

**DILEMMAS OF POLITICS AND SPONTANEITY  
IN THE CONTEMPORARY TEACHING OF LANGUAGES**

*“LA SAL DE LA VIDA”*

Submitted in partial fulfillment of  
The requirements for the  
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By

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## ABSTRACT

This document describes my philosophy of teaching. My primary interests are in Pedagogical Psychodrama and Feminist Pedagogy. This document is a compilation of my experiences, insights, and dilemmas in my practice of teaching Spanish as a second language and also in teaching feminist classes.

### **ERIC Descriptors:**

Student Teacher Relationship

Teacher Attitudes

Experimental Teaching

Teaching Styles

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## PREFACE

### *La Sal de la Vida*

If I was asked to describe in one word what *contemporary* means to me at this moment, I would say *SATURATION*. Today, we have so many options; we are exposed to so much information, so many media lies, and so much violence on this planet. We can be easily overwhelmed by the information with which we're confronted daily.

When I am preparing my classes and I look at all of my books that contain so many approaches to teaching, the hundreds of suggestions, and all of the guides with wonderful lesson plans, I feel the same: saturated. When I review the textbooks for my courses, I can see that they contain much more information than it is possible for my students to assimilate in a single semester. In addition, there are complete collections of CD ROMS, tapes, videos, and Internet resources available for learning and practicing Spanish at all levels. If I visit the Internet, I have at my disposal all kinds of articles, lessons, teaching techniques, and syllabi from other Spanish teachers at so many universities. And with all of it, I feel the same: saturated.

Of course I recognize the value of all of this material that I review, and I feel fortunate to live in this period of human evolution and to have all of these resources. But I usually need at least 20 minutes of *silence and meditation* to know *what I, as a teacher,*

*need to prepare for my classes. What can I, as a teacher, assimilate to transmit to my students?*

When I feel saturated, I, as a teacher, aspire to recover *simplicity* in my classroom. Also, when I feel saturated, I appreciate the simple act of looking into the eyes of the students who attend my classes - the simple act of enjoying and loving *human connection*.

**Making Connections:** *Conflict, problem, dilemma, drama, and contradiction* are wonderful words of Greek origin. *Conflict* is necessary for *action*, *drama* is *action*, *dilemmas* are *options*, and *problems* are *opportunities* to use intelligence. These are words that are with me all the time in my practice of teaching. I love *dilemmas*. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines *dilemma* as: “a situation requiring a choice between equally undesirable alternatives; any difficult or perplexing situation or problem” (Unabrid. 1967). I interpret this as a form of syllogism in which the major premise is formed by two or more hypothetical propositions and the minor premise is an exhaustive disjunctive proposition like “*if*,” “*then*,” and “*or*.”

In my Spanish classes, “*if*” is the essential point at which I start my class: “*If* I start with this exercise, *then* they will see this example. *Or, if* I start with that exercise, *then* they will see that example.” This hypothetical proposition is with me during the preparation of my class.

**The Personal is Political:** In my Spanish and feminist classes the word *politics* is mandatory. As a language teacher, I feel obligated to try to use the real meaning of the word. *Politics* derives from a Greek root meaning *citizen* - which characterizes our relationship to, and implies a certain behavior within, a community. In my opinion,



politics start from the first moment we say, “*¡Hola, buenos días!*” to another person.

Quite simply, this opens whatever public interaction we start in the class, and it can grow into the most wonderful opportunity to develop critical thinking about public events, society, culture, etc.

**Politics is the Art of Exercising Power:** Exercising power in the classroom starts at the moment that teachers and learners validate my and their personal participation in class with comments, questions, suggestions, homework, and assessments. We are political when we are active in the classroom.

**Politics is Recognizing the Existence of the Other:** *Others* that are recognized through the study of the target language are: other cultures, other sets of life symbols, other traditions, and other experiences. Explorations of the new and the unfamiliar add *the salt of life* to my classes - and to life in general.

**La Sal de la Vida:** The idea of *la sal de la vida* was the first thing that I learned from my grandmother. She taught me how to always see the humorous face of life. She taught me how to laugh at myself and how to add spice back into my life whenever I felt that it had no taste or flavor. In fact, food without taste is not good. Life without spark is boring. *La sal de la vida reminds me that in my classroom there are human beings with a lot of salt to add to my class*, salt that brings taste and fun to my classes. Every time one of my classes is losing momentum, I know it’s time to reconnect with *the salt of life*. I ask myself: *Where is the salt for this class? Variety is the spice of life.*

When people ask me what I do, I usually answer, “*I’m an alchemist in a classroom.*” I mix games, joy, love, and teaching Spanish in a school, and I have fun with the students.

This document, which I want to share with you, describes what I think and what I practice in my classes. *It is the beginning of the personal construction of my philosophy of my practice of teaching.* This document outlines the responsibility of being professional in front of a group of learners. In the classroom there are people of different sizes, colors, dimensions, and intelligences - people with a collections of skills, who are loving humans beings called *the learners*. In the classroom, *I am their guide*. I aspire to develop my guidance and to offer it to the learners with masterful love.

I am the kind of teacher that Parker J. Palmer describes in his book The Courage to Teach: the teacher who has bad days, who is sometimes confused, and who sometimes lies awake at night, thinking about how to change my teaching style, approaches, and strategies when the situations are lifeless and painful (1998, p. 1). In the process of thinking about who I am as a teacher, I borrowed the title of the book Manifesta (2000) by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, and I wrote my own *manifesta* - as a teacher in my current teaching.

