Where’s the Community? Redux

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RESPONSES

Where’s John Dewey and Paulo Freire? Ideas on “Recovering” the “Lost C”

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For Twenty-First-Century Success, Embrace Both Tradition and Innovation

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Where’s the Community?
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Abstract: As foreign language and (inter)cultural studies instructors, we have a duty to assist both our students and the communities with which we interact understand and cope with an increasingly technologized, globalized, and conflictive mid-twenty-first-century society. In the unpredictable context of 2068, community-engaged pedagogy can become an even more important progressive force for countering the dystopian tendencies we see around us today. If we confirm our commitment to the fundamental principles of personal responsibility and social justice that underlie our work, we may be able to envision and achieve a more sustainable and ethical democratic society in the future.

Keywords: community-engaged language learning/aprendizaje de lenguas enraizado en comunidades, education for citizenship/educación para la formación ciudadana, educational technology/tecnología educativa, learning communities/comunidades de aprendizaje, pedagogy/pedagogía

A continuous flow of news reports seems to augur a frighteningly violent dystopian future where linguistic, ethnic, racial, religious, cultural, social, political, and economic differences increasingly divide us. Ultimately, it may be impossible to counteract these disruptive forces, but, certainly, (inter)cultural studies and foreign language pedagogy will continue to play a significant role in any attempt to forge mutual understanding and respect across the globe during the next fifty years. Through this special issue of Hispania, we who have dedicated our lives to foreign language teaching in general—and Spanish and Portuguese in particular—are attempting to speculate on the state of our profession in the unknowable world of 2068. It is my strong belief that we cannot come close to achieving this goal without taking into account the societal milieu of our practice and the nature of the communities with which we interact. Moreover, because this collective environment is ever-changing and unpredictable, we are obligated to reaffirm for our students that the success of a civically engaged pedagogy enmeshed in intricate community relationships cannot rest on a set of prescriptive methods, but must rather embody the principles of personal responsibility and social justice that will be fundamental for achieving a more inclusive and egalitarian social order in the next half century.

Although we are unable to discern with any degree of certainty what the future will bring, we can, at least, make educated guesses and extrapolate from present trends, among them, the growing diversity of our society, the increasing availability and sophistication of technology, and the ongoing transition to an information-based economy.

There is no question that the United States is becoming much more diverse ethnically, culturally, and linguistically. Data from the US Census Bureau show a major reshuffling of ethnic/racial demographic categories, with minorities increasing and Whites decreasing (US Census Bureau 2016). These shifts clearly impacted the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, with voters strongly divided on immigration, economic inequality and the wealth gap, and disputes about sexual orientation, marriage equality, and gender bias. Underlying these issues is continuing
anxiety about the loci of power and who will be able to make and benefit from decisions in political and educational arenas. On a global scale, questions about cultural and political influence, economic disparity, global warming, population displacements, and the proliferation of military contests and other forms of violence take on another significant level of complexity. These growing disparities, misunderstandings, and outright conflicts will be increasingly reflected within schools and classrooms in the future, and will directly impact foreign language educators attempting to establish stronger instructional networks with communities abroad.

A prognostication regarding technology may be easy in general but difficult when it comes to specifics. When a Mexican five-year-old “spends all day at the computer” (private communication), when Uruguay supplies computers and internet access to all their schools (Balaguer 2010), when internet language translation is just a Google button away, and when online gaming communications can be used to hide terrorist activity, it is clear that technological changes will continue to radically impact the way we interact with each other and with information in the next half century. But we cannot know precisely how, considering all kinds of digital mobile instruments and online services that are now commonplace did not exist ten years ago. We can only guess what students “hooked on” computers and digital networks almost from birth will demand of their teachers and schools even just a few years from now. Most likely, we will be faced with a panoply of individual adaptations, needs, desires, and goals, all of which will have to be accommodated in our classrooms and other educational venues, whatever they may look like then.

The disruptive effects of a transition to an information-based economy are already evident in a variety of sectors; for example, Google and Wikipedia in knowledge acquisition, Amazon in commerce, Facebook in social interaction, Airbnb in tourism, Uber in transportation, Netflix in entertainment, smartphones in connectivity, and drones in war. New workers with different educational backgrounds and skills are displacing long-time employees whose formerly desirable attributes may no longer be relevant. A similarly disruptive process is affecting education systems nationally as they struggle to adapt to these new labor requirements by fitfully attempting to produce more independently thinking and creative workers of the future. As a result, pedagogies that are collaborative, holistic, student-centered, and occur “anywhere, anytime” are slowly and erratically replacing those that are competitive, disciplinary, teacher-controlled, and classroom-bound in our schools and colleges (US Department of Education 2016). These trends seem to reinforce the notion that there is a significant overlap between the methods, values, and perspectives of community-engaged pedagogy and this new economic and educational context, but perhaps that parallel should not be so facilely drawn.

