Literature in the Undergraduate Spanish Curriculum:
Visionary Brainstorming

Gwendolyn Barnes-Karol
St. Olaf College

RESPONSE

Innovando (desde) la literatura

Victoria L. Garrett
College of Charleston

Edward Chauca
College of Charleston

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Gwendolyn Barnes-Karol
St. Olaf College

Abstract: This essay, drawing from Design Thinking, challenges college faculty to reconsider the reading and teaching of literature in the undergraduate Spanish curriculum and initiates a visionary brainstorming process to be continued by readers in their own institutions. It suggests considering new research in cognitive literary studies, the impact of digital communications, and students' personal reading experiences and future goals as individuals and departments imagine new places for literature in and across the curriculum and innovative ways to teach it.

Keywords: cognitive literary studies/estudios literarios cognitivos, Design Thinking, literature/literatura, reading/lectura, undergraduate Spanish curriculum/currículo subgrado en español

Randoph Pope's (2008) characterization of reading literature in United States college and university programs has haunted me since I first read it:

Literature . . . has been too frequently hijacked by the disciplines of Apollo, the healer and patron defender of herds and flocks, though it is more at home under the aegis of Dionysus, the god of intoxication, madness, ecstasy, and liberation. We have transformed reading into a chore, novels into pretexts for papers, poems into subjects for an exam. A fundamental question we need to ask of our programs is whether the graduate students love literature more than before, enjoy art more, are more daring in exploring culture, are more creative, and are deeper thinkers . . . . (25; emphasis mine)

In this provocative statement, Pope criticized the profession for “[the] ponderous and even moralistic tone . . . usually attached to discussions about the [undergraduate] major and graduate studies” (25) and for taking the joy out of reading literature. His intent was to challenge readers to reflect upon the 2007 Modern Language Association (MLA) Report and the impact of its charge that we prepare undergraduate foreign language majors to be “educated speakers who have deep translilingual and transcultural competence” (235).

To what extent do the sentiments expressed by Pope still ring true for undergraduate as well as graduate students in college and university programs? Have we learned anything new about the relationship between reading literature, creativity, pleasure, and empathy in the past decade? Have we thought seriously about the implications of teaching literature to the “digital natives” (Prensky 2001) in our classrooms?

The purpose of this essay is to take the above questions as a point of departure to explore reading literature from new angles and to begin a process of visionary brainstorming on paper about literature in the twenty-first-century undergraduate curriculum that I hope readers will continue in conversations with colleagues and in their departments.
To do this I use a framework that incorporates key elements of “Design Thinking,” a “human-centered” (Brown and Katz 2009: 4) approach of fostering innovation in a creative, collaborative, and systematic way to find solutions for hard-to-solve problems by “[combining] empathy for people and their context with tools to discover insights” (Curedale 2013: 9). The approach made famous by the global design consulting firm IDEO and taught at the non-degree granting Hasso Plattner Institute for Design at Stanford University, commonly referred to as “the d.school” (Kelley and Kelley 2013: 21). Design Thinking is used by businesses, non-profit organizations, professionals, and in educational institutions to help people “envision what their new or existing operations might look like in the future—and build road maps for getting there” (Kelley and Kelley 2013: 25). Design Thinking unfolds through a recursive cycle of inspiration (observing and gathering information from sources to develop empathy for the people whom change will affect and approach problems from new perspectives), ideation (creative brainstorming that asks problem-solvers to initially ignore constraints regarding feasibility that can squelch exciting possibilities prematurely), and action (implementation, based on experimentation with “prototypes” and bringing feedback back into the design process) (Brown and Katz 2009: 4, 16–21; Curedale 2013: 9; Kelley and Kelley 2013: 22–25). One element of the process is imagining: “What if . . . ?”

Lest Design Thinking sound too “corporate” for readers, its focus on creativity, collaboration, and active participation among interested parties dovetails perfectly with many goals of teaching languages. Furthermore, concepts like “creativity” and “innovation” are beginning to appear on college campuses alongside “internationalization” and “sustainability” as over-arching principles that can influence institution-wide priorities. Finally, using the methodology of Design Thinking to improve the experiences of our students reading literature in Spanish may resonate with students interested in forging closer links between the classroom and the ways people operate in the world of work.

