

## ¿Hablas español? Launching a Spanish-Language Insert at a Small Student Newspaper

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### Abstract

This case study at a Hispanic-serving institution draws on survey materials (N=54), student feedback, a focus group (N=8), and faculty members' participant-observer reflections regarding the creation of a Spanish-language insert in a student newspaper. In the evolution of the interdisciplinary project, opportunities for experiential learning in the languages emerged. Future directions for the collaboration are discussed.

### Introduction

An undated document from the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics reads, in part, "The future of our nation is inextricably linked to the future of the Hispanic community—Hispanics ... will represent 60 percent of our nation's population growth between 2005 and 2050." The number of Hispanic-Serving Institutions in the U.S. has grown correspondingly, more than doubling 2004-2016, according to the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (2018). However, some colleges and universities struggle to transition from "Hispanic-enrolling" to true "Hispanic-serving" institutions (Bennett, 2013).

One way to serve Hispanic students may be through Spanish-language media and partnering with student news organizations to create experiential learning opportunities. This case study explores an interdisciplinary class project that produces a Spanish-language insert for the student newspaper at California Lutheran University, which is a private, liberal arts university that the U.S. Department of Education recently identified as a Hispanic-Serving Institution.

Outside of an international study experience, students have limited experiential learning opportunities in Spanish. At Cal Lutheran, the Department of Languages and Cultures does offer an independent study and an internship; however, these are not faculty-guided content courses. Instead, students select their own topic of investigation or worksite. Rather than developing and implementing a specific way the students can apply their use of Spanish, faculty members function as facilitators and final reviewers of end-of-semester work products.

In this project, students enrolled in a required, faculty-led Spanish course and applied their language skills to work interdisciplinarily outside the classroom. Specifically, the Spanish course partners with a journalism lab class that produces the campus' student newspaper. In

serving as mentors, student journalists learn of serving different global, and increasingly local, populations.

However, there is limited research regarding this pedagogy and foreign-language student media may result in unique challenges. Burstiner (2015) discussed difficulties in launching a Spanish-language supplement at a public, mid-size California university with relatively limited diversity. The current study discusses the experience of another institution, and offers insight for institutions seeking similar educational opportunities.

## Literature Review

The Modern Language Association’s 2011 Executive Council Statement on “Learning Languages: Goals and Challenges” describes the deep and necessary connection between language study, cultural competence, and understanding an interconnected world, for which media literacy is a vital tool:

It is the obligation of educational institutions to provide all students with opportunities to acquire fluency in a second language. Studying a nonnative language gives students the tools to appreciate other cultures... In addition, knowledge of a second language serves students well in the interconnected world: a second language opens the door to job opportunities in the global economy and makes more media accessible, enriching public discussion of current issues. Finally, language knowledge is critical to humanistic inquiry into the cultures and histories of the world.

In developing students’ cultural competencies and media literacy, one potential avenue may be through student media. Student-produced media is a form of experiential learning in which students practice writing and communication in a real-world setting and work to serve specific audiences.

### *Experiential education & student newsrooms*

An essay in the *Journal of Experiential Education* suggests that experiential education became more prevalent beginning in the 1970s (Seaman, Brown, & Quay, 2017). Kolb (1984) described experiential learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). Specifically, his experiential learning theory includes four integrated stages in which learners have a concrete experience, reflect on the experience, learn from the experience, and then practice what was learned.

This approach to learning gained traction in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and has become a selling point for smaller institutions, with Cresswell (2018) observing that “it is common now for liberal-arts colleges to advertise their embrace of experiential, ‘high impact’ forms of education” (para. 2). However, he also noted that this hands-on approach, which is central to professional disciplines, has not always been embraced with gusto by those who value education for education’s sake.

What Cresswell described as an “attempt to break down the barrier between classroom learning and everyday life” (para. 1) existed long before it became a sexy marketing tactic. Apprenticeship programs—a precursor to today’s experiential learning—have a long history in many fields, including journalism. Further, student newspapers have existed in various

forms for centuries, with Dartmouth publishing a kind of student newspaper as far back as 1799 (College Media Matters, 2013).