The title of this paper references a piece I wrote for *Hispania* called “Where’s the Community?,” one of several commissioned to respond to two previously published Modern Language Association (MLA) reports on the state of postsecondary foreign language teaching (MLA 2009). At the time, I was perplexed that the MLA had completely overlooked community-engaged language pedagogy in its recommendations; especially, since academic service learning efforts already had a long history, as evidenced by the creation of Campus Compact in 1985 and the foundation of the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* in 1994. Moreover, language teaching in particular has valued such work since the publication of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century* by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Also, many Spanish and Portuguese teachers have responded to Edward Zlotkowski’s memorable challenge to engage more with communities at the AATSP Annual Conference in Denver in 1999. But AATSP’s current attempt to speculate about the future of Spanish and Portuguese language instruction provides a great opportunity to update our understanding about the role of “community” in that process and develop even more effective engagement strategies.

The promulgation of the ACTFL Standards can be viewed as a watershed moment for language teachers, with their “five C” guidelines (Communication, Cultures, Connections,
Comparisons, and Communities) continuing to influence the way languages are taught. The fifth C’s emphasis on students’ “participation in multilingual communities at home and around the world,” usually considered the most difficult to accommodate and assess, and sometimes called the “lost C” (Allen 2013), has been the foundation for my work at Pitzer College since 1999 (Hellebrandt and Jorge 2013; Jorge 2003; Jorge 2006; Jorge 2008). Our Community-based Spanish Program has not only been efficacious in helping students improve their language proficiency, but also provides significant ancillary benefits for all the program’s participants, including the children of the promotoras (the female heads of households that host periodic visits by our students), who develop a strong desire to access higher education because of their extensive interactions with college students (Jorge 2011). This behavior is quite different from that of their peers in the community who are not similarly exposed.

I find especially intriguing that the development of deep personal relationships between the students and host families that I researched is apparently being replicated in a completely different digital context. My Pitzer colleague, Professor of Spanish and Portuguese Juanita C. Aristizábal (along with Patrick McDermott Welch), has indicated that similar strong ties seem to be developing between her students of Portuguese in Claremont and students learning English in Brazil, who are connected through a formal online course. Students in both countries cited the development of friendships based on common interests as the foundation for continued conversations after the end of the official exchange; a deepened knowledge of the target culture; and, in some circumstances, plans for face to face meetings (2017). Interestingly, it appears that these trends continued as the program developed. Other programs and projects have experienced similar outcomes (Palloff and Pratt 2007; Scott and Johnson 2005; Thorne, Black, and Sykes. 2009). The focus is on the context of learning, and, for me, the fact that “community engagement” pedagogy can so profoundly assist participants in transcending geographic, cultural, linguistic, political, and economic boundaries reinforces the sense of ACTFL’s perspicacity in promulgating its Standards twenty years ago, and the need to find this fifth C again if, indeed, it was ever lost.

Evidently, more and more of our colleagues are coming to the same realization. In 2012, AATSP’s Executive Council approved Community Engagement as the organization’s first special interest group, bringing additional recognition to this field. Then in 2013, Hispania produced a special issue on the scholarship of community engagement, which included an analysis of a survey of AATSP members indicating strong support (75% of respondents) for community-engaged language pedagogy. The high quality articles in that volume on a multitude of topics related to community engagement in language teaching and learning represent contemporary thought and “speak to the breadth, integration, and depth of experiential learning among teachers of Spanish and Portuguese” (Hellebrandt and Jorge 2013).

