

*A Public University and a Small-Town Library: Community-Engaged Learners
Foster Literacy, Diversity and Bilingual Identity in Rural Minnesota*

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Abstract

The United States is an increasingly diverse and multi-lingual society, but when Americans imagine populations of native Spanish or bilingual speakers, they often imagine large urban areas or parts of the Southwest. We happen to live and work in a small, rural community in Minnesota whose Spanish-speaking/bilingual population has increased steadily over the past two decades, creating a significant cohort of young people ideally poised to develop a truly bilingual and bicultural identity. However, the local community and education system face challenges (in terms of funding and expertise) in effectively serving this population in this way. Embracing a key element of our university's mission, we have explored ways to incorporate community-engaged learning strategies into our academic program as a way to both expand students' experience with language and culture and work toward a more inclusive community that can better position this young population to fulfill its bilingual and bicultural possibilities. We have begun regularly assisting our local public library staff in expanding their collection of authentic and high-quality materials in Spanish to give ample opportunities for Spanish-speaking children and teens in the local community to maintain and develop language and literacy skills and cultural connections. At the same time, we involve and empower our advanced and intermediate-level university students in the process of selecting, evaluating, and promoting these materials to the local Latinx community, using tasks and assignments tailored to the needs and abilities of both groups and offering them many of the documented benefits associated with bilingualism.

Keywords: Language, Culture, Community-Engaged Learning, Bilingualism

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Introduction

The project outlined in the following pages came about through the convergence of three key components: a need for program refinement and revision, an institutional mission prioritizing community-engaged learning, and a local community with a demonstrated need that could be addressed via these other components. As faculty members in the Spanish program at the University of Minnesota, Morris, an undergraduate liberal arts campus within the University of Minnesota system, we form part of a small but active campus community as well as a small rural community in the West-Central region of the state, a city whose Spanish-speaking/bilingual population has increased steadily over the past two decades, creating a significant cohort of young students ideally poised to develop a truly bilingual and bicultural identity. However, the local community and education system face challenges (in terms of funding and expertise) in effectively serving this population in this way. Embracing a key element of our university's mission, we have explored ways to incorporate community-engaged learning strategies into our academic program as a way to both expand students' experience with language and culture and work toward a more inclusive community that can better position this young population to fulfill its bilingual and bicultural possibilities. We have begun regularly assisting our local public library staff in expanding their collection of authentic and high-quality materials in Spanish to give ample opportunities for Spanish-speaking children and teens in the local community to maintain and develop language and literacy skills and cultural connections. At the same time, we involve and empower our advanced and intermediate-level university students in the process of selecting, evaluating, and promoting these materials to the local Latinx community, using tasks and assignments tailored to the needs and abilities of both groups and offering them many of the documented benefits associated with bilingualism. We outline in the following the three components of this project, as well as some of the initial outcomes and further plans and challenges for its continuation.

Program Needs and Challenges

Our program offers an undergraduate major and minor in Spanish, one which strives to balance academic rigor with an emphasis on practical skills and applications of language mastery. But as with most language programs, there is a progression of sequenced courses corresponding to student level of proficiency (intermediate to advanced), with what is traditionally considered a "third year" or advanced sequence (though in reality most students who take this level are second or first-year students in the program) that serves as a sort of gateway or checkpoint for students continuing on into upper-division work in the major. Upper-division work in a language includes an emphasis on reading and analysis of increasingly sophisticated literary work in the target language. Given the level of work we expect students to engage in at the upper-division level, it is imperative that our sequenced courses leading to this level, and particularly the advanced sequence, give students ample and diverse experiences to introduce them to and make them comfortable with the types of reading tasks they will encounter as they progress through the program. To this end, we have put in place a sequenced group of classes at this level, which alternate between an emphasis on technical aspects of the language (grammar, composition and conversation) and reading and analysis of literary texts, as outlined below:

1 st half fall semester	2 nd half fall semester	1 st half spring semester	2 nd half spring semester
Span 3011	Span 3111	Span 3012	Span 3112**
Conversation, Composition and Culture	Readings in Spanish I	Spanish Grammar in Practice	Readings in Spanish II
Conversation, Culture, Grammar, Writing Spanish-language films	Short story, poetry, essay Increase confidence and comfort level with reading in Spanish	Conversation, Culture, Grammar, Writing Improved writing technique, strategies and components of academic prose	Strategies for more advanced reading Emphasis on cultural content Short novels in preparation for advanced- level surveys and seminars

Figure 1: Structure of Advanced Language Sequence

The format has served the program well for about a decade now. However, in more recent years students have exhibited a higher level of frustration and a lower level of interest and engagement with some of the readings associated with the literature components of the sequence. There are, we believe, multiple reasons for this trend. In part, student interest and expectations have evolved over recent years, yet the typical assigned texts for this level have not changed much since many of us who are now teaching Spanish-language literature were students ourselves. They are increasingly less accustomed to reading in ways that require the type of attention, engagement and curiosity we ask of them at the advanced level of language study. As instructors, we may justly lament this fact, but at the same time, we need to accept the challenge of finding effective and productive ways of engaging students and preparing them for increasingly sophisticated work in the target language they have chosen to study, as well as prepare them for success in our own program. To this end, we began exploring possible ways to refine the existing classes within the existing program structure.

The ideal place to focus was the second of the literature-based classes in the sequence, Spanish 3112 or Readings II (see above), which serves as the final checkpoint before students continue on to upper-division work. Typically, students in this class are required to read two short novels (preferably from different cultures) that provide the experience of a sustained reading task while not overwhelming them (texts are about 100 pages typically). While every effort is made to keep these reading tasks manageable, students have found the task of high-level reading in Spanish difficult. Those of us who teach world language literature have long espoused the idea of “simplifying the task, not the text” when designing activities and assignments around our materials. Understanding that students struggle with literature that may feel far beyond their level of proficiency, but also aware that the discomfort they feel in such reading assignments is a necessary part of their growth and improvement in their language study, we began to consider alternatives to traditional text assignments that might at least feel more in line with their level of proficiency, and this led to a consideration of the growing genre of young adult literature in Spanish, the thought being that students might feel more of an affinity with texts of this kind, thus raising levels of interest and confidence and

enhancing their progress toward higher-level work. After a considerable amount of exploration, however, we could not identify any one single text that would serve as a worthy candidate for a common reading, one that would ideally appeal broadly to students and provide sufficient linguistic challenge and cultural/historical background to fully serve the goals and objectives of the course. Still, the amount and range of young adult literature that has been produced in recent years was notable, and while it was not yet deemed appropriate to replace more tried and true texts that had been used previously with students at this level of the program, it left us interested in other possible ways to incorporate it into the program. This continued interest in the genre led us to consider a community-engaged project with our local public library, a project that could potentially serve both the needs of our program (and students) and those of our local community and its growing cohort of young bilingual students by assisting the local public library in effectively expanding its collection of quality Spanish-language materials available to the local community. Over the course of several years, the project has further expanded to include both our advanced and intermediate-level courses, and to focus on Spanish-language materials in both the juvenile and young adult categories.

Community-Engaged Learning and the Morris Community

Before we get to the specifics of the project and its implementation, we will explain a bit more of the goals and objectives of the community engagement initiative on the UMN Morris campus and some demographic background on the Morris community. Our campus is fortunate to have a commitment to this endeavor, and a dedicated Office of Community Engagement that “seeks to engage members of the broader community and the University of Minnesota, Morris students, faculty and staff in reciprocal, meaningful course-based and co-curricular partnerships.”¹ Within this office there is a program dedicated to community-engaged learning, whose goal is to “plan, implement, and assess service-learning projects that fit course goals and meet documented community needs.” The program has developed the following set of learning outcomes, which happen to intersect in meaningful ways with those of the Spanish program:

- Increased understanding of how theory, knowledge, and skills learned in and outside the classroom can be used to meet a range of community needs
- Increased intercultural agility
- Improved leadership skills
- Improved critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Increased commitment to and understanding of civic engagement and improved skills and knowledge relevant to effecting social change
- Improved skills that can be applied to careers related to education, community engagement, and community development

With this in mind, we began exploring the possibility of partnering with the Morris Public Library to design a project that could both further the aims of our academic program (and enhance the progress of our students toward reading proficiency) and those of the library to better serve its growing Latinx community and particularly the young readers within this population. A relatively new library director was making a conscious effort to build and enhance the library’s holdings of Spanish-language books, and staff members were consciously working to build up the collection of young adult literature in both English and

¹ See <https://students.morris.umn.edu/community-engagement>

Spanish. What they admittedly lacked, however, were staff members proficient enough in Spanish language and culture to make good, informed choices on acquisitions, or who even knew where to look for the best options. This was precisely the skill set we could offer the library staff to assist with their project. While much of the initial holdings tended to be Spanish translations of popular English-language books (the *Harry Potter* series, for example), we were in a position to help the library introduce high-quality young adult literature produced in Spanish and reflecting cultural perspectives from the Spanish-speaking world, books that would be of value both to our students and the local community of potential bilingual readers.

One might reasonably wonder why a small town in rural Minnesota might have such a demonstrable need for an enhanced collection of Spanish-language materials, or why there would be so much interest on the library's part to address the needs of this particular population cohort. Despite its location and size, demographic trends over the last two decades have seen a sizeable and noticeable increase in the Latinx population in the community, which now constitutes nearly 6.8% of the population of the City of Morris (compared to 1.48% in 2000) and 8.5% of the population of Stevens County, where we are located. The rate of growth of the Latinx community in our county even over the last decade is striking, as illustrated on this census graph:

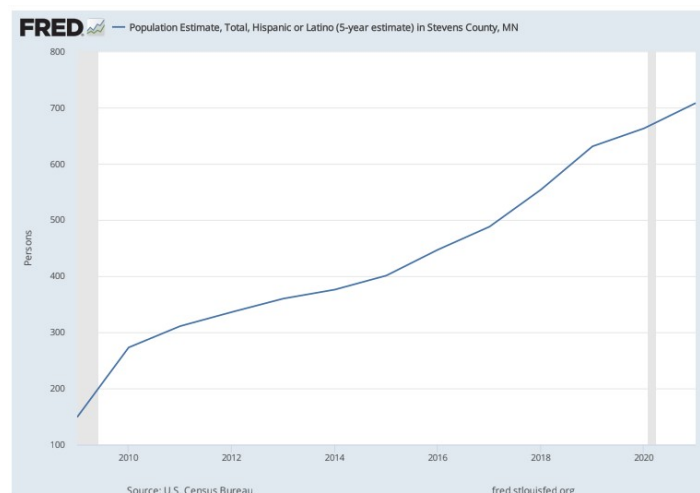


Figure 2: Census information 2010-2020

This is a relatively young population of adults aged 18-40, many of whom have found work in the local agricultural economy and are setting down roots and building families in the community. This naturally means a growing population of K-12 students in the local schools who either call Spanish their first language (i.e., who came to the community as children but spoke Spanish in their home countries prior to the transition) or who may speak or at least hear Spanish at home even if their primary language of communication at school and in the community may be English. While there is increasing will in the community to better understand, support, accommodate and welcome these community members, there is often a lack of experience and knowledge to make such efforts successful. The Spanish program at UMN Morris has developed a number of initiatives in recent years to connect students with the community in meaningful ways, including a community ESL program where students serve as instructors, a translation and interpretation program in which students are trained to provide these services in limited settings (such as in parent-teacher conferences at local schools), and a local iteration of the Jane Addams Project, a cross-cultural discussion group

that provides Spanish and English-speaking community members with opportunities to connect with one another and better understand each other's cultures. This community-engaged learning project constitutes an additional opportunity to engage our students in the community in a meaningful way while also enhancing their academic progress in our program.

