

More than a decade ago, I began designing learning experiences—teaching was and continues to be a process of designing pathways for learners. I am motivated to teach in order to achieve with my students an inclusive space for autonomous yet collaborative learning experiences. These experiences include the meaningful use of technology, the linguistic landscape around us, the relationship between creativity and critical-thinking, and a cognitive approach to teaching grammar. My teaching career began as a Spanish conversation instructor in a girls school in Chertsey, London. Since then, I have taught at the University of Córdoba (a large open-enrollment university), at Columbia University, and at Barnard College, in charge of courses ranging from Elementary to Advanced Language courses, from survey courses to seminars on Hispanic Cultures, Pedagogy, and Western Literature and Philosophy. I have had the opportunity to design and teach independently courses of my own. Additionally, I have woven myself into the approach of the science of teaching and learning through the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia University and the Center for Engaged Pedagogy at Barnard College, which have helped me emphasize sustained engagement and development of my instructional repertoire. Such engagement continues forwarding my teaching practice and has given me the chance to engage with peers across disciplines.

This trajectory has led me to devise strategies that grant my students confidence for a successful performance. I see myself in the classroom as a facilitator of knowledge and of the relations among the group: as I explicitly tell my students the first day of class, “we are together in this process of learning.” In this respect, the clear and effective communication of class expectations is key. My role is precisely to make sure that students can fearlessly produce ideas and contribute to the collective knowledge we are building in the classroom. All this factors into students’ engagement since learning is geared towards self-empowerment. As the following examples show, in the classroom I facilitate autonomous work and also collaborative projects, so that students can learn to develop themselves as individual agents and as part of a peer support group.

I fully engage in the meaningful and intentional use of technology in the class. My courses have an important digital component, and I use technology as a tool for students to collectively produce and contribute their knowledge to the subject matter. For Elementary Spanish II, I have designed a final project whose main learning goal is threefold: by the end of the course, my students were able to use the target language as an analytical and critical-thinking tool, conduct research on a topic of their choice, and use technology as a way to practice a given class concept. In small self-selected groups and through a series of in-class workshops and guided written assignments, students were asked to prepare a digital object in which they match their own interest with an intentional use of technology. In other words, students chose a digital platform that allowed them to merge their topic with a linguistic goal. For instance, I had a group putting together the history of fashion in NYC, using an interactive timeline to hone their understanding of past tenses. A student mentioned in the course evaluations that “choosing a topic of interest for the final project helped me engage with the material more thoughtfully.” This assignment is a great addition to a project-based curriculum, since it is fully integrated within the course design, scaffolded throughout the semester, and presented in a way that makes the use of technology as well as the target language relevant to our students.

I connect what we are covering in class to the world around us, in order to show what the content of the course means beyond the classroom. I taught an advanced language through content course titled “Underground Iberia” in which we covered the cultural production of Spain in the 70s and 80s, that is to say, in the transition from Franco’s dictatorship to democracy. Living in NYC gave us the possibility to explore the concept of counterculture from a different perspective. With this purpose in mind, I planned a field trip to Spanish Harlem to see the street art. Students gathered information on the murals and made a guided tour—testimonials were collected in the class [blog](#). In their evaluations, a student stated that this field trip was “a great way of taking Spanish out of the classroom,” echoing her enthusiasm to the alteration of the traditional layout of the classroom.

Indeed, students were able to use Spanish to produce knowledge about a content not directly related to the class; moreover, they were able to use the target language to critically assess the reality around them.

Creativity is an effective way of exploring the target language in a critical-thinking context, that also offers students the possibility of developing a project of their own. For my Spanish Intermediate II, I designed—along with a colleague in my former department—a final assignment whose main goal was for students to critically and creatively analyze the course’s core concepts in the target language. Students had to create a proposal for a community-based project in NYC, thinking in the target language and using their analytical skills to devise a plan they would like to implement in the near-future. In addition to keeping track of their individual research and thinking processes in three compositions throughout the semester, students were asked to communicate and share their projects on an online [blog](#). Students felt compelled to use the target language in their fields of interest and to explore their creativity—a student pointed out that “by working on the project, I learned a lot about education and culture in New York City.” The project, therefore, allowed students not only to explore their creativity and interests, but also NYC urban landscape, maximizing their meaningful use of the target language.

These examples show how I merge the development of a critical pedagogy with a more formal grammatical instruction from a cognitive point of view. My vision of grammar as an operative and logic system is fundamental to challenge students’ approach to grammar as a prescriptive system. I put this into practice when teaching Spanish Elementary I, a course in which students learn the basic rudiments of the language—and, among them, the negative imperative which corresponds to the form of the subjunctive. I set up an in-class role play activity for them to practice the form of the negative imperative, but formulated in a way—as they would discover later—that required the use of the subjunctive. This simple task demystified the subjunctive and, through to a focus on meaning, made it easier to understand its use in context. A student mentioned in the final evaluations that “as it was my first Spanish course, it helped to teach me the basics and I feel I now have a foundation that I can build on.”

As a designer of learning experiences, my goal is to empower my students to find success both in the context of the classroom and beyond. In their evaluations, my students have confirmed that all these strategies explained here have resulted in strengthening their confidence and trust when embracing new challenges. I am as motivated to teach as I was the first day I entered a class, and I will continue crafting innovative learning experiences and furnishing my teaching development to cater to the teaching needs of every class.