

**Apologia No More:
On Strong Foundations and the Future of Hispanism**

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RESPONSE

Engaged Humanities and the Future of Spanish Programs

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Apologia No More: On Strong Foundations and the Future of Hispanism



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Abstract: By 2060, the United States population will be nearly 30% Hispanic, making Hispanism vital to students' engagement with the full breadth of their own societal fabric (Colby and Ortman 2015: 9). To replace current "reductionist" valuations of foreign language (FL) study as the depositor of career-enhancing skills, we argue for a four-year curricular vision focusing on the development of translingual and transcultural competence, and for a clearer articulation of the value of our work as teachers and scholars of Spanish. We project a future that replaces reductionist symptoms of a broader crisis in higher education with a model that makes our work central to solving that crisis.

Keywords: curricular reform/reforma curricular, foreign language study/estudios de lengua extranjera, Hispanism/hispanismo, humanities/humanidades, reductionist models/modelos reduccionistas

1. Introduction

In the decade of 2060, as *Hispania* celebrates its sesquicentennial anniversary, the United States will be a fundamentally different nation in ethnic and sociolinguistic terms. People of Hispanic origin will approach a third of our population and the entire population of Mexico, currently the most populous country in the Spanish-speaking world (Colby and Ortman 2015: 9). Regardless of how many members of the Hispanic American community are bilingual (if not English-dominant), more than 100 million people will identify with Spanish as a fundamental aspect of their cultural identities. By this time, the fields and professions originally served by *Hispania* will be quite different, but Hispanists in secondary and postsecondary education will continue to look to the journal for leadership and inspiration in research, pedagogy, and curricular design. But a look at emerging practices in foreign language curricula and a review of recent research in FL Education suggests to us that *Hispania* and its readership can do much more than strategize its own survival, or keep up with the times. We may reach more students than any other foreign language because of the unique situation of Spanish in the United States, but this fact makes the stakes for our work that much higher, and its potential impact on our society that much greater. This essay advocates situating Hispanic Studies in the driver's seat as our nation's higher educational infrastructure adjusts to the demographic changes on the horizon, through an exploration of what such leadership might look like if approached "from the bottom up," via a four-year curricular vision that promises to maximize our potential impact on the students we teach at all levels.

2. Cultural and Political Landscape

While we can be fairly confident of the increased ubiquity of Spanish in the United States, we cannot assume that it will occur without considerable resistance and pushback. The possibility of non-Hispanic American cultural resistance to the growth of Hispanic communities seems especially real when one considers our current “culture wars” surrounding immigration, criminal justice, voting rights, and education. Without entering into the fray of these battles, it is safe to say that problematic arguments abound on all sides due to a tendency to “other” the Hispanic in a direction that does not bode well for the peaceful integration of cultures in the future, as Iris Marion Young (2000) has argued. Whether this alterity is a tool for appealing to the Hispanophobia experienced by some non-Hispanic voters or a strategy for engaging and winning a simplistic and mythical “Hispanic vote,” it constitutes a real problem for those who would promote an inclusive and mutually enriching cultural evolution in which Spanish settles into its role as a second national language. Whether as a cause to champion or as a social threat that should be removed from society (calls for federal crackdowns, border fences, self-deportation, etc.), “othering” the Hispanic depends on the “othered” also being the unknown, in other words when an absence of personal engagement with Hispanic communities leaves one dependent on those doing the othering to provide the narrative through which Hispanic peoples are understood. This “unknownness” of the Spanish language and the people who identify with it is an issue that threatens the stability of our cultural transition toward a one-third Hispanic, minority-majority nation. This is a job for Hispanism.

Regardless of political or ideological affiliations, all Hispanists dedicate their professional careers to teaching and studying the language and cultures of the Spanish-speaking world—which makes them a key resource for institutions of higher education as they rethink what constitutes a college education according to the changing publics they serve. It is on these shifting grounds that we see the importance of a comprehensive four-year Spanish curriculum, as the study of Hispanic languages, cultures, and literatures will become a vital part of educating a citizenry to be more fully engaged with the full breadth of its own societal fabric. But in order to assume this vital role, Hispanism will have to address a number of now-fossilized systemic breaches, themselves due to broader cultural circumstances, that impact how we organize and perceive our work.