In essence, student newspapers were a form of experiential learning before it was part of the lexicon of higher education. Today, college news outlets range in their independence, financial status, size, and more. Some newspapers are classroom-based lab programs with limited budgets, whereas for others, “student newspaper” may be something of a misnomer, due to their financial autonomy and independence from any curricular program. For example, UCLA’s communication major offers no specific focus in journalism, yet the Daily Bruin student news organization describes itself as the “premier source of campus news for students and members of the university,” and is celebrating its centennial in 2019. The publication’s “About” section notes that “Because UCLA does not have a journalism major or school, the Daily Bruin serves as the university’s primary training ground for young journalists.”

As a location for learning, student newsrooms again exist in various forms. Recently, Smith, Norman, Hettinga, and Lyon Payne (2018) established that students learn through communities of practice in which students find community, learn through practice, shape their own identities, and find meaning. Specifically, Smith et al. (2018) found that the greatest potential for learning came when the different components of a community of practice overlapped.

For example, students professed to learn through trial and error (Practice), but when they blended this practice with Community, the authors saw and experienced mentorship. Similarly, while students identified as journalists, pride in their product led to a blending of Identity and Meaning. (p. 21)

In developing the interdisciplinary Spanish-language newspaper insert project, the authors sought to develop a multi-pronged educational opportunity that provided Spanish-language students an opportunity to learn by doing, and thus created a learning community. In this community, student journalists who served as peer mentors and guided the Spanish students as they ventured into journalism learned by teaching. Stollhans (2016) suggested that the “learning by teaching” approach is common in language study. While the Spanish students were the language and culture experts, they were learning a new form of communication—that is, they were practicing their Spanish-language skills in a more real-world context that prioritizes an audience, including the Spanish-speaking community, beyond an instructor or classroom peers.

Traditionally, experiential learning in Spanish-language education is imagined to be related to an international study abroad experience, student-to-student tutoring, or any other activity outside the formal classroom setting where students can have a more “real-world” interaction with Spanish in an environment where it is used authentically by native speakers. It is rare that early and intermediate stage learners have the opportunity to apply their burgeoning skills to contexts outside the classroom; however, Moreno-López, Ramos-Sellman, Miranda-Aldaco, and Gomis Quinto (2017) outline a strong case for including an experiential learning component to classes as a means to increase student learning and interest in cultural comparisons. Their article investigates the well-known areas of service learning, telecollaborative exchanges, and study abroad. Although the quantitative results of the study showed that traditional classroom experiences prepared students to continue into more advanced coursework just as well as experiential-based classes, the experiential component did have a positive impact in other areas:

...offering varied course models provides an approach to helping students meet graduation requirements in ways that accommodate their varied interests; address their preferred learning styles, needs, and modalities; alleviate possible scheduling conflicts; and validate their personal goals. This may be a reason why, while courses in other foreign languages have been losing enrollment..., experiential learning courses in Spanish have maintained a robust registration every semester. (p. 405-406)

Despite the clear benefits to students and programs that experiential learning offers, there still remains a dearth of research about approaches to experiential learning that push beyond the more expected formats, for example journalism, as outlined back in 1995 in the *Hispania* article “Piquing Spanish-Language Students’ Interest in Journalism: A Five-Point Plan” (Martínez, 1995). The pedagogical piece details how students can enhance their Spanish writing skills specifically through the lens of media and journalism. Martínez (1995) based the practice on five writing styles: newspaper, broadcast, opinion, magazine, and press releases. She wrote,

Students will find satisfaction in learning to distinguish between the different types of writing, and in acquiring a skill they can apply in real life. They get a taste of the fascinating world of media, improve their writing and comprehension of the Spanish language, learn techniques that will be helpful in the job market, and learn to use community resources. (p. 351-352)

The project described in the current research is built upon Martínez’s vision for experiential learning with the course she described in her article, *Writing for the Media in Spanish*. Although the Cal Lutheran course analyzed here is not entirely based on media writing like Martínez’s, the collaboration between students from different content areas also enriches the research on approaches to writing in the disciplines in languages other than English. Susan MacDonald’s *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (2010) addresses how the use of language must be calibrated to meet the content-specific expectations of a certain field; however, the curricular endeavor of having Spanish-language students write journalistic pieces for publication for a Spanish-speaking readership is a significant expansion of MacDonald’s original framing of “language.”