### *Manifesta*

*Be in touch with your own potential. If you have something to teach, develop it!*

--Shakti Gattegno

SMAT 20 - Summer 2001 SIT

We are learners. I am a learner. I do not doubt it. It is the principal reason why I am on this planet. Questions that we, as learners, should ask during the learning process are: What satisfaction do we get as learners? What are the mechanisms that each one of us uses in order to learn? How can each person be aware of her/his vulnerability when

learning something new? How can each person take care of herself/himself during the learning process?

Questions that I, as a teacher, ask during the teaching process are: How can I convince the learner that it is a good thing to make mistakes? What is happening in the universe of the learner that I need to touch or to recognize, and what is not? How can I, as a teacher, be in touch with *my* internal learner?

I have a passion for studying the process of learning. Learning is a process in which I, too, as a teacher, must always be engaged. And I must not forget that the people in my classroom can also be teachers - to me.

I believe that the potential of the human being for learning is infinite, divine, spontaneous, creative, unique, special, and powerful. That is the reason why I am a teacher. As a teacher, I want to build the creative space where two souls (learner and teacher) can be together and learning - in a joyful and peaceful way.

This is my *Manifesta*.

## CHAPTER I

*¿Quién soy, de dónde vengo y a dónde voy?*  
(Who am I, where do I come from, where am I going?)

*TEACHING IS ABOUT AUTOBIOGRAPHY.*  
*Teachers are intellectuals, activists; they have political values.*  
*They bring all these values to their classroom.*  
*They look for social changes.*  
--Sonia Nieto (from a lecture)

*WE TEACH WHO WE ARE.*  
--Parker J. Palmer

### Background Information:

To understand the global background of my experience as a teacher was one of the most valuable insights that I had after finishing the classroom work towards a Master's degree at the School for International Training, during my SMAT program.

Before establishing some order for this document, I needed to be in touch with my personal process as a learner. I wrote approximately 70 pages of memories of my life, from kindergarten through college studies in Mexico. After completing the exercise, I was able to see the early formation of the principles of teaching that guide my current practice as a feminist language teacher. What follows are three stories that connected me with the loving part of who I am as a teacher.

Story One (about Patricia, the little girl who loved to go to school):

**“Patricia, behave.”**

A town in Michoacán, Mexico - 1966

My grandmother, Natividad Lopez, asked *la señorita* Herminia if I could go to her school. *Señorita* Herminia was the kindergarten teacher in the small town where my family lived at that time, and her school was in her own house. *La señorita* Herminia told my grandmother that I was too young for school, since I was only 4 years old. My grandmother replied that I was young, but I was very smart. My grandmother was very obstinate. *Señorita* Herminia had no choice but to finally accept me.

The first day I went to the house of the teacher - to “my school,” by myself - I put a pencil, a notebook, an eraser, and a banana in an empty shoebox. I took my box and I crossed the street. The house of *señorita* Herminia was in front of the house of my grandmother. I crossed the street - feeling that I was crossing the universe.

I remember *señorita* Herminia said that the vowel “O” was like a *grano de maíz* - a kernel of corn. I did not understand why. She took my hand and guided me to the granary - where we looked at corn kernels for many hours. In fact, the form was similar to the letter “O.”

I learned a song as part of the routine of doing my homework:

*Ayúdame lapicito a terminar mi tarea*

*Los renglones son los surcos y yo soy el sembrador*

*Cuando acabe el primer año*

*Voy a aprender a leer*

*Esa será mi cosecha y quiero que quede bien*

Help me, my little pencil, to finish my homework  
The lines are the garden rows and I am the sower of the seed  
When I finish my first year  
I will learn to read  
It will be my harvest and I want it to be good

This is a memory about how I learned about vowels, and what it means to learn.

Story Two:

**Rules for Becoming a Good Six-year-old Student in a Private Catholic School**

Colegio Novel, Morelia, Michoacán - 1968

*Do not speak. If you do, you will have masking tape put on your mouth.*

*Do not laugh so loud.*

*Start the day with a prayer to the Virgin Mary.*

*Wear a clean uniform.*

*Do not interrupt the teacher while she is speaking.*

*Do not go to the restroom more than twice a day.*

*Bring your homework with the signature of your mother.*

*After finishing your homework, start doing your sewing.*

*Repeat your syllabi every day.*

I guess it is not difficult to understand *why* I became an expert in escaping from school. *How* I escaped was by learning to *lie*:

*“Señorita, I need to be at home early because my mother is sick.”*

*“Señorita, my mother asked me to be home early, because my little brother is in the hospital.”*

*“Señorita, I feel very sick, please, I need to go home.”*

At the age of six or seven, I was an expert actress. I recall every time that I asked permission to be absent from classes. Of course, problems arose when the principal finally asked me to bring a signed note from my mother, requesting permission. That day, my brilliant strategy stopped magically.

On one of the days that I had escaped from school, I was walking downtown on my way home, when I saw the army running in the streets after some big boys. I saw the police, too. I saw many faces filled with fear. I was there walking alone amidst all this confusion. I was five blocks from home. I saw the soldiers taking some big boys and hitting them. I heard: *“Motherfuckers! Stupid students! Do you want to study? I will teach you something! Do you like Che? Let me give you your fucking Che Guevara!”*

I saw again how the soldiers hit the boys many times. I stood there petrified. I remember very well: I was in front of the Holy Nicolaita College of the University of Michoacán, the public university of my city. I do not know how long I stood there, but the faces, the voices, and the realization that to be a *student* was something *dangerous* stayed with me for many years.