3. Narrative Surrender among Humanists

Changing conditions in academia make our assumption of the role described above challenging, but all the more important. Higher education’s place in society is under increased scrutiny and revision, the effects of which include years of declining enrollment suffered by our (mostly humanistic) degree programs. While state support for public institutions declines, the cost of attendance soars at an unsustainable pace, even at private institutions affected by the broader cultural questioning of the return offered by such an investment. Students and their families understandably question the value of a college education as they are asked to pay more each year, and the answer offered by the Academy has become progressively more disturbing. Indeed if there is a crisis in the Humanities, it stems from our failure to control the discourse through which our value is articulated. In place of a clear explanation of how humanistic learning leads to a healthier society, university public relations campaigns cite statistics on the salaries of their graduates as evidence of the “marketability” of their degree programs. While there is merit in highlighting the “transferable skills,” attractive careers and higher salaries that students will acquire and enjoy through our programs, such metrics set us on a slippery slope of defining public and civic utility through discourses of business and economics that are alien to their traditional identities. When our humanistic disciplines surrender the narrative of the

important work they do, they also surrender their agency to promote that work. Nowhere is this slippery slope more evident than in the fields of foreign languages, literatures and cultures, as Ingeborg Walther (2007) has argued persuasively.

The “narrative surrender” described above has led to what is often called a “reductionist” view of our work that renders foreign language less a main course of study and more a side-dish best used to enhance the flavor of the more “serious” programs of study that promise clearer career paths (Warner 2011, among many others). Degree programs in Business, Engineering, and Pre-Medicine, for example, rightly see foreign language study as a means to boost the skillset and marketability of their graduates, as it enables them to serve and do business with a wider array of populations and markets. This attitude is only problematic when it is not countered by our own effective articulation of what our students stand to gain from engaging in our fields of study beyond the augmentation of these other career paths. In the absence of such an articulation, the purpose and value of foreign language study is reduced to that of a vocational skill that other academic units can outsource to our departments. It is understandable that we take on this additional work to address our own budgetary problems due to declining enrollment and funding, but without articulating the value of our field in its own right, we run the risk of being seen only as providing a service that can be reduced in essence to translation. And so the slope becomes progressively more slippery to the point where administrators have begun considering alternative and more cost-effective means of achieving this service, including the closure of language programs deemed “less essential,” reduction of tenure-track appointments in favor of adjunct faculty, and even the adoption of software programs like Rosetta Stone (Lord 2016). In the absence of our articulation of why our work is so much more than providing translation skills, such measures are entirely logical, if lamentable.

4. Breaches to Be Healed

Before they can counter this reductionist thinking, Hispanists will first need to synchronize their own work so as to speak from a more unified perspective. The surrendering of our disciplinary narrative is most likely the result of this lack of synchrony, as members of the same academic unit have accepted a kind of post-structural resistance to “master narratives.” If the professionals working within the same program are unable to reach a consensus about who they are and what they do, a coherent narrative will continue to elude them, creating a void to be filled by discourses of professional schools and their administrators, or of advertising campaigns for the latest digital program that would cut us out of the equation altogether. Thus healing disciplinary breaches several generations in the making is vital. They are cast here in broad terms so as to apply to as many programs as possible, but we acknowledge that their description is inevitably reflective of our own subject positions as tenured faculty in a large, PhD-granting program at a major public research university—the kind of program that produces a majority of the professoriate at a wider array of institutional settings.

The first such breach, the traditional distinction between research, teaching, and service used to organize our professional responsibilities, has led to their being so disconnected as to compete for our time, with the outcome determining our professional success. The message that “research is what counts” sent by many university administrations through the mechanisms of merit pay, promotion to tenure, and other forms of support, leads many ambitious researchers to see their teaching responsibilities as a separate job best done efficiently so as to minimize its effect on their ability to publish. The teaching/research breach widens when we see colleagues denied tenure or promotion because their passion for teaching comes at the expense of their research productivity, or when publications about teaching are classified as secondary or “minor.” Along similar lines, work categorized as “service” is often of disproportionately insignificant importance to evaluations of our professional performance, despite the fact that

such work is indispensable to a coherent and productive curriculum that synchronizes our colleagues' pedagogical efforts with our own. As long as "service work," like program assessment or curricular design, is framed as marginal "grunt work" in competition with our teaching and research, Hispanism will not be able to organize itself so as to assume the important role in higher education that we envision for it.