As US demographics continue to evolve and Hispanic enrollment in colleges and universities continues to increase (see Gramlich, 2017), and schools seek opportunities to innovate learning, creating Spanish-language media may be a fruitful opportunity to break down educational borders while simultaneously serving a student population. With the observation of the growth of both Spanish journalism programming at colleges and universities as well as increased potential for employment in Spanish media, developing interdisciplinary programs may be a means of preparing students for an increasingly diversified community and job market. José Luis Benavides, who came to California State University at Northridge in 2002 and soon launched a bilingual multimedia student publication named *El Nuevo Sol*, noted the crucial need for highly trained bilingual and bicultural journalists even when the presence of some media are diminishing. In a press release, Benavides said:

Despite the fact that many newspapers are downsizing, a good number of our students are landing jobs at television stations, online news media outlets and, yes, newspapers across the Southwest, on the East Coast and at news organizations across the country. As this country becomes more and more diverse, a large number of this nation’s

population will be Latino or Spanish-speaking. If news organizations want to do their jobs well in reporting news important to all Americans, then they are going to need journalists who have the skills to report on Latino and Spanish-language communities. (Chandler, 2018)

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to review an ongoing interdisciplinary project at a small, private liberal arts university and to make recommendations for best practices for other programs considering launching similar language inserts.

## **Method**

### ***Background***

This project was inspired, in part, by a Latinx student at Cal Lutheran. She attended a student journalism conference and spoke to students from other schools and, following the conference, proposed a Spanish-language insert. Thus began an interdisciplinary partnership between the university's Communication Department, situated in the social sciences, and the Department of Languages and Cultures, which falls under humanities. The first edition of *El Eco* was produced by student volunteers in fall 2017.

In hopes of building on this initial effort, two classes—one from each major—were brought together in spring 2018 to produce a more robust version of *El Eco*. The insert is not a Spanish translation of the English-language student newspaper, *The Echo*, but rather an original publication that specifically highlights the interests and concerns of the campus' Spanish-speaking students and their families.

This partnership continues today, with some 20 students from an advanced Spanish class, Conversation and Composition (SPAN 301), partnering with the class that is associated with university's student newspaper, which can be classified as a "lab paper." The newspaper class includes as many as 30 student reporters, photojournalists, and editors. Past coverage has included stories about multicultural events on campus, ways for Hispanic/Latinx students to get involved in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), and the lived experience of students attending the university as Dreamers.

### ***Specific data-gathering approaches***

This multi-method case study draws on nearly two years of establishing a Spanish-language insert for a weekly student newspaper. This research pulls data from feedback surveys

from the students who worked on *El Eco* (N=54), as well as their qualitative commentary. An audience focus group (N=8) was also conducted. Further, two of the authors served as participant observers—one is the professor of the Spanish conversation and composition class while another served as the faculty adviser to the student newspaper. Their reflections are included.

## Findings

### *Student feedback*

The first iteration of El Eco began in fall 2017 as a purely volunteer process in which students who were comfortable with journalism and could speak Spanish volunteered to write articles. Somewhat hampered by the lack of structure, the initial launch did not occur until the very last issue of the fall semester and was limited to just two pages.

To grow this project, the faculty adviser of the student newspaper and the professor of a Spanish conversation and composition class on campus formed a partnership in spring 2018. Through the class collaboration a larger, four-page insert was produced in spring 2018. Surveys were gathered from both student journalism mentors and Spanish student reporters. This partnership continues today and for the purposes of this research, surveys from the most recent students who worked on El Eco are compared to the initial surveys gathered in spring 2018.

