

Improving Students' Understanding of the Spanish Culture

Margot Versteeg, Spanish

By making more efficient use of class time, designing more effective assignments, and including eloquent visual components in teaching, students better understand and appreciate the Spanish culture.

BACKGROUND

I revised a 400-level elective course for Spanish majors, most of whom were often not familiar with Europe and Spain. The course covered Spanish peninsular culture from antiquity up to the present day, a high content load. Its underlying philosophy was that one cannot understand modern Spain without knowing from where modern conflicts arise. The course was centered on concepts such as diversity, immigration and emigration, nation building, role of the church, and gender roles.

Originally I taught this course three days a week in 50-minute sessions. The short sessions were inconvenient as I could not show long videos or combine videos and class discussion. For the first course offering, in fall 2004, I did not have time to prepare PowerPoint slides when designing the course. I believed that adding PowerPoint slides would help students summarize information, and visuals would be a better way to review the readings. In addition, some students had commented that they wanted PowerPoint slides during lectures. In fall 2004, I was able to show some video documentaries but often there was no time for students to have an immediate discussion on what they had watched. I felt that videos should be presented with a purpose, for students to actively watch in order to engage in meaningful discussions.

After teaching the class the first time, I redesigned the course to enhance students' learning of course materials by making more efficient use of class time. I was also able to teach the course twice a week in sessions of 110 minutes, which made it possible to show videos and discuss readings. I wanted students to do more preparation *before* class, so that class time could be dedicated to discussion of the readings using PowerPoint. With more class time, I was also able to have students' watch documentaries to further enhance learning of the material. The documentaries were always followed by a set of questions that students answered in small groups. I found that having longer class sessions proved to be a better option than 50 minutes three days a week.

The current course offering in fall 2006 was the third time I had taught this course. I decided to make additional changes based on students' participation from last semester and my personal evaluation of how the course went. This portfolio presents my course evolution to make more efficient use of class time and to improve assignments and course materials so that students better understand and appreciate the Spanish culture.

Students

The group of students who took the course in fall 2006 was considerably smaller than the group who took the class as an evening course in 2005: I had 25 students in 2005 and only 12 in 2006. In fall 2006, only one of the 12 students had ever been to Spain, and none were native speakers of Spanish. Because of the smaller size, we went more quickly through the materials and there was time for some extra tasks in the classroom.

Goals and Objectives

One objective was for students to become familiar with the major lines and key concepts in Spanish history and cultures. They "played" with those concepts and saw them emerge in different contexts. I also wanted students to be able to integrate this knowledge into other literature courses.

Practical goals:

- Improve students' class preparation to make more efficient use of class as a learning time.
- Make better use of visual lecture materials and design assignments to enhance students' learning.

Learning goals:

- Make students familiar with key concepts of Peninsular Spanish culture.
- Help students contextualize the readings in other Peninsular Spanish literature courses.

IMPLEMENTATION

Fall 2005

I made a rigorous selection of course material. I used a recently published textbook that was well organized to help students better learn key concepts. Students were also given key readings for each lecture. Because the course's underlying philosophy was that one cannot understand modern Spain without knowing where modern conflicts arise from, I started with a presentation of modern Spain and pointed out key concepts we would work on throughout the semester. We then back-tracked to Spain's past and began to analyze how history has influenced the present.

For each class period, students had assigned readings, and they were expected to come to class with key ideas from those readings written down. At the start of each class, students were asked a question which was related to the main theme of the class. They had to write down the answer of this question during the first minutes of class. During class the main ideas in the readings were discussed and/or presented in PowerPoint. The PowerPoint showed "my selection" of the otherwise abundant material. The PowerPoint presentations were included to reinforce themes and encourage discussion of the readings, and not for students to rely on them for concepts they should have gained from the readings prior to class. Documentaries were also shown and students were asked to discuss the videos with questions I provided.

Student writing was an important component of the course. For the first day of class, students wrote a short in-class paper on what they knew about Spain and what they wanted to know about this country (see 2005 topics). On the last day of class they then revised this paper. In the model for the course I took over from my predecessor in fall 2004, students had to write individual papers based on Internet searches. Although some students did fine, most of them turned in papers full of information literally copied from the web. I decided to give students the same assignments but more direction. Giving all students the same assignment made class discussions easier – both before and after the assignment. I also felt that I could give better guidance and help students perform better. In fall 2005, students also had four writing assignments; two of them were analytical papers and two were informal tasks. For more variety and to accommodate diverse learning styles, two of the assignments were text based and two were visually-based.

