clear in this description, but upon reflection, the instructions more clearly outlined what we were *not* looking for rather than what we wanted the students to produce. Furthermore, we realized that the traditional research paper was not necessarily the best vehicle to allow students at this level to develop their own perspectives on the topics. The project was therefore re-conceptualized as a persuasive essay that should make use of primary sources to convince readers of their point of view and why the topic was meaningful to them.

A second major issue that we wanted to address was the students' perception that the project was not related to their learning in class, but rather as something "extra" to be done. After discussing this, the team began to suspect that a potential source of disconnect might actually be the flexible nature of the assignment, which (ironically) was intended to make the project more interesting to the students as individuals. We therefore decided to require that the project be derived from one of the (many and varied) topics covered directly in either the 3rd or 4th semester course. An excerpt from the revised assignment instructions follows:

For the Final Project you will be writing a persuasive essay on one of topics covered either in SPAN 212 or 216. You may focus on something we have already talked about in class or you may also look ahead and investigate something we haven't yet covered. Our hope is that you view this project as an opportunity for in-depth exploration of an aspect of Spanish speaking cultures that is of particular interest to *you*.

After choosing a topic, you will be asked to:

- formulate your own opinion/ your own stance on the issue based on the materials in Acceso and our class discussions
- research and evaluate newspaper articles, interviews, films, songs to support your stance
- write an essay in which you aim to convince your audience of this position

Each successful essay will include *at least 3 primary sources*. Primary sources may consist of (but are not limited to) the following: Interviews with native speakers, films, songs, articles, and books. You should not have more than two primary sources of the same genre (no more than two films, books, articles, etc.).

The resulting assignment was a topic-driven rather than research-driven final project that sought to directly connect with ideas and cultural products with which all students in the course would have some familiarity. Although the impetus for the topics being directly connected to the course resulted from students' dissatisfaction, an affective concern, we hoped that familiarity with the topics and practice/experience with Acceso's approach to engaging cultural content, in general, could be drawn upon as an intellectual model. The students already had a great deal of practice doing this in class but most were unable to transfer this experience to the task of analyzing cultural production on their own. By delimiting the topic to one that they had already engaged critically, we anticipated that students would approach their projects with less trepidation and more confidence; they would have a solid foundation to guide and support their own deep dive into the topic through analyses of cultural texts. These connections and advantages were emphasized in class and in written feedback, as the instructors supported the development of the students' projects.

Instructors' Perspectives of the Results

The team came together at the end of the semester to discuss the results of the students' final projects. Everyone agreed that the students' work was much stronger, and as a result, evaluating the projects was a much more gratifying experience. Specifically, instructors reported improvement with respect to the content of the essays, which were now based on students' opinions about a socio-cultural phenomenon and supported by evidence found in the primary sources. The vast majority of the students (70%) achieved either Excellent or Good scores on the Content component of the evaluation rubric. This can be cautiously compared to the 47% of students who earned comparable scores for Content the previous semester because the rubric employed in Phase 2 was modified to better align with the transformed assignment.

Another benefit of the redesigned assignment was not directly captured by the evaluation rubric. Instructors reported that the quality of the peer-review activities that students complete as one of the steps of the project was notably higher. This perception could not be supported quantifiably because the students receive a grade for participating in the peer-review (reading and evaluating the drafts of two of the six students in their learning team using a proscribed rubric); there was no change in the percentage of students who participated. However, all of the instructors agreed that the nature of the feedback was greatly enhanced due to the fact the students were familiar with the topics that their peers were addressing. They pointed out that before the assignment was tied directly to the topics explored in the course, the peer-feedback focused primarily on grammar, and in some cases organization. For this iteration of the assignment, the students were familiar enough with the topics to challenge each other and offer more suggestions with respect to content and vocabulary use, as well. The relationship between this enhanced peer feedback, the topic familiarity and the higher content scores on the essay would be interesting to explore, though it is beyond the scope of

the present project. Examples of student work that resulted from Phase 2 of the redesign can be found here along with the summaries of their performance on the project.

Examples of student essays: Excellent, Good, and Acceptable.

Students' Perspectives of the Project

The instructors took notes on the reflection journal entries that related directly to final project in order to determine if the students themselves were able to make connections between their learning in class and their experiences with realizing the final project, one of the stated goals of the project. (Due to the personal nature of the reflections, we decided not to include examples in this portfolio.) The instructors reported that the vast majority of student reflections affirmed that these connections were being made. Students noted that they enjoyed exploring aspects of the course content in more depth and that they liked their peers' projects, as well. Overall, there were far fewer complaints about not understanding the purpose of the project; however, a notable number of students still complained that the project was "too hard" and took too much time, in addition to the other required work for the course. We concluded that the redesigned assignment satisfactorily accomplished the first two goals of the redesign project (below), but that the third goal had yet to be achieved for the majority of students.