Perhaps it is easy to believe, or not: But that day, I knew that I would come back to this school. Some day I would tell the soldiers that hitting boys was not a good action. Many years passed before I knew that the university of my state, like many universities in Mexico, suffered political repression from the government military, in response to the student movements of the 60s. Many years passed before I understood the impact of the events in the year that the Mexican government ordered soldiers to kill thousands of students in the Plaza Tlatelolco in Mexico City, giving Mexicans one of the most painful memories of that time: The massacre of 1968.

October 2, 1968, was a day that many students in Mexico who fought for social changes would memorialize, with the famous saying: “*2 de Octubre no se olvida.*” - “October 2 will not be forgotten.”

### Story Three - Part I:

#### **Meeting Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra and Don Quixote de la Mancha**

Morelia, Michoacán, México - 1970

The letter that Patricia Pedroza wrote to Don Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra:

Dear Don Miguel:

Because you have the power that dead people have, and because you may live on some star watching this innocent planet and its people - who believe that they are civilized - I want to write you a letter. Once again I have in front of me your wonderful book Don Quixote. Some years ago I told one of my friends in Mexico that if you could write this book without computers, and if the indigenous people in Chiapas could also



live without them, then I did not feel obligated to understand computers. But you know that sometimes it is not possible to survive the pull of technology, so here I am, writing to you on this machine.

My first encounter with your book was when I was a child, during my second year of elementary school in Morelia, Michoacán, my native city. As you know Morelia is a typical colonial city in Mexico, and the educational system loves to teach the children about Colonialism and Literature, along with the other obligatory historical topics.

As a child I did not have any conflict with the literature of Spain, but as an adolescent I refused to have anything to do with the culture of Spain. (How foolish and ignorant!) It was later, in College, at a lecture by the novelist Carlos Fuentes, that I first heard something that I needed to hear (and I'm quoting here approximately, from memory):

*Our relationship with Spain is as our relationship with us:  
conflictive. Remember, the measurement of love is the measurement of  
hate. We can put both together in a word: passion. A trauma is in the  
origin of the historical relationship between Mexico and Spain: the fact of  
the conquest.*

*To be born as contemporary society, knowing how many societies  
had to die to give us life...the splendor of our ancient indigenous  
civilizations: sons and daughters of a mother without name - but knowing  
our cruel father.*

As a student I was taught that the only way to understand Mexico, was to understand Spain, as well. It is necessary to admit that, in looking for our identity, we Mexicans are the inheritors of both: the mythic indigenous civilizations and the culture of Spain. However, listening to Carlos Fuentes helped me to name many of my feelings, and I enjoyed studying more about the culture of Spain.

It may be stupid, but I prefer to believe that I am a direct descendant, or heiress, of the Mayan and Jewish cultures, and of ethnic groups like the Huicholes, Purepechas, Gypsies, and Arabs, rather than coming only from the Spanish conquest combined with the Catholic Church and the Inquisition.

So, after this *internal cultural reconciliation*, I began to feel less guilty about loving Don Quixote and dancing to Flamenco music. (I know that they don't have any relationship, but for me, both were from Spain.)

Finally, my dear Cervantes, your book touches my heart, because, in your character of Sancho, I can hear and recognize the voices of my family, principally the voice of the most important person in my life: my grandmother. My grandmother always used old sayings when she spoke, with words of wisdom such as Sancho uses, and many of the sayings in your book are the sayings that I grew up with. This language of sayings that, in my opinion, it is possible to learn only by oral tradition, is something amazing that connects me with the simple and uncomplicated means of communication that people use in the country.

I needed to write you this letter because Don Quixote has been a catalyst for me, a special catalyst for my feelings, my contradictions, and my need to express what is happening inside of me. I am inspired to write, to read, to study, and - a crazy idea - to

write in English! I am reading Don Quixote also in English - can you believe it? I am visualizing a small notebook called: "Everything that I wanted to say in Spanish, I will write in English." It sounds a little pretentious, but not impossible. But, if I am honest, I am discovering something: to write in English hurts less. The words do not hit my heart as they do when I write in Spanish. When I write in English, there is a barrier, a protection around me, because I am not a master of English words - they have less power for me - and so the pain is different. I guess that writing is a joyful process, but, for me now, it comes out full of anger and reproaches.

Well, Don Miguel, I have finished my letter now. Thank you for reading it.

--*Patricia.*

## Part II:

### **Quixote, The Knight Errant**

Scholar Center, Michoacán, México

Children sometimes choose strong characters to be their friends, to help them when they are in need. When I was a child, the popular and poor kids chose a Mexican character called: The Saint - The Silver Mask (*Santo - El Enmascarado de Plata*). Other children who had television chose: The Lone Ranger, Superman, or Batman. Others chose animals like Lassie or Flipper. I chose Don Quixote.

I was in my second year of elementary school. There were a lot of children in every classroom. During recess, it was typical for the big boys to abuse the little boys and girls. For some time, a horrible custom was popular with these big boys. It consisted of

taking the food or lunch from the little boys or girls, just for fun. (I was one of the little girls at this time.)

They (the big and bad boys) came running and said: “*Matanga dijo la changa*” - and then they took our food. To say “*Matanga dijo la changa*” meant to take by surprise, without time for any reaction or time to run. So, it was something fun for them to take the little kids by surprise. If you have read Don Quixote, don’t you agree that a perfect cause for Don Quixote would be to defend innocent kids?