Fall 2006

The changes I made for the third course offering were based on my personal evaluation of what went well and what could be improved. These changes were motivated mainly by my desire to provide a very clear structure and as much guidance as possible. There is now less credit given for the two knowledge-based tests and more credit for the four writing assignments, which demonstrate deeper understanding of the material. I changed all papers to have equal weight to give the course a clearer structure. In addition, I handed out the rubric beforehand and designed some guidelines for oral presentations, to clarify my expectations and to help students perform better. In 2005, asking questions at the start of class helped student engagement, but in 2006 I graded those questions to ensure the students were prepared and had completed the readings. I also did this because in the past, students tended to rely a little too much on the PowerPoint presentations, while I viewed PowerPoint as a way to present already known material (they read it first) in a slightly different order to promote discussion. In 2006, I handed out the rubric and the instruction sheet for oral presentations to students ahead of time when I was discussing the assignments to help students learn what was expected and how to improve their papers throughout the semester.

With having a smaller class, we went a little faster through the material. The result of this was that I had to develop extra material (mainly short reading tasks with sets of questions). I developed some new engaging in-class activities since discussing photographs, paintings, and short newspaper articles proved very fruitful the last course offering. I also decided to incorporate more recent developments in Spanish culture and society.

I kept the format of the class the same because I was still happy with the approach of presenting each theme in a number of ways. The Spanish Civil War, for example, was presented by readings from the book and an overview article, by a PowerPoint in which I used posters from both sides of the battle, and by showing a movie. When students were able to participate in a more general discussion afterwards, and in the best case could make some connections to works from the period that they read in other literature classes – and the better students indeed could – I felt I had achieved my teaching goals.

First day topics

Fall 2005

Items that came up in first day papers: Movies, holidays, regions, food, US/Spain relations, sports, religion(s), family, gender roles, gypsies, Franco.

Fall 2006

The first day topics the students listed were considerably less in number than in 2005, and mainly limited to family life, religion, politics, food, flamenco, and relations between the US and Spain.

Documentaries

The films and documentaries I used were meant to highlight and visualize topics already discussed both in the readings and in the PowerPoint presentations. The material was usually in Spanish, and whenever possible shown with Spanish subtitles to help students' comprehension. Since students were prepared by the readings, they generally did not have great difficulty following the visual materials. I showed 10 to 15 minute long documentaries on topics such as the Altamira cave paintings, Roman conquerors of Spain, Camino de Santiago, Moors, Catholic kings, Spanish Empire, Enlightenment, Buñuel, Lorca, Civil War, *Movida*, youth culture, regionalism, and Spanish food.

Fall 2005 Course Assignments

- I tracked students' ability to see the same recurrent issues in different contexts. These consisted of class preparation, short narratives, and discussions. I tested analytical skills in an oral presentation that also served as a discussion starter for one topic from a series list that I had given them.
- Factual knowledge was checked in two short exams.
- There were three large assignments (one oral and two written), and a few shorter writing assignments. Each assignment reiterated main lines and key concepts of Spanish culture that students encountered in earlier material. I also checked two analytical papers based on texts that I provided. Students had to write everything in correct Spanish. I developed a rubric for their papers.
- Based on the drafts of their papers, there were class discussions before they actually turned them in.
- Students could also gain extra credit with a hands-on activity, which consisted of preparing a Spanish culinary dish or tapa.

Changes for Course Assignments in 2006

For the third course offering in the fall 2006, I decided to make additional changes based on students' participation from last semester. I kept the layout of the course, but I redistributed the credits for the assignments. Less credit was given for the two knowledge-based tests (but they were still there, midterm and final, because some facts need to be memorized) and more for the four writing assignments, which were based on a deeper understanding. In fall 2005, I had two analytical papers and two minor assignments. In 2006 I used four assignments of equal importance (see Fall 2006 assignment descriptions). Two were based on visual material, two on texts. I changed one assignment based on an immigration problem that was acute a few years ago for one

based on a more recent issue, the introduction of gay marriage in Spain. I also graded the questions that students answered in the first minutes of class, to make sure that the readings were done. The rubric for the grading of the papers was given beforehand, and I also designed an instruction for preparing the oral presentations.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Fall 2005

The first-day class writing activity indicated that students initially knew less about Spain than those enrolled in fall 2004, so their base knowledge level was lower. However, I was not too concerned about this because I would be using more visuals and having more discussion. The course went smoothly and everybody was able to keep up with its pace.