Many practitioners and authors trace the roots of today’s community-engaged pedagogies to philosopher and psychologist John Dewey’s pragmatism and education for democracy (Dewey 1942; Dewey 1997) and Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy and education for social justice (Freire 2000; Freire 2013). A third influential thread originates with Russian psychologist and educator Lev Vygotsky’s focus on the social construction of knowledge and meaning (Kozulin 2007). In addition, his concepts about the “zone of proximal development” (Chaiklin 2003: 39); the student’s integral role in his/her own educational experience; teaching and learning as collaborative and reflexive processes; and the interconnections among speech, language, and cognitive development (Moll 2014; Smagorinsky 2013; Vygotsky 1986) have been influential among educators. The integration of these three theoretical threads provides the basis for my own point of departure—that language is a social practice inextricably linked to community and cultural contexts embedded in power relationships (Jorge 2010). I also believe that such an approach can provide a viable perspective for thinking about language pedagogy in a future that will be impacted by the uncertainties resulting from new developments in technology, changing demographics, and the vicissitudes of international sociopolitical and economic relationships.
Indeed, on the surface, there appears to be a growing overlap between current educational technology trends and the “traditional” premises of community-engaged educational efforts. A good overview is provided by The US Department of Education Office of Educational Technology’s timely National Education Technology Plan, “Future Ready Learning: Reimagining the Role of Technology in Education” (US Department of Education 2016). Although the plan deals primarily with K–12 educational systems, and, more specifically, the role of technology therein, the consideration of contextual influences and aspirations has significant implications for postsecondary education, especially language instruction. The heading in the introductory graphic alone, “making possible everywhere, all-the-time learning,” combined with the emphasis on equity, accessibility, and overcoming the “digital use divide” are, in themselves, noteworthy for community engagement practitioners (2–3).

The plan covers learning, teaching, leadership, assessment, and infrastructure in relation to education technology, and makes numerous recommendations for both formal and informal educational settings, and the learning opportunities possible through connecting the two. The plan also emphasizes “non-cognitive competencies” (social and emotional learning), personalized learning, “blended learning,” and the development of “learners with agency.” It also provides ideas for “technology-enabled learning in action,” including project-based learning dealing with ‘real world’ problems, digital and online games and simulations, robot-assisted language learning, digital modeling, and three-dimensional imaging (6–8, 11, 16).

Other authors have also discussed mobile-assisted language learning (Liu et. al. 2014; Taylor et al. 2006); the role of computer games in “enactive” learning (Li 2014); and the emerging field of information technology applied to language teaching and research (Stockwell 2014). These ideas and projects are all currently on the cutting edge of technology-based learning efforts, but, within the next fifty years, the picture will evolve considerably. Perhaps by 2068, even some Star Trek visions will be closer to reality. We already see rudimentary versions of the holodeck and some of the crew’s other sophisticated technologies in WiFi, voice recognition software, interactive computer-generated speech, foreign language translation programs, and online video games and simulations. Such tools could provide students with direct feedback about their progress in learning skills, effective communication, or culturally appropriate behavior while they participate in life-like fabricated worlds. Yet they could also seriously disrupt traditional formal education systems, and magnify current concerns and questions about the appropriate role of teachers.

As the USDOE plan shows, we are apparently able to develop the means to address technological issues that impact education, at least for some students. However, the question remains whether there is sufficient political will to translate our rhetoric regarding equity and accessibility into action. It may be that in the next fifty years the changes occurring in the country’s demographics will, in themselves, cause widespread beneficent alterations in the power relationships within many of our social systems and educational institutions. However, I remain somewhat skeptical and believe that other explicit efforts, including appropriately and effectively executed community-engaged language and intercultural education, will continue to be essential in helping to build bridges among various sectors of our society. The plan’s list of twenty-first-century skills all center around greater efficiency and productivity in a more complex information ecology, and, although many additional individuals from currently underrepresented populations may gain access to those new systems and develop the related skills, the question of the overarching purpose for this new kind of education is still unanswered. We still have to ask, “How does it address the needs of our ever-changing communities? Where is the concern for the common good and active democratic participation? Where are the ethical principles of personal responsibility and social justice espoused by Dewey and Freire?”

We can look to Caryn McTighe Musil’s article, “Civic-Rich Preparation for Work” (2015), to help us answer these questions. She considers the ethical components of a liberal education as essential for succeeding in the new information-based economy. She and colleagues undertook
a study to examine the intersection of preparation for both work and citizenship, and posed the question, “How might a deliberately civic-enriched liberal education prepare students for good jobs and for exercising civic muscles and democratic values while doing their work?” She cites a series of surveys of employers that seek to determine the most desired capabilities for college graduates entering the twenty-first-century workforce, wherein only one of the top five skills, “ethical decision making,” was “uniquely important to a democratic society.” She cleverly points out that, ironically, excelling in the other four—critical thinking, written and oral communication, teamwork, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world settings—“were part of what made financial lending in the subprime mortgage scheme so wildly profitable . . . and sent the rest of the world into financial chaos on a scale not seen since the Great Depression” (4).