1. Students will directly connect their learning throughout the course (and the previous 3rd semester course) with the skills and knowledge necessary to realize the final project so that their learning is visible (to themselves and to their instructors) upon reflection.
2. Students will engage the content of their final project in such a way that its realization will be meaningful and satisfying to them.
3. **Students will perceive the expectations of the project to be fair and reasonable and its steps to be clear.**

The instructional team was tasked with brainstorming strategies for achieving Goal 3 over the summer and pass on their suggestions to the Course Coordinator for the next instructional team to consider in a planning meeting before the beginning of the 3rd semester of the project.

PHASE 3

The new instructional team, consisting of four instructors and the course coordinator from the prior team and three new instructors, met before beginning the fall semester (2015) to consider the suggestions for addressing negative student perceptions of the final project without compromising its integrity. All agreed that the assignment itself was fair but did require extensive time outside of class, some of which was spent in the instructors' offices to clarify similar doubts. Based on these observations and the success of the peer editing of the essay draft the prior semester, we decided that it would be worth eliminating the content of two of the hybrid instructional days and replacing them instead with interactive, peer-review activities focused on developing the project at earlier stages. Subsequently, it was hypothesized that the students would have the necessary time to work on their projects as well as the incentive to do the work because they would be receiving credit for sharing the process of developing the projects with their peers. The fact that instructors could provide common feedback to the group throughout the projects' development (rather individually and redundantly by email and during office hours) alleviated their disappointment with the need to eliminate actual content from the course. In fact, the most difficult part of the planning meeting was coming to an agreement about what to cut to make room for the time dedicated to realizing the project.

Instructors' Perspectives of the Results

The team held a marathon meeting at the end of the semester to discuss the results of the students' final projects and the extent to which the project goals had been met. The student scores on the Content component of the final essay were similar to those in Phase 2. The new team (three of whom had taught the course before the current project was implemented and were new team members for Phase 3) was very pleased with the quality of the students' work. On the whole, the projects were interesting, personal and well developed. From the instructors' perspectives, the project was a more integrated component of the course. They also noted that replacing the content with the hybrid day activities focused on the project kept the vast majority of the students on track and improved efficiency with respect to providing feedback. Seventy one percent of students achieved either Excellent or Good scores on the Content component of the evaluation rubric, following the trend from Phase 2. With respect to the overall grades on the essays themselves, more students (88%) earned A's, B's and C's than ever before. Only a small minority of students did not write an acceptable persuasive essay, and these poor examples were evenly distributed across the 17 sections of the course.

Examples of student essays: Excellent, Good, and Acceptable.

Students' Perspectives of the Project

To review, the third phase of the project focused on the third goal: Students will perceive the expectations of the project to be fair and reasonable and its steps to be clear. While, it was evident from the instructors' perspectives that spending instructional time on the development of the project was successful, we were anxious to know what students wrote (or didn't write) in their reflection journal entries that were focused on the final project. It is rewarding to report that the instructors read far fewer complaints about the expectations of the final project. Not only did fewer students make negative comments about the project, the negative comments that were made were less vehement and often included productive suggestions in addition to the complaints. For example, several of the students suggested that the timing of the due dates be changed, which is quite reasonable. Overall, the students' perceptions of the project, as reflected in their weekly journal entries, demonstrated broad consensus that the project expectations were indeed fair and reasonable and that they felt able to complete it successfully. Thus, the team concluded that we could move on from this concern.

Reflections:

The results of participating in this multi-semester, iterative redesign project demonstrate the benefits of an inquiry-based approach to improving student learning and instructor satisfaction. To date, more than one thousand students and a dozen instructors have benefitted from the sustained collaborative effort to analyze student work in order to diagnose areas for improvement in instruction and opportunities to enhance student learning. What follows is a final reflection on two aspects of course design that resulted directly from the experience of participating in CHRP and that can be applied to improve teaching and learning in any course that seeks to employ a more meaningful and satisfying capstone assignment to structure and demonstrate student learning.

1. Benefits of simplifying and personalizing capstone assignments to promote student engagement: Moving beyond the traditional research paper.

We began the project by analyzing why the capstone assignment in SPAN 216 was not satisfying for students or instructors. On paper it had all of the hallmarks of a solid comprehensive assignment that employed best practices: a process-oriented approach; deadlines that were purposefully spaced throughout the semester to encourage sustained effort; peer review activities; ample feedback from instructors as several key stages; and flexibility in topic choice to encourage student engagement. However, upon careful consideration of both instructor and student experiences, we recognized that there was not a clear enough connection between the skills and knowledge that were being developed in the course and those required to complete a traditional research paper. Furthermore, when we really thought about the goals of the final project with respect to student learning we realized that a research paper was not necessarily the optimal vehicle for structuring their learning.