The first day writings showed that there was a lot students wanted to learn; the last day of the course I showed them that we had effectively dealt with these topics. Their papers showed the variety of students who participated in the course. One student, student A [AR_MV_studenta.pdf], for instance, wrote that she had never been to Spain but that she would like to know more, since she was going to study there in the spring semester. In her paper she listed that she was interested in Spain's history, daily life in Spain, food, religion, government, and relations between Spain and other countries. We dealt with all those topics during the course. Another student, student B [JB_MV_studentb.pdf]. had already been to Spain twice and knew already something about regional differences and daily life, both aspects the course dealt with. She hoped to learn something on "a variety" of things, something the course effectively offered. A third student, student C, listed extensively what she knew—she had studied abroad already—but she wanted to know still more about Spain [KC_MV_studentc.pdf].

Overall, the papers ranged from excellent to very poor, both in ideas and in writing style. The rubric proved very useful for the grading process; students usually agreed with the grading done with the rubric. In addition to the midterm and final papers, as an extra task, I included another paper based on the screening of two movies. I was surprised to see that the papers based on the analysis of a text were generally less well-developed than the papers based on the analysis of visual materials. See Graded Writings Fall 2005 for more information.

Fall 2006

For the first-day writing assignment, when I asked students to list topics they were interested in, the fall 2006 class had lists that were far shorter than the year before. Only one student had been to Spain, so they did not know many relevant topics: "They are all Catholic," one student wrote. "I don't know much," was another reaction. A third student knew about flamenco dancing and that the Spanish in Spain is different from the Spanish in Latin America [pdf files: MV06firstday1, MV06firstday2, MV06firstday3, MV06firstday4].

Even though they did not know much about Spain, and there were no native speakers of Spanish in the class, their overall performance was good. Some students still struggled with Spanish. I noticed that students lacked the extreme highs and lows of the 2005 group, and generally their work was better. This might be due to the fact that my instructions were far more precise. Sometimes I feel that this “handholding,” although it helps the students obtain very acceptable results, also kills creativity. Only one of the students wrote a paper in which (s)he went further than the required assignment. I also noticed less difference in quality between the various papers. See Description of the assignments and Graded Writings fall 2006 for more information.

At the end of the course we did the same hands-on culinary activity (preparing tapas) for a little extra, and several students turned out to be great cooks. The most common grade was a high B, but with the extra credit several students made it to an A: the final grades were 7 As, 4 Bs and 1C.

Oral Presentation

Students’ oral presentations were much better than fall 2005. Before we started I gave them an outline with what exactly I expected from them. I included the task to look for information from two extra, recent sources. On this task, some students did well, but some chose sources that were not always relevant for the content of the presentation. They also had to come up with questions for class discussion; again some students did that well and others did not. For the final presentations they had to prepare a handout, and most students were able to do that well. Although I encouraged them to use PowerPoint, only two students actually did so. Check here for an excellent example of one of the PowerPoint presentations that exceeded my expectations. [OralPresentation.pdf]

Graded Writings - Fall 2005

Midterm paper 2005

In 2005 the students wrote a midterm paper on a 19th century satiric newspaper column by Luis Taboada. They had to comment on the content of the column and put the text in context. Although we did discuss the text in class, students had a hard time with it and not all of them understood the text well. This might be due to the 19th century prose and the tongue in cheek language of the author. See assignment description (MVmidterm1.pdf).

The students who wrote A papers [see two examples (MV_midterm1.pdf; MV_midterm2.pdf)] understood the article well, got the main ideas, and could connect those to the social and historical context (in this case the 1898 war between Spain and the US and the political corruption in Spain). The students were also referring to the course readings. Their papers have a clear structure and the Spanish is proficient.