One day, we finally told our teacher what was happening. She listened to us very carefully and then she began to tell us the story of Don Quixote and how he was not afraid to fight, even when he didn’t have the best guns, or swords, or a decent horse, or physical strength. She told us about the many deeds of this wonderful character. She taught us all week about the adventures of Don Quixote. The adventure of the windmills became one of my favorite stories. Many nights, I dreamt that I was fighting against the bad boys in the school and that Don Quixote was with me. His face was serene and his voice was very strong and, at the same time, very sweet.

The next week, our teacher asked us if we were ready to go to recess and fight with the windmills like Don Quixote. We yelled, “*Yes! Yes!*” Our teacher came with us. She said to us, “*OK, now we are pretending that we are Don Quixote.*” Every child had the opportunity to yell: “*En un lugar de la Mancha de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme...*” (“In a certain village in La Mancha, which I do not wish to name...” Cervantes 1950, p. 31) That was our “battle cry,” because the teacher told us that La Mancha was a secret place that everyone can enter, leave, and return to, however many times one needs to. She also said: “*This is your secret place of power, no one can take*

*this force from you. It is yours and only yours, and you know where it is...inside of you.”*

Little by little, we thought that we were brave and intelligent like Don Quixote. A change happened: We took care of ourselves. If a big boy took our food, we immediately told the principal, and this custom stopped. This was the first connection that I had with the power of the fantasies of Don Quixote, although at the time, I did not know that Don Quixote was a novel by Cervantes. I know that I was in my second year of elementary school, only seven years old. But I remember that day was very special for me, because on that day I learned that I was little - but smart and strong. From that day until now, I still go to my own place of La Mancha, and I remember all those kids fighting and yelling: *“In a certain village in La Mancha, which I do not wish to name...”* - the secret place of power. Don Quixote was my partner in my games for many years.

## CHAPTER II

### *La Escuelita*

For many years during my childhood I loved to play the game *La Escuelita*. I was the teacher and my brothers and other children in the neighborhood were the students. We enjoyed this game so much. I remember how many songs we sang together and how many games we invented.

Over the years I recovered a lot of memories of those games, and I decided to start a personal project called *La Escuelita* to produce creative workshops to promote learning in a way that I consider to be joyful. At the time, the workshops were connected with my feminist activism, but when I started teaching Spanish, it made sense to me to pull all of these aspirations together. The name of *La Escuelita* is not original; it was not my invention. It is a popular name that many children use in many Latin American countries, when they play school, or when they imitate their teachers or even their parents. Children play *La Escuelita* with their toys, dolls, and animals. ***La Escuelita, to me, is every instant or moment, in the interaction between the teacher and the learner, that is constructed with imagination, creativity, and spontaneity - and connected with a learning process.*** When I decided to create and work with the concept of *La Escuelita* as an independent educational project, I wrote the following principles:

Principles of *La Escuelita*:

1. **The Mission:** To teach about tolerance and diversity, personal development, learning skills, and human creativity.
2. **General Objective:** To create a safe space and teaching environment inside of and outside of the classroom, dedicated to the mission above.
3. **Political Ideology:** *La Escuelita* believes that people are not educated in a vacuum, but are products of the economy, the politics of the time, the macro culture, and the social systems in which they live. It sees human learning as a process of creation in the hands of each human being: man or woman, boy or girl, old or young. Each individual should be able to access their own creativity, at whatever level of intimacy is comfortable for them, in whatever sphere (private-personal or collective-public) that they choose.
4. **What Does *La Escuelita* Do?** *La Escuelita* develops workshops, lectures, and theatre games, utilizing the theories of creative theater and psychodrama, in order to explore issues of human creativity, in the service of education. Since 1994, Patricia Pedroza has conducted such workshops both nationally and internationally.

Examples of Educational Activities Used by *La Escuelita*:

- Sexual education
- Psychotherapy for survivors of domestic violence, physical violence, and sexual

violence, including the trauma suffered by the survivors of war, torture, kidnapping, and abuse at the hands of the military or the police

- Emotional education
- Activities for the enhancement of self-esteem and personal development
- Spiritual education
- Activities in which women can create a new symbolism and a new genealogy
- Psychodrama in the teaching of Spanish as a target language

### *La Escuelita and My Spanish Teaching:*

*La Escuelita* is a project in progress, dedicated to developing creative teaching practices. After finishing the coursework toward a Master's degree at SIT and reviewing my history as a learner, I consider that I am still at the *beginning* of the creation of my philosophy of teaching. The new concepts that I am exploring are related to language and culture - more specifically, to the borders that divide humans beings.

I will share briefly the story of my initiation as a Spanish teacher: I had studied Spanish in order to be able to write about theatre. In 1992, I received an invitation to teach Spanish to a "special group" at a Language Center in the city of Cuernavaca, Morelos. It was a very interesting invitation, but I thought: "I don't have much experience teaching Spanish. Why are they calling me to teach this 'special group'?" The "special group" turned out to be 18 students from the Boston area, students who were *gay*, who were learning about the *history of the homosexual/gay movement in Mexico*, and who wanted to learn Spanish also. Wow!