The instructors of the course are graduate students who write research papers as a matter of course, and I, as an academic, am accustomed to presenting the results of my work in a more developed version of this same format. That is, the research paper is the default mechanism for structuring and presenting inquiry in our discipline. We wanted the students to conduct research and present the results of their investigation so it was perfectly logical to us that a research paper was the appropriate assignment. However, our students in a 4th semester foreign language course could be assumed to have only limited if any experience with writing successful research papers and certainly no experience with realizing any other formal research paper in Spanish in our sequence of courses. Why then was a research paper an appropriate assignment for structuring and demonstrating their learning?

This was such a simple realization but one that escaped us for many semesters as we tried in vain to make significant improvements to the products of the assignment. We wanted the students to conduct research, analyze multiple related perspectives (including their own), draw meaningful conclusions and be able to write and orally present about their findings. Throughout the course students have ample, guided opportunities to interact with authentic texts and search for evidence supporting or refuting a variety of perspectives. They also express their own opinions and consider the opinions of others through class discussion (orally) and blogging (in writing). Once we let go of the traditional format of the research, we were able to more clearly articulate the desired outcomes for our students' capstone assignment:

- Students will demonstrate deep reflection on a topic connected to the course that is meaningful to them.
- Students will research, understand and make use of multiple authentic texts (2 of which are primary) to better understand the topic.
- Students will write 1,000+ words and complete a five minute oral presentation to report their learning

When we reflected on these outcomes without having them tied to a research paper, we realized that a topic driven and research-informed persuasive essay and presentation could more effectively achieve these outcomes while better exemplifying the types of learning activities that had been conducting on a regular basis throughout the course. When students have to convince their peers and their instructor that the topic they chose to investigate is important and why, they are forced to move beyond the “book report” to achieve a deeper level of analysis and reflection. Perhaps the persuasive essay is not an appropriate assignment in a more advanced course whose goals include developing the practices of a given discipline, but for the purpose of this course we came to understand that our course goals could be more effectively met by a less traditional capstone assignment.

2. The role of reflection (both student and instructor) in improving teaching / learning experiences

Participating in CHRP also served to solidify my belief in the integral role of structured and sustained reflection in effective teaching and learning. Throughout the project both the instructors and the students reflected regularly on their perceptions of the successes and areas for improvement in the course.

The instructors considered which aspects of their students work met their expectations and why. They identified common areas of weak performance among their students and discussed these with their fellow instructors. They came up with plans to adjust their practices and student assignments to see if these weak areas could be improved. They took responsibility for facilitating these opportunities for improved student performance rather than casting the blame for poor performance entirely on the students themselves. They analyzed their students’ reflections on their own learning challenges and, where appropriate made changes based on these weaknesses. They came to realize that without student buy-in even a well-structured assignment would fail to produce successful learning among more than the most prepared students (who would do well on any assignment). They learned that in order to be transparent with students with respect to a complex assignment, the purpose of each aspect of the assignment must be absolutely clear to the instructors themselves. And finally, they recognized the successful performance among a broader range of students that resulted from their efforts. None of this happens without structured and sustained opportunities for reflection.

For the students, structured, iterative reflection played a variety of roles in the course, as well. The English language reflection assignments were highly structured and asked students to address specific aspects of the course; certain aspects of the prompts were repeated regularly: “What can your instructor do to improve your learning with respect to X in the course?” “What can you do to improve your learning with respect to X aspect of the course?” It is important to note that students received course credit based on the thoroughness of their reflections and were provided with the rubric used to evaluate their reflections. As a result of this component of the course, students were

able to (compelled to) communicate with their instructors each week about their impressions of the course, thus serving as a more time-efficient and perhaps less intimidating form of attending office hours. The reflection assignments that were dedicated specifically to the final project required students to engage the project earlier and consistently—they had to think about their efforts and their progress (and the relationship between the two) across the entire semester. They signaled doubts they had about course content that their instructor was able to clarify. The students explicitly catalogued how they used instructor feedback in subsequent phases of the assignment and drew connections between the knowledge and skills they developed from step to step. They were able to provide feedback on aspects of the course that resulted in changes that benefitted their performance. They were able to communicate in English and express frustrations about their developing yet limited abilities to communicate in Spanish. And perhaps most importantly of all, they were encouraged to recognize their own progress and learning and earned credit for doing so. The vast majority of students expressed their appreciation of the opportunities to reflect on the final course evaluations (which were far more robust and informative than in semesters when reflection was not an integral component of the course).