Thus, the question remains: how will a technologically enhanced liberal education benefit communities of the future beyond producing more efficient and productive Information Age workers, even if they do increasingly come from currently underrepresented groups? A sense of civic responsibility is also necessary to ensure a truly functioning democratic society. Musil suggests that developing a sense of personal and social responsibility be required outcomes for all students in higher education curricula, and not only dealt with informally through student services departments or, as is frequently the case, not at all (4). This makes eminent sense to me, but I should point out that Pitzer College has had educational objectives for “intercultural understanding” and “concern with social responsibility and the ethical implications of knowledge and action” for over thirty years, and they have been the basis of our community-engaged language learning approach since 1999.

While it is clear that the broad educational environment will change significantly in the next fifty years, I strongly believe that community-engaged language and culture instruction can continue to play an important role in helping students develop ethical attitudes and interactions with the environment and their fellow human beings. The technologies will change, the economic factors will change, and the community composition will change; however, I suspect that our professional progeny will still find the lessons of Dewey, Freire, and Vygotsky to be important and useful even in 2068. And it is my hope that those readers who have already experienced the (admittedly limited) efficacy of community-engaged (inter)cultural studies and foreign language pedagogy in overcoming linguistic, ethnic, racial, cultural, and social differences will be able to maintain their stamina and continue to work toward a more democratic and just future. For those of you who have not thus far ventured into this realm, I hope you will be willing to join us in these efforts to assist students in flexibly adapting to the fluctuations of an increasingly technologized, globalized, and conflictive mid-twenty-first century society. A little dose of utopian vision may offset, in small part, the dystopian tendencies we see around us today.

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Response 1 to “Where’s the Community? Redux”

Where’s John Dewey and Paulo Freire? Ideas on “Recovering” the “Lost C”

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Keywords: community-based pedagogy/pedagogía basada en la comunidad, education for citizenship/educación para ciudadanía, ethical learning/aprendizaje ético, global civic engagement/compromiso cívico global, John Dewey, Paulo Freire

“Where’s the Community? Redux” raises some excellent points of discussion for the future of foreign language pedagogy and cultural instruction within ACFTL’s “five C” guidelines. We especially commend the author for pointing out the “lost C” of “Community,” aptly citing the pedagogical philosophies of John Dewey and Paulo Freire as worthy of revisitation. In this response, there are three points we will elaborate on in regard to the so-called lost C: 1) ethical learning; 2) engaging the local community; and 3) engaging the global community. These three points, we contend, build one upon the other, and establish a pedagogical framework to “recover” this lost C, drawing from the thinking and practices of Dewey and Freire.

Beginning with ethical learning, revisitation of John Dewey’s philosophy on experiential education and democracy, detailed in works like Democracy and Education (1916) and Experience and Education (originally published in 1938), is the first order. According to Dewey, an education should: 1) generate interest; 2) be intrinsically worthwhile; 3) present problems that awaken new curiosity and create a demand for information; and 4) cover a considerable time span and be capable of fostering future development for the individual and for the social. On the latter point, Dewey establishes an ethical foundation for education, one in which there is a dialectal relationship of social sharing and growth between individuals and community. As Dewey (1916) notes, “the measure of the worth of the administration, curriculum, and methods of instruction of the school is the extent to which they are animated by a social spirit” (415).

For our second point, engaging the local community, Brazilian pedagogue and social activist, Paulo Freire, is also worthy of revisitation. His books, Educação como prática da liberdade (originally published in 1967) and Pedagogia do oprimido (originally published in 1968), in particular, are essential reading for teaching and civic engagement. Freire (2009) synthesizes his pedagogy thusly: “É fundamental . . . partirmos de que o homem, ser de relações e não só de contatos, não apenas está no mundo, mas com o mundo” (47, emphasis his). That is, we are to teach with the world, not in it, which results in an authentic dialog with the community and leads to what he termed “conscientização” (Freire 2005: 180–81). Furthermore, inspired by the ideals of Che Guevara, Freire was a revolutionary teacher who engaged communities through literacy campaigns directed at poverty-stricken areas of Brazil, planting the seeds for a more just and ethical society through a marriage of education and civic engagement.
The philosophies and practices of Dewey and Freire segue into our final point, engaging the global community. Our courses titled Senior Global Citizenship Seminars at the University of New England focus on issues such as civic engagement and democratic values, social responsibility, appreciation of diversity, sustainable development, and service learning. These seminars spend roughly two weeks in country, in locales such as Mexico, Peru, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Kenya, where students experience the interrelationship of the above dynamics. While in country, students partner with local citizens and organizations, communicating in the native language, and engage in a variety of civic activities in areas such as health care, housing, education, and the environment. In this context, students are able to speak with and volunteer for people of lesser socioeconomic advantages, and add an invaluable sociocultural context to their foreign language and cultural educations. As one student who recently returned from Nicaragua assessed: “I spoke more Spanish with ‘locals’ about local issues than I did in an entire semester of study abroad in Spain.” And another student evaluated: “It is about being human and being humane. It is about realizing that I am not the only person in the world nor am I the most important person. It is about making a difference and an impact in someone’s life.”