So, let’s begin a process of Design Thinking on paper to generate possible alternatives to the scenario described by Pope.

Inspiration

Instead of turning first to the vast wealth of professional literature about teaching literature in a foreign language curriculum, what if we started by getting insights into our students as readers of literature in Spanish through scholarship from the emerging field called cognitive literary studies? Natalie M. Phillips (2015), a professor of English who conducts interdisciplinary research in this area, explains, “Neuroscientific tools can provide humanists with a richer picture of how our minds engage with art” (57). Would this help us develop “empathy” (in Design Thinking, “respectful understanding of what others are experiencing and their point of view,” [Curedale 2013: 20]) for our students from a new angle?

Maryanne Wolf (2007), a cognitive scientist, reminds us, “Reading never just happens” (107). Both she and Paul B. Armstrong (2013), a professor of English well-versed in neuroscience, explain that reading is a result of processes in the brain not originally wired for this activity and that “every new human being must learn to read by adapting genetically inherited circuitry to uses for which it did not originally evolve” (Armstrong 2013: 27). This fact, according to Armstrong (2013), provides insights into challenges faced by beginning readers as well as of those reading in a foreign language (27–40). Furthermore, the brain’s “contradictory, decentered structure” (Armstrong 2013: 52) and its elasticity and plasticity make reading possible, enhancing the brain’s “capacity for cognitive breakthroughs” (Wolf 2007: 17), its ability to “reconfigure itself in light of new challenges,” and even to “play and seek out novelty” (Armstrong 2013: 52, 53). Neuroscientists Irving Biederman and Edward A. Vessel (2006) call human beings “infovores”
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(247) and posit that the human brain craves pleasure from “experiences that are both novel . . . and richly interpretable” (250), primarily through the senses.

Recent experiments elucidate two key aspects of what happens when people read literature that may be particularly relevant to foreign language teachers. In an interdisciplinary study of literary attention, functional MRIs tracked blood flow in the brains of PhD candidates in English reading excerpts from Jane Austen novels (Phillips 2015). Cued by the researchers, participants shifted between close reading (attention on form and literary features) and pleasure reading (immersion into the story). Preliminary results show unexpected changes in brain activity when shifting between types of reading that illuminate the “cognitive complexity of this core skill in the liberal arts” (58). Moreover, they reveal unanticipated overlap between close and pleasure reading, as Phillips (2015) explains: “Not only does reading move through a spectrum of intensities, but pleasure reading has its own cognitive demands; close reading, its own pleasure” (63). Two studies that compared the impact of reading fiction versus non-fiction (newspaper) stories on Dutch students (Bal and Veltkamp 2013) illuminate another area of interest to us: the extent to which the act of reading fiction can enhance people’s empathy in the real world. They suggest that reading fictional narratives does not automatically produce empathy, and their study demonstrates it can enhance empathy when readers are “emotionally transported” into the narrative (10–11).

Familiarizing ourselves with developments in this emerging field may be a first step toward attending more effectively to the needs of the “always on” (Baron 2008) “digital natives” (Prensky 2001) in our classrooms who have grown up with hyperlinked electronic texts that present vast quantities of visual stimulation in non-linear fashion (Wolf 2007: 16); “vapor texts” (constantly updated texts or ones that disappear from the web) (Baron 2008: 206); and “snippet literacy” (a penchant for reading excerpts or synopses of literary works online instead of the complete works) (Baron 2008: 204).

Wolf (2007) recommends teaching twenty-first-century readers to be “bitextual” or “multi-textual” (226) and to adjust their reading and analysis of texts to different modes of reading. In a more programmatic fashion, N. Katherine Hayles (2012), suggests a “Comparative Media Studies” approach (11–12, 55–79) “across a range of media forms . . . and focuses on interpretation and analysis of patterns, meaning, and context through close, hyper [e.g., practices like skimming and scanning (12)], and machine reading practices’” because “it is time to rethink what reading is and how it works in the rich mixtures of words and images, sounds and animations, graphics and letters that constitute the environments of twenty-first century literacies” (78–79).