I had no idea what kind of door was opening for me. I arrived to teach others a second language, my native language, but I also had the opportunity to talk about issues that were very important to me. I will always be grateful for that opportunity, because ***there I began the endeavor that I now enjoy most - teaching a language in connection with social and political concepts.***

In my classes, I emphasize the issue of ***borders***, not those on maps, not the frontiers of migration, not political or economic frontiers, but the personal walls that we erect and maintain around ourselves individually. I urge my students, when they travel, to be interested in the people of the countries to which they travel and to get to know people. So much is lost when we do not speak with people. I say to them: If you speak only English - you lose the possibility of making friends; you miss out on the unique charm, the warmth, and the genuine love of people. I try to convince my students that it is difficult to be a citizen of this great nation, the United States, and to *not* be seen outside of it wearing the face of the dollar or the oppressor. So when they travel outside of their country, they should not show their pride in this country by demonstrating arrogance or by assuming that they are superior - because they are not. I urge them to show their humanness instead, by showing their *love* for the USA; certainly, show it - if you have it. That kind of pride - love for one's country - is understood universally. But mainly, I urge my students to go to the Hispanic Latin countries without fear, to go and to learn - and to enjoy, most of all, its people.

With this idea in mind - that, by seeing ourselves and others as ambassadors, we gain great opportunities for making connections, for experiencing exchange on all levels,

for increasing understanding between peoples, and for advancing personal development -  
I have integrated the following concepts into my project of *La Escuelita*:

- **Crossing Borders is a Process:** We cross political, geographical, and emotional borders all the time. We cross borders each time that we confront a new challenge or take a risk. But, when we cross frontiers into other languages and other cultures, we make one of the most important connections we can make in life - the connection with other people.
- **Connecting Language with Culture:** As a Spanish professor, I am interested in maintaining an equal balance between helping the learners to acquire a high level of second language proficiency and to gain a real understanding of the target culture.
- **Connecting Literature with Personal Experiences:** Sometimes it is not easy to connect learners with literature in the classroom. However, acting like Don Quixote helps me to love the book, and to understand and appreciate the characters - besides giving me power.

As I proceed in this exposition on my beliefs about teaching, it's appropriate to recount the learning experiences that I've had in the past and to summarize the result of each one. They have all played a role in my development of *La Escuelita*:

1. At the Mexican School of Psychodrama, directors Dr. Jaime Winkler and Maria Carmen Bello taught me the classic psychodrama of Jacobo Levy Moreno, who not only created psychodrama, but was a pioneer in group therapy using action or drama as the principal instrument to rescue the creativity and spontaneity of

human beings. In our classes in Mexico, Dr. Jaime Winkler always said of Moreno: *“The creator of psychodrama was full of the obsession to transform. To transform relationships between humans was one of his principal obsessions.”* As a young psychodramatist, I followed the philosophy of Moreno, trying to rescue and maintain my own creativity and spontaneity in my teaching practice, as well as that of my learners in their learning process.

2. In my training as an actress, my profession for some years, I learned that without spontaneity, it is difficult to improvise. Improvisation is a basic creative tool used in acting. Even more, life itself is one big improvisation. As a teacher, improvisation is part of my lesson plan every day.
3. I had a wonderful teacher, Laura Aguilera, who introduced me to the Re-evaluation Co-counseling Practice created by Harvey Jacking. From this teaching, I learned that, to have commitment as an educator, it is necessary to have complete respect for the intelligence of others. Every person is creative, intelligent, and has their own particular set of learning skills. We are equipped with intelligence from the moment of our conception. Every day, I remind myself of this in my classroom.
4. From my spiritual path, Eckankar, I learned that I am a creative soul; I have the opportunity to love my students and to create a loving climate in my classes. Joy and love are as essential to my lesson plan as assessment and homework are to the students, and they are equally important.
5. From my feminist political background, I have learned gender consciousness. I learned that men and women have together created a sexual politic that usually

stereotypes human relationships. The philosophy of gender can explain the oppression of human beings with regard to ethnicity, age, sexual preference, religion, class, and political ideology. Feminist practice has created Feminist Pedagogy, which offers the most wonderful awareness to the learners that their personal experiences are as valid as the theoretical principles that we study in the classroom. This acknowledgment can often be quite liberating and empowering.

6. And finally, my SMAT program validated the importance of recognizing each individual's particular learning process and the importance of connecting with each learner in my classroom.

I can speak now about my process, as a teacher, of recognizing the learners. In my practice of teaching it has been helpful for me to create an environment in my classes that *helps me to know my students as learners* and to look for experiences that validate their skills as learners. Below are three exercises which bring great results. The first is a letter that I wrote after listening to Shakti Gattegno in our SMAT program. She started her lecture with some of the words that I have used in this letter.

Exercise One (A Letter to the Learners in My Spanish Class):

**Myself, as a Learner**

Once upon a time, even if you do not remember, you were babies. It was necessary to learn everything around you. And you did. Even if you did not have the “perfect” teachers, you learned because the essence of being a human is to be a learner.

Of course, you were babies, and who does not love babies? Who does not enjoy, let alone celebrate, when babies learn something new?

Even if you do not remember, you did not come into this world speaking. You had to learn how to speak. You listened to the language around you, you repeated what you heard, and you learned your native language. As a baby you enjoyed playing with sounds, and the people who loved you encouraged you to express yourself, first with sounds, and, little by little, with new words. How many times do you think you needed to hear the sounds? The people around you expressed happiness upon hearing you speak. You enjoyed people's responses to your sounds and enjoyed hearing yourself express words and meaning. When you put sounds and words together it was not always clear, but others understood what you were trying to say, and they celebrated every time you spoke or tried to communicate.

Now it is time to learn to risk making sounds and repeating words again, whether you know the meaning or not, as we attempt to communicate in Spanish. And as we do that in this language, those who speak or have command of this language enjoy our attempts as our parents did when we were first learning to speak. As you attempt to speak another language, others will mostly welcome your attempts. They are not interested in criticizing you. They are interested in enjoying communication with the wonderful person that you are.