In 2018, a thematic review of the qualitative portion of the survey (n=22) revealed that students wanted more structure in the class partnership. In 2018, the Spanish class and the newspaper class were on different times and days, so the students were given one another's contact information. However, multiple students suggested that this could be facilitated further. One student wrote, *"I think meeting with the students in class and pairing us up together, instead of just sharing our names with each other, would prevent the communication issues that some students experienced."* And another wrote *"Have a meeting with all Echo reporters and Spanish 301 students at the start of the semester, so mentors and mentees can meet in person as I think this would increase the likeliness that mentors and mentees actually take advantage of this collaboration and work together."* Other students suggested further structural changes, such as having firmer deadlines and clearer rubrics. At least one student suggested that it would be helpful if more of the journalism mentors spoke Spanish, and another suggested that the main student editor should be a native Spanish speaker.

Following these recommendations, the faculty members made significant structural changes. They worked with their respective department chairs to ensure that the classes could meet at the same time and coordinated three in-class meetings: one for an initial meeting and connecting partners, one for planning article assignments as well as reviewing practices for reporting and writing, and one for reviewing the written articles. A more detailed timeline with specific deadlines to move the students through the project was shared and specific rubrics of what was expected were distributed. The faculty also established minimum requirements and procedures for the articles. For example, the journalism professor required the students to complete three interviews, and the Spanish professor required that at least one of the interviews be conducted in Spanish. A corresponding policy was also established, in that students who conducted interviews in English were only allowed to paraphrase information, not directly quote from the interview, so as to preserve the authenticity of information that might be lost through translation. Further, a paid El Eco editor was hired for the 2018-2019 academic year. The student editor was a native Spanish speaker from Guatemala. The faculty followed these practices in fall 2018 and spring 2019. In spring 2019, the same survey with the new student participants was conducted (n=32).

Survey participants responded to a single, Likert scale question that rated their experience in their mentor/mentee relationship. Participants then responded to open-ended questions about their experience in general and made suggestions about how to improve the project.

For the quantitative question, student participants were asked “On a scale of 1-5, please rate your mentor/mentee relationship,” where 1=“I had a poor experience and would not want to work with my mentor/mentee again” and 5=“I had a great experience and I would definitely work with my mentor/mentee again.” Because of the small sample size, the authors did not anticipate significant results, however, there was a difference between the spring 2018 semester and the spring 2019 semester. In general, the students from spring 2019 (after the revisions to the class structure had been made) expressed more satisfaction with their mentor/mentee relationship. An independent samples t-test revealed no significance, but there was a mean difference with students from 2019, on average, expressing more satisfaction with their partnership ( $M=4.41$ ,  $sd.=0.77$ ) than those from 2018 ( $M=4.14$ ,  $sd.=0.95$ ).

To look at differences between mentors’ and mentees’ satisfaction, a second independent samples t-test was conducted. Interestingly, despite the small sample size the results approached significance, with  $p=.06$ . The mean difference indicated that mentees, on average, were more satisfied with their partnership experience ( $M=4.54$ ,  $sd.=0.83$ ) than mentors ( $M=4.10$ ,  $sd.=0.88$ ).

In the survey conducted in spring 2019, students expressed appreciation for the more structured class. One student wrote, “*Having a set schedule for everything and the due dates made keeping up and staying on track easy. Working with my mentor helped to give me some guidance and not feel so confused on what to do and how. I learned a lot and thought the project was a cool learning experience and good opportunity to work on things and become a better person.*” Another student wrote, “*Meeting with the COMM class was worth the time,*” while still another wrote, “*One thing that worked well is having a mentor to be able to ask questions.*”

In general, students seemed to recognize the unique learning opportunity. One Spanish student wrote, “*It was a great way to combine two classes. It made it so our Spanish writing had a purpose*” whereas another said “*I was very excited to participate because I never had the opportunity to publish my work whether it was a newspaper or online, especially in Spanish. Then, working with my mentor just made everything much easier.*” By comparison, a journalism student wrote, “*I thought it was beneficial to pair up with someone who was less familiar with journalism. I got to review and practice while teaching and guiding the El Eco student.*”

### ***Focus group***

In addition to the post-class surveys, the authors conducted a 40-minute focus group ( $N=8$ ) with students from an advanced Spanish class in spring 2019. Of the eight participants, three were majoring in Spanish (all were double majoring) and five were completing a Spanish minor. Specifically, the students who participated in the focus group were students who had not worked on El Eco. In general, students were asked if they knew about El Eco, and then they were given time to look at the most recent issue and were asked for feedback.