Project Implementation in the Classroom and the Community

As noted earlier, we first decided to focus efforts on our course Span 3112, the final component in our advanced sequence with an emphasis on reading proficiency and literary and cultural analysis and the development of strategies for sustained comprehension and understanding of lengthier texts, as a challenge in our program and an opportunity for improvement. We considered the incorporation of young adult literature at this level to alleviate some of the frustration with more traditional assigned texts but had been unsuccessful in identifying a single text from the genre that would be a suitable common reading for all students. Then we began to explore alternative ways to incorporate this literature into the course while still maintaining the level of academic challenge and rigor necessary to prepare students for future work in the program and considered possibilities to do this in the context of community-engaged learning and the methods and objectives that entails.

We decided not to replace the more traditional assignments for the course with selections from the young adult genre, but rather to use these as an ancillary assignment to the course, giving students an additional opportunity by the end of the course to compare their level of comprehension and proficiency between the challenging and perhaps frustrating traditional assignments with the somewhat unorthodox selection of young adult literature which, in realistic terms, might better align with their linguistic abilities at the moment. To this end, and with the goal of helping the public library expand its collection of Spanish-language young adult literature, we decided, rather than to focus on one selection, to assign each student their own individual selection, which they would be responsible for reading and evaluating independently by the end of the course. The texts could be assigned randomly, but also in certain cases tailored to the interests and abilities of individual students. Longer selections could, for example, be assigned to students with demonstrated stronger potential, or texts with particular themes could be matched to students with demonstrated interest. The assignment would result not only in an individual achievement (and, ideally, a confidence booster for each student that would reinforce the progress made toward better reading comprehension and proficiency in Spanish) but also a contribution toward the broader collaboration between our program and the library.

To this end, we worked with library staff to identify and adapt existing criteria for evaluating young adult literature², and designed materials with which students could rate (according to a number scale) their assigned readings based on these criteria and provide additional commentary to justify their numerical ratings. The work could reasonably be done independently in addition to the more traditional common reading and associated assignments and submitted in a uniform format (in the form of a survey) by the end of the course. This, in turn, would generate useful information and data for use by the library in making thoughtful, informed decisions on the materials to add to the collection and make available at their

² See <https://www.ala.org/yalsa/teenreading/teenstopten/ttcriteria>

discretion the evaluation materials or relevant details from these materials to potential readers and/or their families.

With the success of a pilot program associated with the advanced level 3112 course, in subsequent years we have incorporated different but related assignments in our second semester of the intermediate-level sequence (Spanish 2002). For this component of the project, and in light of the proficiency level of these students, we focus on Spanish-language materials produced for juvenile readers, including picture books for very young readers and lengthier illustrated chapter books designed for beginning readers. These texts are manageable (though not without linguistic challenges) for a typical intermediate-level student, and our assignments are again crafted with the level of the students in mind as well as the usefulness of the results for the local library's use. To this end, intermediate students also have an individually assigned chapter book to read and evaluate (using a common set of criteria and a simplified survey form) by the end of the course, with the aim of making these materials available for use by the library in evaluating their acquisitions or making relevant information available to readers and their families. In addition, and at an earlier point in the semester, these students are also individually assigned simple picture books to read. Their assignment with these selections is to choose a segment of the book that they think would engage the interest of a potential reader, and prepare a short, simple video of 60-90 seconds in which the text of the book appears along with their voice reading the book aloud. These videos (pending student permission) are then shared with the library for use in promoting the materials on their website; meanwhile, students have the opportunity to enhance their vocabulary and comprehension while also focusing on pronunciation and clear communication in the target language (which, of course, they are encouraged to practice and perfect as much as possible before recording). Again, the aim of all of these assignments is two-fold: to offer practical and engaging ways for students to enhance proficiency and increase confidence in their target language (to further our program outcomes), while at the same time providing useful information and guidance to our library, which in turn can better serve the local Latinx community in meaningful ways. In other words, we strive to see our program goals connect with the goals and needs of the local community, and therefore contribute to the institutional commitment of community engagement to enhance the learning experience of our students.