Practice with feedback is what helps us acquire skill. Speaking a language is a skill. Learning how to speak another language is a process of developing that skill. But the most important goal for you in this endeavor is to connect with your own process of learning. It is important that you respect your own process and respect the time that you

need to make mistakes; they are an essential part of the learning process. And, by understanding our mistakes, we learn. We practice and we learn. Just think of all the things that you have learned in your life.

Take a few moments to remember when you learned something, anything. Now ask yourself these questions:

- How was the process?
- How long did it take?
- How many mistakes did you make?
- How many hours did you practice?
- How did you know that you were learning?
- How did you feel as you made progress in the learning process?
- Who helped you in that learning process?

We may receive recognition for many other things, though we may not for our effort to learn another language. But learning a new language requires mastering complex skills. The mind works hard to understand different meanings. So, please, appreciate your effort and the effort of your classmates, celebrate your mistakes, and help each other. I am here to teach you and to help you. Welcome to this new experience. You are a learner. Hopefully, you will always be one. Enjoy the process!

## Exercise Two:

### **Recognizing the Learner**

The exercise of recalling and writing down some of my childhood memories helped me to see my personal abilities as learner, as well as how I connect with the process of learning. Because I see myself as a multidimensional learner, ***I believe that all learners are multidimensional.*** As a very simple example: Sometimes I want to learn alone, and sometimes I want to learn in a group. However, I can also see that my personal learning process is greatly motivated by my need to observe, to think about, to be involved in, and to practice my desire for social justice.

Learners are not simple. They have energy to bring to the class; but sometimes they are sick, they are sad, or they are worried about something. And why not? Sometimes they really have other activities that are more exciting than the class. Come on! Who would prefer learning to conjugate the imperfect in Spanish, instead of going to the movies with a girlfriend or boyfriend, eating popcorn, and stealing a few kisses during the show?

Learners may have the option to study with or without a book. They may disregard the homework or do the homework. Learners have the option to engage with the class or to not engage. As the teacher, I also have the option to engage my class or to just “do my lesson plan” and say: “Good-bye, class!” ***Freedom implies responsibility.*** *Learners* are responsible.

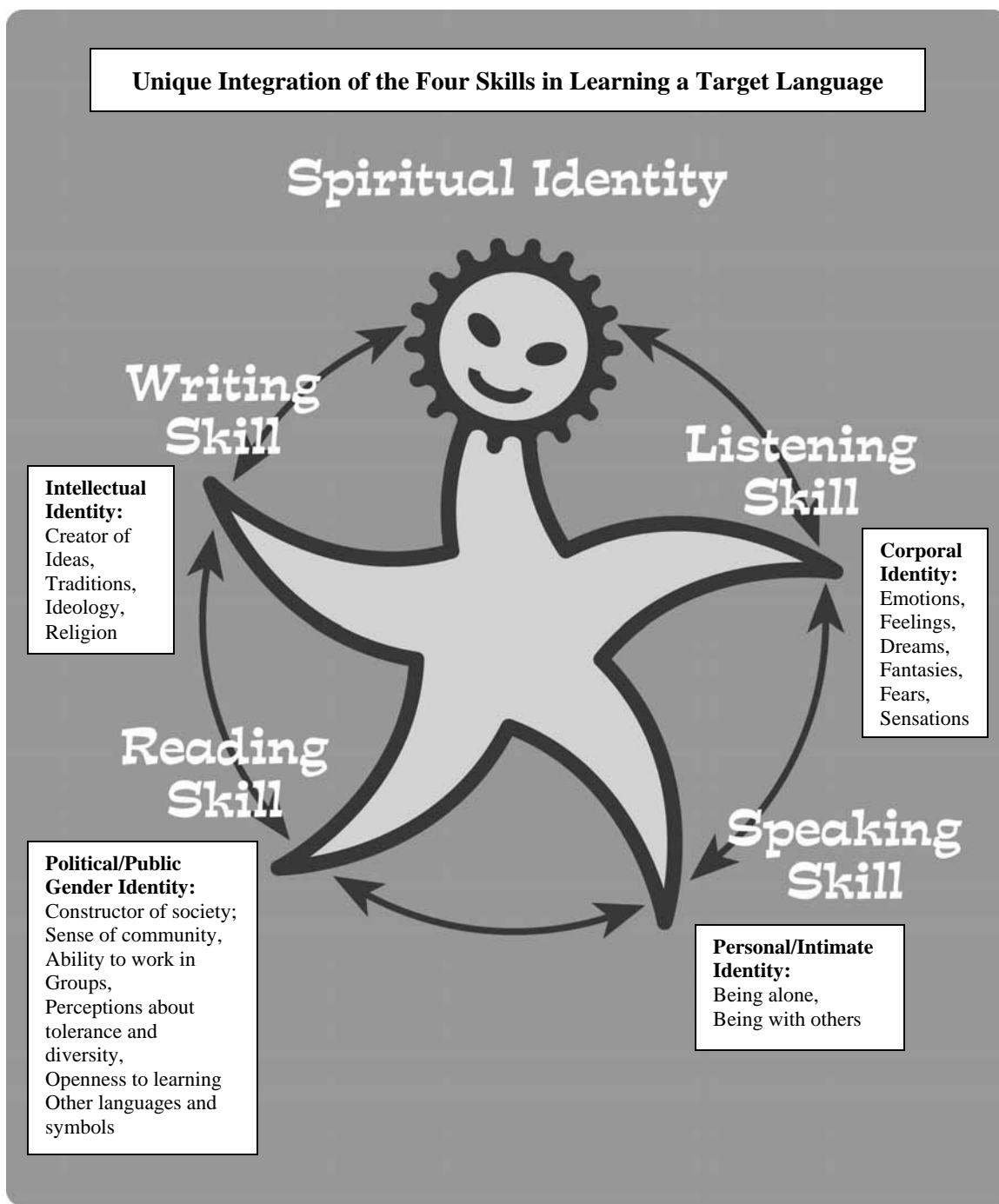
Learners have fantasies...dreams. For instance, they may be motivated by an intense desire for peace for the planet. Learners have spiritual identities - which may be

entirely distinct from their religious affiliations or practices. They have intellectual skills; they have social, personal, and collective skills - which they may decide to use or not to use in the classroom.