Yet reading such scholarship can only take us so far in the “human-centered” approach that is Design Thinking. What if we actually asked students about their experiences so that we could see things through their eyes with greater acuity? My eyes have been opened immensely by students’ responses to the first assignment in an introduction to literature course: without using outside sources, writing a reflection in Spanish on what they believe “literature” is; why people should read literature (if they should); what makes a good reader; and the book—in any language—that has had the greatest impact on them.

Excerpts from the narratives of two students’ in their unedited Spanish illustrate the range of students’ experiences in a single class. Some share a reading autobiography, as did a student who wrote in almost magical way about the impact of having her mother read Margaret Wise Brown's 1947 children's classic Goodnight Moon aloud to her every night:

Escuchaba yo a las palabras de mi madre, pensaba en lo que había oído y soñada con el día cuando pueda yo pertenecer al mundo de lectores como mi mamá. Goodnight Moon abrió mis ojos a la belleza de la literatura y dio a mi un anhelo para explorar este mundo de palabras y papeles, historias y héroes. Aprendí cómo leer cuando yo tenía tres o cuatro años y he leído cada palabra, etiqueta, libro y periódico desde entonces.
Another told a story of dreading literature until a transformative experience in a general education program:

Antes . . . la palabra “literatura” describía un libro académico y tenía connotaciones negativas. Sin embargo, después de mi viaje a través de [a great books program], tengo un respecto profundo para la “literatura”. Ahora, yo asocio la palabra con perspectivas nuevas y crecimiento personal.

The revealing stories that students share inspire me to find out what colleagues across campus are doing, envision how I might devise new types of class activities and assignments that will capture students’ imaginations and/or talents to complement more conventional discussions and papers, and think of creative ways to encourage more students to want to “belong to the world of readers” in Spanish.

**Ideation**

Ideation, the second phase of Design Thinking, involves brainstorming alternatives to current practice based on the insights gathered in the inspiration phase. So let’s continue with the “what if” questions. (Where appropriate, suggestions for further consideration appear after the questions.)

- What if we included literature in all courses in an undergraduate Spanish curriculum, including major-level courses in composition and conversation, culture, linguistics, and Spanish for Specific Purposes (SSP)? Would this start to demystify literature and make reading a “normal” activity? With this in mind, Barnes-Karol (2002; 2010) proposes a “literature across the curriculum” model. In this approach, literature is understood in the broadest sense to allow for maximum flexibility in choosing from any genre and from among canonical texts, contemporary works by noted authors, mass-market best sellers, and even young adult literature.

- What if we devoted as much attention to engaging students in reading literature as to the works themselves? What results might a less text-centered and more people-centered approach produce? Kimberly A. Nance’s *Teaching Literature in the Languages* (2010) addresses this issue head-on: how to overcome students’ “estrangement” (xi) from literature and promote engagement. Sylvie Debevec Henning (2011) exhorts faculty to promote studying literature through activities that engage students in multiple ways, taking lessons from less commonly taught languages that must innovate to survive (29).