In addition to these practical academic pieces of the project, we also felt it important to create a tangible opportunity for students to interact with the library and local community and showcase the work they had done for the course. Though this piece was not possible during the worst year of the COVID pandemic, it has been a successful conclusion to the project in the years when it has been possible. For this piece, we organize an end of the year event (refreshments included as an incentive) to which community members are invited to learn more about the library and see the new Spanish-language materials on display as well as the student work associated with it. We have also worked with the library on potential reading incentive summer programs (thus far with only modest success). The event also gives the library staff the opportunity to interact directly with current and potential patrons, provide information on the library services, offer library card applications to those who have not yet acquired them, and make it clear that the community matters and that their local library wants to understand in their needs, concerns and interests.

Finally, we also use the opportunity to reinforce what research has shown about the important benefits of bilingualism, by offering concise materials giving a brief overview of the information. These are available at the community event and also shared with the library to

be made available at any time. The following handout was prepared by students in the program, and adapted from Edwards and Newcomb, “Back to Basics: Marketing the Benefits of Bilingualism to Parents”:

6 Reasons for Developing Multilingual Skills

<p>In School: Children who learn two languages have a head start when reading and counting. They often do better on exams later on.</p>	<p>En la escuela: Los niños que aprenden dos idiomas tendrán un buen comienzo al aprender a contar y leer. En muchos casos sacarán mejores notas en los exámenes.</p>
<p>In the Family: Learning two languages is easier for young children. In no time they'll be switching easily from one to the other. The whole family will be proud.</p>	<p>En la familia: Aprender dos idiomas es más fácil para los niños pequeños. En poco tiempo podrán cambiar fácilmente de un idioma al otro, motivo de orgullo para toda la familia.</p>
<p>At Work: Two languages offer a better choice of work. Many employers in the U.S. and beyond look for skills in English and Spanish.</p>	<p>En el trabajo: Dos idiomas ofrecen mejores opciones de empleo. Muchas empresas en los EE.UU. y otros lugares buscan personas que dominen el inglés y el español.</p>
<p>In the Community: It gives you a buzz to be able to switch easily from one language to another. Speaking both languages opens doors to make new friends.</p>	<p>En la comunidad: Poder cambiar entre dos idiomas es genial. Hablar dos idiomas te abre las puertas para conocer nuevos amigos.</p>
<p>Around the World: Most people throughout the world speak more than one language. After learning two, it's much easier to learn more!</p>	<p>En todo el mundo: La mayoría de las personas en el mundo hablan más de un idioma. Después de aprender dos, ¡se hace más fácil aprender otros!</p>
<p>In Life: Both English and Spanish are treasure troves, full of stories and songs, history and fun. Your child will have the best of both worlds!</p>	<p>En la vida: Ambos idiomas son tesoros, repletos de cuentos y canciones, historia y diversión. Los niños bilingües disfrutan de lo mejor de dos mundos!</p>

Figure 3: Example of shared material

These basic principles are applicable to our students as well as the readers and families in our community.

Conclusion

Even as we plan to continue this project for the foreseeable future, we are pleased with its success so far even as we acknowledge the need to further refine our goals and improve outreach strategies. We will need to ensure continued funding for the project as well as faculty support and available time to dedicate to the project. There is further opportunity to expand the materials included in the project, for broader cultural diversity within the Hispanic world as well as diversity of genres (including, perhaps, graphic novels and films). Based on available data from the library, current circulation of Spanish-language materials has been significant but could be improved; we would like to continue working with the library on strategies to promote the Spanish-language collection. Finally, to the extent possible, we would like to collaborate with the local public schools as well as the library for better integration and promotion of the project and its goals. This will take time and effort moving forward, but our project, despite its limitations, has made a demonstrable impact on our students and our community.

References

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