Another breach in need of healing is the curricular divide between beginning and more advanced levels of study at the undergraduate level (Byrnes 2006; Modern Language Association 2007; among others). This divide, traditionally conceived as between "language" (grammar, writing, conversation) and "content" courses (literature, culture, linguistics, etc.), organizes our students into two distinct populations (degree and non-degree seekers) and sends the message that we see serving one as more serious and meaningful, even though serving the latter population offers greater (and mostly unrealized) potential to have a critical impact on far more students. Furthermore, this message reinforces traditional teaching hierarchies among faculty and staff that put tenure-track "content teachers" in control of adjunct and graduate student "language teachers." According to such a narrative, it is the job of the language teacher to help students achieve a degree of language proficiency deemed sufficient for the "content teachers" to take over, regardless of what decades of second language acquisition (SLA) research reveals about the time demands and optimal conditions for FL students to progress through complex developmental stages and orders of acquisition (VanPatten 2003). Such a divide leaves each side unaware of what is being done by the other, and consequently unaware of how their approaches might actually converge—an "intersection of the interdisciplinary fields of second language acquisition and contemporary cultural studies" (Walther 2007: 9)—in order to more effectively meet our students' developmental needs. It should be noted that this beginning/advanced divide plays into the reductionist "translation services" narrative through which our work is so often perceived by others. Still further breaches endemic to Hispanism—between Spain and Latin America or Literature and Linguistics, for example—exacerbate this problem further, insofar as they promote further hierarchies and inhibit the kind of synchrony for which we are calling. Certainly such divides make little sense to our students (undergraduate and graduate) as they embark on Hispanic studies, though understandably most come to reflect and even reinforce them as disciplinary realities.

5. A Broadstroke Vision of the Future

With a commitment to healing these breaches at the departmental level, a vision of how we can work together as Hispanists to reinvent and clearly articulate the value of Humanistic studies can emerge. John Beverly (2014), for example, calls for a rallying of humanist troops around the cause of elucidating the question of inequality in all its historical and contemporary manifestations. Articulating such "big picture questions" that define our curricula is prerequisite to asking our students to answer them, if through discovering the answers they are to prepare themselves to embrace rather than fear our evolving societal realities. What outcomes would we ideally hope to see achieved? Research should inform what we aspire for our students in terms of their linguistic abilities, cultural knowledge, and critical dispositions, all pointing to their productive and healthy engagement with the discourses of Spanish-speaking communities, even if institutional contexts lead to differing areas of focus. By starting with these desired results at the curricular ("macro") level, we can then work backward to establish what types of student work and performances will allow them to demonstrate achievement of these goals, and in turn design instructional interventions and opportunities for learning and practice at the individual course ("micro") level to foster their progress. Here we briefly describe what we believe necessary to realize such a vision, again framed by our own institutional context, which shares common ground with the programs most responsible for preparing the future professoriate.

- 1) A clearly articulated four-year curriculum that encourages content learning and textual thinking from the beginning (Arens and Swaffer 2005; Dupuy, Paesani, and Willis-Allen 2015), and systematic focus on promoting communicative abilities, metalinguistic awareness, and the development of symbolic competence (Kramsch 2006) and textual analysis from beginning to end (Frantzen 2002).
- 2) A clear and consistent description of the value of contextualized second language learning (as the study of language use itself reveals cultural understandings and promotes affinities that the study of cultural texts in English translation could not) in conjunction with a reconsideration of proficiency expectations in foundational courses (Schulz 2006).
- 3) Curricula that are driven by SLA research: language learning requires time and sustained exposure to input and opportunities for interaction that can be enhanced by instruction (Ellis 2005). Spanish majors in a senior seminar, like all of us who are not native speakers, are still language learners that benefit from focused instruction and practice in addition to any feedback on essays.
- 4) A focus on students' construction and analysis of new identities through which they learn to operate between languages and cultures and recognize their own cultural perspectives (Modern Language Association 2007).
- 5) Promotion of a broad understanding of historical and current events shaping our social realities, including the role of the United States in the Hispanic world and its perception by that world beginning in foundational levels (Rossomondo 2012), thus maximizing the number of students who learn what it means to "other" through textual representation, and are aware of the implicit dangers of such representations.
- 6) Valuation of the role of formative assessment and evidence-based approaches to curricular design as integral to effective foreign language teaching, along with efforts to connect scholarly research with teaching (which implies the need to articulate research interests and findings in ways that are meaningful to students, colleagues in other areas of study, and society at large).

This wish list is left deliberately (and necessarily) vague so as to be applicable to the wide array of institutional contexts in which Hispanists work, but its basic principles (broad departmental buy-in for and collaboration on an articulated approach to a four-year curriculum) are already being practiced in other language programs—particularly in German and French, no doubt due to a more immediate need to address declining enrollments. (The most complete and accessible model in our view is the documented process by which the Georgetown German department synchronized their four-year curriculum [*Developing Multiple Literacies*].) Spanish's unique position in the United States has made such soul-searching less urgent for Hispanists, but we argue that with this privilege comes the responsibility of learning from our non-Spanish colleagues' impressive contributions to FL study in the United States in order to impact a much broader public than their programs are likely to reach.