- What if we started having students read works of literature in ways that are not exclusively “literary”? Jennifer Redmann (2005) encourages faculty to design courses to “focus on multiple student interactions with a text, rather than on the text as a fixed object of study” (486) and describes an approach based on interactive reading journals appropriate for all levels of instruction. Catherine M. Barrette, Kate Paesani, and Kimberly Vinall (2010) illustrate how to maximize the use of literary works as “target language narratives that provide access to a rich sample of . . . discourse styles, and historical, geographic, cultural, and linguistic information” (217) by weaving together analysis of their cultural, literary, and stylistic dimensions (216). David A. Wacks (2011), based on conversations with students, reconceptualized a survey of Peninsular literature to teach canonical texts within a “question-driven syllabus” that highlights “big question[s] . . . [pertinent to] the broader social, religious, or political significance of the text[s]” (2).
What if Spanish for Specific Purposes (SSP) courses, frequently perceived by students as a respite from literature courses because they feature “relevant” content (e.g., terminology and practices), became a particularly promising space for reading literature to help develop empathy for the people and situations future professionals may encounter after graduation? In the area of business, for example, Ana M. Brenes-García (2000), viewing “literature as the most explicit expression of a culture and its values” (426), developed an advanced Spanish business course with literature at the core. The works of literature analyzed in critical essays in Carlos M. Coria-Sánchez and Germán Torres (2007), *Temas del comercio y la economía en la narrativa hispana*, may be appropriate choices for some business Spanish courses. Some students may find particularly intriguing novels, such as *Los olivos de Belchite* (2011), written by an actual business professional, Elena Moya, a trilingual senior investment writer and former financial journalist. The novel blends together the legacy of the Spanish Civil War with a tale of family-run Catalan businesses fighting to survive boycotts of their products by Castilians and competition from multinationals in a twenty-first-century global market. In another, more holistic approach to Spanish for Specific Purposes, faculty in Spanish and German at the Air Force Academy have created literature courses that examine texts through the lens of leadership and leaders so that cadets “[study] literature using traditional approaches as well as [cultivate] the value-added element of leadership development simultaneously” (Uribe, LeLoup, Long, and Doyle 2014: 199). What if in all courses in which students read literature we replaced at least one conventional activity or assignment with another that tapped into students’ creativity in a new way? Or, what if we let students choose from among a variety of assignments? What if, using Design Thinking, we let students design their own projects? What if the activity or project were something to be shared with all class members and/or all Spanish-speakers on campus instead of just being something for private consumption (grading) by the teacher? What if we asked students to respond to literary works in the “real-world” ways of adults outside the academy, addressing audiences other than their classmates and instructor? Could they write a review suitable for publication and actually submit it to a print or online venue; create a guide that a book club could use to discuss an appropriate work; function as dramaturgs and write program notes for a staging of a play; or adapt a work as an illustrated children’s version, graphic novel, or some type of interactive web-based narrative? Could some projects later become part of students’ portfolios for interviews for internships or jobs? Perhaps asking students to create work with a specific audience in mind would provide them with a secondary outlet for developing empathy alongside the one that lies potentially in the act of reading a work of literature itself.

**Action**

In the cycle of Design Thinking, action grows out of insights gained during the inspiration phase and possibilities generated during the brainstorming of ideation. Again it involves prototyping the most promising alternatives to get feedback (for us, trying a curricular innovation as a pilot project or conducting a small classroom-based research project) before prematurely investing large amounts of time and energy in large endeavors that may not work (e.g., revamping an entire course or Spanish curriculum). It is my hope that faculty in undergraduate Spanish programs can continue the brainstorming process started in this essay and experiment with a wider variety of approaches to selecting literary texts, placing them throughout the curriculum, and reading them with students for purposes that include, but are not limited to, conventional literary analysis and history to create a vision for literature in the twenty-first-century
undergraduate Spanish curriculum appropriate for their students and institutions. Let's try to make reading, while still a challenge, less of a “chore” by designing classroom activities that “unleash [students’] creative [and empathetic as well as analytical] potential” (Kelley and Kelley 2013) and (re)discover the pleasure of reading—not pleasure as the fun of entertainment, but that which comes from mastering a challenging task and that leads to a “‘click’ of comprehension” (Biederman and Vessel 2006: 252)—so that our students do (paraphrasing Pope) “love literature more, . . . [become] more daring in exploring culture, . . . [and] more creative . . . and deeper thinkers.”

NOTES

1 For more information about the d.school at Stanford University, see d.school (2015). Of particular interest are the section “Our Point of View” and the fact sheet available in PDF format on their website.
2 See Zunshine (2015) for an extensive overview of this emerging field.
3 These reflections are among data collected for an on-going classroom-based research project, “The Impact of Post-communicative Strategies on Spanish-Language Learners.”
4 Her curriculum vitae is available at www.elenamoya.com.

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WORKS CITED


Respuesta a “Literature in the Undergraduate Spanish Curriculum: Visionary Brainstorming”

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Victoria L. Garrett  
College of Charleston

Edward Chauca  
College of Charleston

Palabras clave: crisis in the humanities/crisis de las humanidades, undergraduate Spanish curriculum/curriculum subgraduado de español, innovation/innovación, literature/literatura, neoliberalism/neoliberalismo

El artículo de Gwendolyn Barnes-Karol se enmarca dentro de discusiones sobre cómo mostrar a los estudiantes la relevancia de la literatura en su vida diaria, o la llamada “vida real”, y de hacerles partícipes de dicha experiencia.