Broadly speaking, students were typically not aware of El Eco before they participated in the focus group. Of those who were aware, they were concerned about potential repetition of topics from issue to issue. Others expressed appreciation for the variety of stories, but indicated that they would like to see more stories about people. One student said, *“I thought they were going to be about personal stories about people and where they come from... I thought it was going to be based on student lives here.”*

The focus group participants were asked if they spoke Spanish at home, which several did, and were asked if they would share El Eco with their families. One student said, *“I’m always telling them about things that relate to Hispanic families, or, like, Spanish speaking communities, because for them, it’s comforting to know that article is being included... anything that’s happening on campus, I like to let them know because for them it’s like, a happiness for them to know we’re being included.”* Another student noted that her mom was aware of cultural conflict and that she would be happy to see *“there’s something being done to include everybody.”*

Participants were also asked if they would be interested in contributing to El Eco in the future, but many expressed hesitation. One student said, *“I’m not the best at writing Spanish, let alone speaking it. So to do like a whole project, doing this and it being published, I feel very self-conscious about it.”* This hesitation was reiterated by other participants in the focus group, as one student said, *“I don’t know that I’m good enough at writing Spanish to do that. Especially if the Echo people don’t know any Spanish, that would just feel like you’re on your own.”* This language seemed to be reflective of a lack of understanding of the process for how El Eco is produced (i.e., the peer mentor, multiple class meetings, in-class peer feedback, student editors, etc.). Comparatively, a student who completed the survey recognized the importance of the mentoring aspect. The student wrote, *“I had a really great experience working with my mentor and the support she gave me throughout all this, it was honestly a pleasure to work with her. She made me feel comfortable and was always there to give me the information or any help I needed in order to be successful. Also she has a really great positive attitude about everything which made it even more of a pleasure to work with her. Overall, I just want to say thank you so much for this amazing opportunity!”*

### ***Faculty reflection***

As previously noted, two of the authors of this research served as participant observers. The faculty members were well aware of the structural issues identified by students within the classroom feedback and survey, and were seeking to address these concerns even within the first semester of the partnership. Both acknowledged the critical nature of open-minded partners as well as the importance of relying on the expertise of colleagues. It was a learning opportunity for both instructors.

The Spanish language professor observed the difficulties of the hands-off nature of advising in student journalism. To protect students’ free speech rights, faculty student media advisers commonly do not review material before it is published. This may be counter to the experiences of language professors who seek to assist students in perfecting their writing. Here, too, administrative concerns emerged. The Spanish professor and department chair pondered the ramifications of having a public Spanish-language product that was not vetted or reviewed by



faculty. There was some concern regarding how the student-produced publication would represent the Department of Languages and Cultures. Ultimately, it was decided to include a letter from the editor in every issue that explains the purpose of the publication and its role as a learning tool.

The journalism professor, who does not speak Spanish, occasionally experienced frustration in her limited ability to aid the Spanish-language students, who were new to journalism and had limited training. To facilitate the class project, the journalism professor had created brief, instructional videos, one on reporting and one on journalistic writing, that the Spanish students reviewed. However, issues of media literacy emerged, in that the journalism students were likely to have had previous classes that educated them about the role of communication in society, journalistic norms and standards, etc. However, the Spanish students did not have this background, which prompted questions about the basics of journalism that were not anticipated.

The language professor said she benefited from the opportunity to discuss culture in a different way. She said that discussing the audience, the needs of the community, and the role of student media in the bigger institution created an opportunity for a new style of writing that might be absent in another language class. For the journalism instructor, she noted that the student journalists were given the opportunity to build on their own skills by serving as an expert to students who were new to journalism.

The faculty recognized that this partnership created a chance for students in both classes to receive new forms of feedback. Spanish students were made aware of the public side of composition, whereas the journalism students received feedback on their ability to educate others in journalistic norms and standards. It further pushed the journalism students to be more aware of the changing nature of their audience. In line with the concern for repetition noted by focus group participants, there was also opportunity to educate student journalists about resisting stereotypes, such as assuming that Spanish-speaking students share common problems etc.

