

My professional teaching career began on a sweltering August day in 2006, in a classroom in inner city Washington, D.C. that more closely resembled a prison cell than a place of learning. The windows, covered in iron grating, did not open; the door was equipped with multiple deadbolts to protect the one ancient (and, in fact, non-functional) computer on my desk; and the twenty-five seats allotted to my thirty-five students meant that some gangly teenagers had to participate in our opening lesson while perched atop a radiator. That bleak environment proved my testing ground, the place where I worked out the practical implications of all of the educational theory that I had accumulated during my undergraduate classes and Teach for America training. A decade later, the commitment to social justice that led me to that classroom is still an important part of my academic work. In my research, I strive to demonstrate how literature has helped marginalized communities challenge dominant paradigms of race and class in Latin America. In my teaching, I strive to equip students with an understanding of how their own language skills can be used in the service of others—both within and beyond the university. The pedagogy that I apply in pursuit of this goal evolved from my days at Ballou High School and is rooted in an unwavering belief in the power of high expectations—maintained within a supportive environment—to facilitate a transformational educational experience.

My philosophy of high expectations extends to each area of my teaching: my course design, requirements for students, and my own professional development. When teaching language classes, for example, I endeavor to go beyond simply offering a course where students will improve their grammar and vocabulary. Instead, I use the following “big question”—borrowing Ken Bain’s terminology—to drive my syllabus: How can language learning provide us with ways of knowing and interacting with Spanish-speaking cultures that enrich our understanding of them and, crucially, our understanding of ourselves? By being explicit about how this question orients our classroom work, I help students contextualize their language and literature studies within the broader objective of developing cultural competence. As we return to this question time and time again over the course of this semester, students develop an appreciation of how language learning represents an opportunity for personal and professional growth regardless of their future career plans.

In order to create an intellectual environment focused on the goal of cultural competence, I employ a flipped classroom structure that requires students to prepare vocabulary and grammar exercises at home and focus exclusively on communicative activities during class time. In the past, since this methodology was new to many of my students—and demanded that they do additional work that their peers in other sections were not accountable for—I marketed it deliberately. At the start of the semester, I provided students with an upfront explanation of the pedagogy behind “flipping” the class. While this won their initial investment in the model, their enthusiasm for it really grew as the semester progressed and they participated in meaningful communicative activities that challenged them linguistically while also piquing their interest in Spanish-speaking literature and cultures. For a unit on business in Spanish-speaking countries, for example, my advanced intermediate students spent one class interviewing Latin American MBA students from UVa’s business school. Using the information that they gleaned from these interviews, they then wrote reflective essays comparing different elements of corporate culture in the United States and Latin America. For a unit on social problems in Latin America countries, my intermediate-level students composed journal entries detailing their reactions to a video about the Mexican cult of “La Santa Muerte,” recited protest poetry by Pablo Neruda, and analyzed the

lyrics of the Calle 13 song “Latinoamérica” in a group discussion. Each of these activities paired cultural learning with focused practice of a particular grammatical concept and set of vocabulary, allowing my students to advance in their linguistic skills and cultural competence simultaneously.

This kind of communicative approach is demanding for students. For that reason, I consider it my responsibility to facilitate their success by helping them mature as self-aware learners. I do this in two primary ways. The first is through the practice of explicit pedagogy. In my experience, I have found that many students, even well-prepared undergraduates, are unaware of the methods by which they learn best, and nearly all students enter my classroom without an understanding of how the brain learns new languages. To rectify that, I not only share with students the science behind second language acquisition, but I also work with them on an individual basis to develop study plans that reflect their specific learning styles. Periodic progress reports partnered with self-reflective activities give students concrete (and mandatory) opportunities to monitor their performance and make necessary adjustments over the course of the semester. The second way in which I directly support students as learners is to stress the value of being “productively uncomfortable” while learning a language. I encourage enthusiasm and the willingness to try new things—from acting out key scenes from *Don Quijote* to writing Spanish-language editorials on current events—and emphasize the role of failure as opportunity for learning.

The high expectations that I maintain for my students are also standards that I apply to myself. By maintaining an open dialogue about my teaching with students and requesting their feedback frequently, I am able to make adjustments to my courses and classroom practices to better facilitate student learning. In the past, I have also used outside experts for feedback on my pedagogy, consulting with UVa’s Teaching Resource Center, for example, for objective evaluations of my performance. Finally, to expand my pedagogical training, I completed the Tomorrow’s Professor Today professional development program at UVa and enrolled in an Advanced Pedagogy Seminar offered by the university. Teaching and learning about teaching continue to excite me, and it is with that passion that I pursue my own continuous improvement as a teacher. My students, ultimately, are the ones who benefit from this work, and I have been gratified by their response: during my teaching at UVa, my overall instructional effectiveness was rated “A” by 94 percent of my students; department-wide, only 72 percent of students give their professors an “A.”

Over my years of teaching, I have had the truly wonderful privilege of seeing students make significant life decisions as a result of their time in my class. Students who never would have considered majoring in Spanish have switched their majors or decided to go abroad simply for a love of the language. Others have proven to themselves that they can be “good” at learning languages after all, even if all of their previous experiences were negative. The ability to affect the lives of college students in meaningful ways is why I love teaching, and why I am seeking to continue my career in the classroom.