In many of my classes, I tell the students that they are “the stars” of my class - because they have five extremities that I would love to see in complete balance during the class.



Figure 1 - Multidimensional Learners:



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**The Head:** The head represents the unique integration of the four skills in the learning of a target language. It represents the spiritual identity. It is the extremity that connects the learner with the sky, with a spiritual essence, with messages from the universe, with their ability to imagine and to expand their ideas and knowledge. I say to them: We have the opportunity to connect the wisdom of our intelligent head with our scatterbrain, with our stubborn pigheaded airhead, or with our head full of hair with or without colors. Everyone has the option to use his or her head in the way he/she wants.

**The Arms:** The arms represent the acquisition, by the learner, of listening and writing skills in the target language. They represent the corporal identity. On the one hand, the corporal identity is comprised of emotions, feelings, dreams, fantasies, fears, and sensations. On the other hand, it is comprised of intellectual components: our ideology, our religion, and our creation of ideas and traditions. These arms are two wonderful extremities. They help us to have a sense of balance and direction when we are confronted with millions of options or saturated with ideas. These arms are our compass when we feel lost.

**The Legs:** The legs represent the acquisition, by the learner, of speaking and reading skills in the target language. Together, they represent the learner's personal and public identities (the abilities to work alone or with others), as well as our perceptions of community, tolerance, diversity, and the construction of society. *Es bueno saber dónde y como estás parada/o - It is good to know where and how you are standing.* To be standing up implies the work of our legs. It is useful to connect with your legs when you want to be responsible. Responsibility implies making decisions, and decisions usually require a good reason, or good reasons. When we walk, we often know in which direction

we want to go, and we use our legs to transport us in that direction. Our legs are the instruments that help us move. Learners may walk in a straight line by following a syllabus, or, in order to put concepts together, they may walk along different paths. Learners may walk to the library and review the magazines in Spanish or they may walk to the cafeteria to talk with friends. They may walk to the library and sign out a Spanish movie for the weekend or they may walk far away from any kind of interaction that would offer the opportunity to speak or practice Spanish. They may know what their intention is when they decide to walk into a language classroom. I suggest to learners that they think of their legs as roots, and to ask themselves, when they arrive in a classroom - or anywhere else - whether or not they choose to be planted there and present.

Together, the head and the arms and the legs can be likened to the five points of a star - a star that represents the complete essence of a holistic learner/teacher. (See Figure 1 above.)

### Exercise Three:

#### **Recognizing My Own Creativity**

I wrote the next ideas as inspiration to myself in my process of connecting with my own creativity. First, are a few aphorisms; it's useful, to me, to remind myself of them frequently:

- When a painter sees a white canvas, this is the beginning of the creation of a painting.

- When an actress sees an empty stage, this is the beginning of the creation of scenes and the acting process.
- When a teacher sees a classroom full of learners, this is the beginning of the creation of the learning/teaching process.

And so, what kind of learning/teaching process do I start when I teach Spanish?

In a second language classroom, we are learning another language. Language is one of the most important human social constructs. In the introduction to the reading and language development series of books, "*Hagamos Caminos*," I have read: "*The use of language - and through it, the possibility of communicating thoughts and feelings, sharing past experiences, and planning for the future - is an attribute common to all people. The better we can understand, recall, analyze, share, and shape the world around us, the more fully human we are*" (Ada & de Olave 1986, p. 4).

In a second language classroom, ***the skills of being a complete human being are fundamental***, and it is here that I see the importance of ***connection, understanding, and spontaneity***. To connect with the learners involves taking risks in the classroom and being innovative in preparing lesson plans.

This document will not include a collection of lesson plans because each teacher has his/her own way of understanding and applying methods and techniques. I assume that each language professor has a complete understanding of the importance of having or following a particular or specific methodology of teaching language. In the words of our beloved Diane Larsen-Freeman:

*For we know that teaching is more than following a recipe. Any method is going to be shaped by a teacher's own understanding, beliefs, style, and level of experience. (qtd. in Larsen-Freeman 2000, x)*

*A study of method...can help teachers articulate, and perhaps transform, their understanding of the teaching/learning process. Methods can serve as models of the integration of theory (the principles) and practice (the techniques). Their study can encourage continuing education in the lifelong process of learning to teach. (qtd. in Larsen-Freeman 2000, xi)*

Again, I'd like to emphasize that I do not pretend to offer a specific method to teach; I do not pretend to say which methodologies are the best. It is neither my intention nor my interest. As a language teacher, you need to have your own method.

The philosophy or dilemmas that I want to discuss pertain to your **connection with your self** in your personal process of being a teacher, and that includes the knowledge of your self at the moment that you choose a language methodology. I believe that one needs to be clear in one's lesson plans as to which techniques of language acquisition one is using and why. For me, the process of integrating my passions in a personal approach to teaching Spanish and feminist culture is an idea that I continue working on.