Final paper 2005

For the final paper students had to compare two articles from two newspapers with a different political view concerning an outbreak of racism several years ago in El Ejido. Most students found this paper less difficult than the midterm paper, probably because

they could more easily connect with this topic. See assignment description (MV_final.pdf)

The students who wrote A papers [see three examples (pdf files: finalpaper1, finalpaper2, finalpaper3)] understood the newspaper texts well. They wrote well organized papers in proficient Spanish in which they compared the articles on a number of relevant points. The students who wrote B papers understood the newspaper articles well, but the analysis did not go into enough depth, and the papers lacked precise information. [pdf files: finalpaper4, finalpaper5]

Graded Writings - Fall 2006

Midterm paper

Since the assignment on writing about life in the sixties in Spain was quite successful in 2005, I repeated the paper with some modifications. Instead of assigning just two movies to watch, I also assigned a critical article and some pages from the course readings. Students who wrote an A paper watched the movies very attentively or for multiple viewings, captured a broad range of aspects concerning life in the sixties, and organized these aspects into a well-written paper with meaningful examples. Check here for one example of an excellent A paper. [pdf file: MV06StudentA] Students who wrote a B paper usually did well, but their papers were less perfect both formally (e.g., provided no title) and as far as content was concerned. They did not include, for instance, several important aspects of the assignment (e.g., forgot to deal with the influence of the Church). One example of B student work is shown here. [pdf file: MV06StudentB] Students who wrote a C paper wrote papers that were incomplete, not exhaustive, and incorporated irrelevant aspects. Formally these papers were less polished (e.g., incomplete bibliography). An example of C student work is available here. [pdf file: MV06StudentC]

Final paper

Instead of the slightly outdated essay on the outbreak of racism in 2000, which in the fall 2005 course consisted of comparing two newspaper articles, I decided to give a new paper on the more recent introduction of gay marriage in Spain. Students had to describe the history of the introduction, opinions of people in favor and against, legal difficulties, the situation of Spain in Europe regarding gay marriage, numbers of married couples, etc. Most students did this paper in a quite acceptable way. Students who wrote an A paper dealt with all the aspects indicated in the assignment and wrote a good, well-structured paper. They listed a series of relevant references in a correct bibliography. Check here for one example of A work. [pdf file: MV06FPA] Students who wrote a C paper usually did not write badly, but the papers were incomplete and they did not deal with all the assigned aspects. Sources were often listed incorrectly or not listed at all, and the bibliography was usually incomplete and/or incorrect. Check here for an example of C work. [pdf file: MV06FPC]

REFLECTIONS

Fall 2005

Students in fall 2005 did not do better than students in fall 2004. One reason for this may be because the course was in the evening that semester, which may have influenced the workload students were willing to do since many of them were not full-time students. Another reason might be that the group in 2004 was a rather strong one, only the course was not as well designed. Even though the grades were not higher than in 2004, the 2005 course was more structured and enjoyable for both the students and me. Class time was pleasant and a good number of students participated actively in the discussions initiated by the videos and DVDs.

It was a great surprise for me to see that for the hands-on tapas-making activity on the last day of class, through which a little extra credit could be earned, all the students came in with an authentic self-prepared Spanish dish. Additionally, students really enjoyed the culinary activity. They actively searched for recipes to prepare authentic Spanish dishes, and we enjoyed a fantastic evening meal! I plan to continue this activity the next course offering.

My course evaluations were much higher fall 2005 than the first time I offered the course. Students felt that the lectures were clear and enjoyed the added visuals via PowerPoint and videos. With that being said, I felt that students did great if their performance was based on something we did in class (e.g., watching a documentary, commenting on a picture) but that things were different if the preparation had to be done outside of class. The results of the midterm test showed that quite a few students could have dedicated considerably more time to do the assigned readings.

Fall 2006

The course went very smoothly in fall 2006, which could be expected when one is teaching a course for the third time. I was happy with the different papers I assigned and also with both exams. The material was all well paced over the semester.

Since this course was a first encounter with Spain for all but one of the students, it was harder to go into the depth that the past courses touched on, particularly as compared to fall 2005 when several students had already studied abroad in Spain. However, since it was a smaller group, I was able to do more activities in class.

The students could have done a little better as far as the readings were concerned; even if the articles were in English, they often did not read the assigned text unless I announced a quiz. I need to explore other ideas to encourage all students to complete the readings.

I think that I will keep the course essentially as it is, but always incorporate new materials since culture is a dynamic phenomenon and societies change rapidly. I am also interested in adapting new editions of the course books.