## **Discussion & Conclusion**

A review of student feedback indicated ample opportunities to build and develop the Spanish-language insert and the interdisciplinary relationship between Spanish-language and journalism classes. Students from both classes largely reported that the educational opportunity was beneficial.

This partnership has allowed students from the Spanish class to see the application of their knowledge through experiential learning, and holds them to a high standard in which their work is public, rather than for just an instructor. Meanwhile, the journalism students, who serve as journalism mentors, learn about serving a more diverse audience, including Spanish-speaking students, faculty and staff, as well as their families. A student who volunteered in the very first iteration of *El Eco* shared that her father was a native Spanish speaker, and she spoke about how much it meant to her to have written something that he could read in his own language. This was corroborated by students within the focus group, who expressed appreciation for content that went beyond the walls of campus and indicated that they would be interested in seeing more

varied content, such as information about politics, sports, or student perspectives on the issues of the day.

The findings of this research suggest that faculty and administrative involvement are essential in establishing interdisciplinary experiential learning opportunities for student news media, particularly at small institutions with student newspaper labs.

For example, ensuring that classes meet at the same time and have a physical location for such meetings cannot be addressed by student staffers. Additionally, planning assignments that will benefit students of both classes, while not infringing on the free speech and free press rights of the student publication, is critical. Publicly, the insert met both praise and criticism.

Following the initial issue of *El Eco*, the authors sought informal feedback from Latinx student organizations on campus. A staff member from the university reached out to say, *“I love it! I am staff here at CLU and would love to help in any way.”* Further, in the spring 2019, a representative of an organization that was written about contacted *The Echo* and wrote, *“We just received copies of the excellent article written by [student] on our organization that appeared in your April 9 issue. Please pass along our sincere thanks for this well written article!”*

However, there was some pushback from other community members who did not fully grasp the intent of the publication. Following the second issue, an adjunct faculty member reached out to say that she felt left out because she could not read *El Eco*. And, after the spring 2019 issue, a concerned faculty member from a different department described the Spanish-language insert as discriminatory. He indicated that having content in Spanish excluded the majority of campus community members. Further, he was operating under the misconception that the Spanish-language content was occurring more frequently, or, in essence, “taking over” the student newspaper. Thus, it should be recognized that the launch of a foreign-language student publication may face detractors; students, faculty, and administrators should be prepared to respond to criticism.

Though there was a limited amount of negative feedback, areas for improvement for the collaboration as a whole were also noted. For example, the discrepancy in satisfaction ratings between the journalism mentors and the Spanish mentees indicates that there is room to further impress upon the journalism students their role in the process and to make them conscientious of their own opportunity for learning.

Ultimately, the Spanish-language insert received predominantly positive accolades, such that Cal Lutheran is using this interdisciplinary partnership between classes as the foundation for developing a new program. The authors are in the development stage of a new interdisciplinary Spanish Media Minor to be shared between the Department of Languages and Cultures, and the Communication Department. As a recently identified Hispanic-Serving Institution, the respective departments see this collaboration and new program as a way to truly embrace the idea of being Hispanic-serving rather than simply Hispanic-enrolling.

Situated near Los Angeles, Cal Lutheran is an ideal location for this type of programming. A Spanish Media Minor would be a tremendous opportunity to introduce greater experiential

learning experiences into Spanish language, literature, and culture classes and to help prepare students in both Spanish and Communication for an increasingly global market.

While the existing partnership between the student newspaper class and the Spanish conversation and composition class would continue, new classes that teach students about Spanish media markets and audiences would prepare students to work in Spanish-language media from a more humanities-based paradigm. The minor's connection to journalism and lived experiences exemplifies how the Stanford Humanities Center defines its field: "The humanities can be described as the study of how people process and document the human experience." This minor would provide students with the skills they need to faithfully document a wider range of human experiences that can only be accessed by skills attained from the humanities—specifically Spanish language and humanistic inquiry.

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