En respuesta a los desafíos de la enseñanza de lenguas en el mundo post 11 de septiembre del 2001, el Modern Language Association (MLA) publica un reporte sobre cómo reestructurar los programas de lengua para responder a las desafíos culturales del mundo globalizado. Sin cuestionar la relevancia de los idiomas, plantea que el enfoque en la literatura debe reducirse para abrir espacio a modelos multidisciplinarios que abarquen la sociedad en su complejidad. En respuesta a dicho reporte, el distinguido hispanista Randolph Pope publica una atractiva nota con inspiraciones cinematográficas para buscar mejores y más placenteros métodos de acercarse a la literatura en las aulas.

El artículo previo parece lamentar que dentro de los programas de idiomas, la literatura está en crisis, ya que no se ha prestado la suficiente atención a la propuesta de Pope para salvarla del aburrimiento. Para reafirmar su relevancia, bosqueja excelentes ideas y prácticas innovadoras de enseñanza. Llega a ellas, sin embargo, aplicando un marco conceptual tecnócrata que promete expandir nuestras posibilidades de solucionar el presunto problema.

¿Se necesita la jerga de Silicon Valley para enfrentar los desafíos de nuestra disciplina? Inspirados por los legados intelectuales de entre otros José Martí y Roberto Schwarz, consideramos importante buscar estrategias innovadoras que partan desde nuestro propio campo. ¿Qué son, en última instancia, las famosas metáforas de “Nuestra América” sino llamados a la innovación que nace de lo propio y no de lo ajeno?

En su libro Literature and the Creative Economy, Sarah Brouillette (2014) traza paralelos entre los modelos de trabajadores creativos, innovadores y empáticos del mercado neoliberal y los modelos del campo de la creación literaria y artística. Expone la falacia del sujeto creativo innovador: enfocarnos solo en la capacidad innovadora de este agente cultural nos oculta la materialidad y el trabajo precario que sostiene el pensamiento y la práctica creativa.

Urge pensar las condiciones de la innovación, es decir, reevaluar la estructura social, financiera y académica que insiste en una crisis de las humanidades para luego promover su tecnocratización. El “Design Thinking” genera precisamente un sujeto que se distancia de sus condiciones sociales para luego reimaginarse dentro de lo social desde una posición privilegiada. Aun si aceptáramos el discurso sobre la llamada crisis en la enseñanza de la literatura...
y buscáramos que el profesorado se ajustara a las demandas de la universidad neoliberal del siglo XXI, cabría resaltar los muchos esfuerzos que se han hecho para afirmar la relevancia de los programas de idiomas, entre otros la creación de Español para profesionales y la renovación de los programas de estudios latinoamericanos y caribeños. Para el caso particular de la enseñanza de la literatura, la sección “Ideation” incluye una lista de “what ifs” que son hoy en día prácticas comunes entre varios colegas que nunca han dejado de innovar y experimentar en sus aulas con el objetivo de acercar a sus alumnos a la compleja experiencia que es la literatura.

Como ha dicho Cristina Rivera Garza (2015), “la escritura, por ser escritura, invita a considerar la posibilidad de que el mundo puede ser, de hecho, distinto” (173). Junto con ella consideramos que la literatura de por sí es un acto revolucionario de imaginación. Ahora vivimos en tiempos en los que la capacidad disruptiva y renovadora propia de la literatura retorna re-empaquetada en nueva jerga tecnocrática. ¿Pero cuándo la innovación dejó las humanidades para que tengamos que readquirirla? A nuestro parecer, cualquier esfuerzo por mejorar la enseñanza de la literatura debe partir de un intento de revelar estas cualidades de la literatura: su capacidad de agitar, provocar, transformar, y hasta revolucionar nuestra forma de ver y actuar en el mundo.

Si continuamos enmarcando la enseñanza de la literatura en términos tecnocráticos, menospreciando nuestros avances y actuando como si la enseñanza innovadora fuera la excepción y no la regla en nuestras aulas, corremos el riesgo de perpetuar el falaz discurso de la irrelevancia y arcaísmo de las humanidades.

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