6. Conclusion

If you are reading this article, there is a good chance that you will be directly involved in determining how Hispanism will evolve during the next fifty years. The time is right for the field of Hispanic Studies to assume a leadership role in a system of higher education whose mission will be to serve and engage an increasingly diverse society, lest our profession be cast in our current climate of budget cuts justified by market-driven valuations of the "worth" of our educational system. Regardless of to what extent the curricular vision described above resonates with the diverse array of *Hispania* readers and the institutional circumstances in which they work,

we urge all Hispanists to rethink their institutional mission so as to embrace a near future in which access to the language and cultures that they study and teach will be vital to our society's peaceful and inclusive evolution.

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Response to “Apologia No More: On Strong Foundations and the Future of Hispanism”



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Keywords: curricular reform/reforma curricular, engaged humanities/humanidades comprometidas, foreign language study/estudio de lengua extranjera, Hispanism/hispanismo, reductionist models/modelos reduccionistas, Service-Learning/aprendizaje del servicio, Spanish for the Professions/español para profesiones

More than just finally articulating the value of what we do in Spanish programs, we must actually change a significant portion of what we do—and how we do it—in order to offer the kind of value the authors wisely propose. To provide solutions to “the possibility of non-Hispanic American cultural resistance to the growth of Hispanic communities” (Bayliss and Rossomondo 2017) we need to focus much of our curricula on US Latinos, commit to social justice education and engage with our local Latino communities. Few departments do this, though, because few departments have truly seen this as their mission. To prepare students to be civically-engaged, savvy cultural critics who are equipped to combat highly-charged, racialized discourses will require integrating into our curriculum topics such as human migrations (historical and global), economics, policy studies, communication, media studies and more. Yet the vast majority of departments continue to mostly teach students how to analyze cultural products (literary studies, predominantly) and language (linguistics). To bridge what Spanish programs actually do and what the authors claim we are preparing students to do requires a more radical—and uncomfortable—shift than just finding the right words.

This curricular shift must occur swiftly. A decade has already passed since the MLA’s special report on foreign languages (cited by the authors) as well as Carlos Alonso’s declaration in *Profession* that Spanish is now “a second national language and culture in this country” (220). Yet most Spanish departments in the United States still operate as foreign language programs, perennially privileging Spain and reproducing value systems and power structures the authors suggest we can dismantle in the United States. They astutely propose that Spanish departments embrace the local and transnational nature of Spanish, but our current approach of scattered heritage speaker sections and service learning courses is insufficient. Departments that adopt the engaged humanities model and a mission to see and seek connections among traditional scholarly projects of inquiry and the issues surrounding them imbue their programs with an urgency and relevance that our profession as a whole currently lacks but that students and other stakeholders seek.

The demographic trends listed by the authors will consolidate by 2067, but we can change today. Take the concrete example of campuses located in new-growth communities—places where immigrants have not traditionally settled and which lack infrastructure to build linguistic and transcultural competencies. Cultural studies scholars and students can work with the community to analyze depictions of these new encounters and suggest more accurate, helpful representations of the challenges and opportunities within their changing communities. Second language acquisition experts and schools can partner to create positive responses to

multilingualism, inside and outside the K–12 classrooms. Literary scholars and libraries can collaborate to build collections, attract Latino patrons and design relevant programming. Language program directors can integrate service learning across the curriculum to provide targeted assistance that meets community-identified needs. Conceived as the department's mission, these activities can be integrated into regular research, teaching and service obligations, not heaped upon them. Nonetheless, a quick look at the dissertations produced in Spanish departments ("Open Access Dissertation Lists") reveals that our focus on literary analysis and linguistics has barely budged, constantly reproducing frameworks that do not actually address the societal needs the authors foreground.

Lastly, our profession should embrace both civic and career connections to Spanish studies. After all, the important civic project the authors outline plays out in workplaces and among colleagues and clients, not just in voting booths and neighborhoods. We perpetuate our own reductionism by presenting a focus on careers as a caricature of vocational training. Instead, it is an opportunity to engage with the complexities and creative challenges of professionals who must not just develop but also deploy translingual and transcultural competence in real time, with real people, not characters on a page or screen. As the authors say, the stakes for our profession and our society are high. We are experts in translingual competence, and we have not yet successfully found the language to express our value to others outside our field, despite the urgency. We are experts in transcultural competence, and we struggle to negotiate between our own academic culture (with its belief system, values and cultural products) and outside audiences with differing cultural perspectives and practices. The authors suggest we can fix the breaches within our society, but these breaches are mirrored within our profession. To fix either, we must look harder at ourselves.

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