In short, in global civic engagement seminars, students come face to face with the ethics of the experience, the ethics of engagement, and the ethics of their own learning. Such, we believe, are the ideals that Dewey and Freire intended to teach us, and are some ideas for “recovering” the lost C for foreign language and culture curricular design in the twenty-first century.

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Response 2 to “Where’s the Community? Redux”

For Twenty-First-Century Success, Embrace Both Tradition and Innovation

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Keywords: civic engagement/compromiso cívico, Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP)/lenguas para fines específicos, professions/profesiones, Service-Learning/aprendizaje a través del servicio, technology/tecnología

Interacting with diverse communities of the future is not a choice between “producing more efficient and productive Information Age workers” (Jorge 2017: 179) or ensuring that college graduates act with a sense of personal responsibility, social justice and civic engagement. To succeed beyond college, graduates of the future must be equipped to do both.

One of the best ways to develop college graduates able to “cope with an increasingly technologized, globalized, and conflictive mid-twenty-first century society” (Jorge 2017: 179) is through service-learning opportunities while in college. The communities with which students engage during a service-learning encounter are often professional communities. And upon graduation, the most successful will enter communities of professionals, where a college degree has become the prerequisite for entry-level work that used to require a high school diploma (Burning Glass 2014) and the cost of getting that four-year degree has been increasing dramatically (National Center for Education Statistics 2015).

Including technology and technological adaptability in our pedagogy can be part of concretely preparing students for their work in the community while still in college as well as for their futures as professionals after college. This means teaching students to adapt—not just teaching them fixed skills—even as we teach adaptively. In terms of how we teach, this might mean pushing students away from the professor as primary resource; when students are in the community, the professor is neither present nor the expert. Therefore, students must develop the habit of consulting non-instructor resources to resolve problems they encounter (for example, employee manuals at the community partner organization, the community partner where necessary, and online technical support tools).

In terms of teaching adaptively while incorporating technology, faculty can require that all students use “hard skills” in their course projects. (While the humanities generally serve to develop “soft skills”—written and verbal communication, the ability to engage in critical thinking, analysis and synthesis of information—there is certainly room in the curriculum to require students to use hardware and software). This can be achieved simply by requiring that students present their assignments or final projects using technologies such as websites, social media, YouTube, iMovie, virtual meeting sites or screencasts. Whatever the course, content or project, students can use their critical thinking skills to find the best technological venue for their work. Community partners and employers are eager for students and recent graduates with these technological skills (Taylor 2015) paired with the independence, resourcefulness, problem-solving and decision-making skills that go with selecting and troubleshooting them (Adams 2014).
To provide more structure, build time into the curriculum for students to get themselves over the technological learning curve. For example, one homework assignment might be to choose a technological platform and hand in a link to the video or step-by-step tutorial used to learn about it. A week or two later, students hand in a link to a “test” sample—a generic website with no actual content in it—a “test, test, 1-2-3” YouTube video created using iMovie or screencast; or a social media handle with a compelling case for that platform’s appropriateness to the project.

Instructors do not have to troubleshoot any of this technology, but do have to adapt to not being the sole experts in their courses. Tech support is readily available to students. Nearly every application has a “help” tab, many provide tutorial videos, Googling your problem as a question usually leads to a useful discussion thread with a solution, and calling the help desk is always a last resort that is best done directly by the user (and not by a faculty intermediary). This is precisely how we teach adaptively as we teach students to adapt.

To produce graduates prepared both for the professional workforce and to act with a sense of civic and personal responsibility, faculty must embrace both tradition and innovation as we teach students to adapt and teach adaptively ourselves.

WORKS CITED