Below is a list of basic suggestions from a standard handout that was given to me at the Language and Culture Center of the School for International Training (LCC-SIT). They are very helpful to me every time I create or review a lesson plan.

## Lesson Planning:

### **Elements to Consider for Self-evaluation**

- What are the skills taught/practiced (speaking, listening, reading, writing)?
- Are they integrated? How?
- Is culture integrated into the lesson? How?
- Is there a coherent theme? (context, content)
- Are the stages of the lesson adequate/appropriate? (presentation of new material, guided practice, free practice, or use)
- Are the transitions smooth? Are the parts logically connected?
- Is there appropriate balance in classroom interaction to maximize student participation? (individual, pair, group work)
- Is there a balance of teacher vs. learner input?
- Are the objectives of the lesson clear?
- How is meaning conveyed?
- How is the learning assessed? How do you know the learner can use what has been presented and practiced?
- Is there variety in the types of tasks/techniques used? Do they allow for different ability levels?
- Do the materials that are used enhance/support the lesson? Do they take into account individual learning styles?
- Are the activities **P** (participatory) **I** (interactive) **C** (communicative)?
- What would be an effective homework activity to reinforce/expand the lesson?
- *Do you have any question/concern/dilemma/new idea about your lesson plan?*

Dilemmas, Utopias, and Gramagineceo:

*El feminismo no muerde, el español tampoco.*

(Feminism does not bite, nor does Spanish.)

--Patricia Pedroza

To live in the United States, the country that I understand to be the leader of the capitalist system - the system that Latin America sees in relationship to racism, exploitation, illegal migration, and political intervention - is a process that challenges my political consciousness and my feminist ideology. In a Spanish class, these are subjects that I am compelled to connect, as part of my lesson plan. Fitting perfectly with my process of integrating feminism and the teaching of a second language are the theories and essays of bell hooks. Her ideas have also helped to shape my own personal philosophy. This quote is characteristic of ms. hooks' thinking:

*My experience with him [Paulo Freire] restored my faith in liberatory education. I had never wanted to surrender the conviction that one could teach without reinforcing existing systems of domination...*

*...Most professors were often deeply antagonistic toward, even scornful of, any approach to learning emerging from a philosophical standpoint emphasizing the union of mind, body, and spirit, rather than the separation of these elements. (hooks 1994, p. 18)*

Since 1985, I have worked doing popular education with “non-educated” women in Mexico. I was trained to do this work using feminist approaches and Paulo Freire’s methodology. At that time in Mexico, the understanding of education as a process of

liberation was fundamental to the process of political liberation, which the feminist movement integrated with the most powerful issues at that time.

I am a feminist language teacher. Not only has my feminist education shaped my philosophy of teaching, but it also continually enables me to examine and assess, in a unique way, the shape that my philosophy has taken. In fact, I believe that, because I was fortunate to be educated as a feminist, I am able to see life with different eyes and to have a different understanding of what it means to create culture - as opposed to just reproducing culture.

Language, as a social product, involves amazing symbolism. The Hispanic culture is a culture full of symbolism that was created through resistance to the colonization process. To be born in a colonized culture is to come face to face with a series of identities that have been shaped by victimization and that are very interesting to analyze. From my feminist perspective, women are a group that has been colonized, in a sense, to conform to a culture created by others: men. Gender is not just a distinction that impacts grammar in the language class. Gender is a social construction. Gender impacts vocabulary, expression, songs, and sayings. To identify the impact of the feminine on culture is a wonderful subject to study in a Spanish class.

In feminist pedagogy, it is not strange to speak about people holistically. I believe that *the human process is a learning process* which includes even more dimensions than those I mentioned earlier (Figure 1). The dimensions that are important to me, as a teacher, are:

- Personal development and self-esteem
- Personal/intimate qualities



- Emotional abilities
- Corporal/organic sensibilities (learners have biological and physical bodies)
- Intellectual skills
- Political/public/collective experiences
- Spiritual aspirations or practices, besides religions
- Spontaneous and creative personal development
- Culture and gender

To create a methodology using a feminist perspective has been my passion for almost 15 years. Today I consider myself a person with diverse knowledge of educational approaches, which, as an educator, I am challenged to actualize. The challenge is to integrate a methodology of teaching about diversity, race, cross-cultural connections, tolerance, multiculturalism, politics, violence, and globalization with a feminist perspective in higher education. I consider that we live in a time in which migration is a daily phenomenon, the movement of languages and cultures is a social issue, and we experience new confrontations and challenges in terms of foreign politics. That is why I am teaching Spanish as a second language in American colleges with young-adult learners at this point in my life.

My approach to feminist pedagogy can be summarized in a list of simple statements (that are in no particular order):

1. I want to construct and practice a feminist pedagogy that is congruent with my own values.

2. As a feminist, I know that “knowledge” is constructed and that every human experience is gendered and colored by race, class, sexual identity, political affiliation, and religion. As a result, I want to recognize all of the knowledge produced for each culture and to teach from a multicultural point of view.
3. The fact that the word “male” continues to be used as a synonym for “human” is something that I want to change.
4. Personal change is directly proportional to social change.
5. The personal is political.
6. If the “male experience” represents the human experience and is everything that we know, then feminist pedagogy shows us “all that we do not know.” In effect, I specialize in teaching “the impossible.”
7. Feminist pedagogy studies the silence of women as a form of resistance in history. Silence does not mean invisibility; it means survival. Despite that, silence is not the answer to oppression.
8. Feminist pedagogy teaches us to create culture, not to reproduce culture. Freedom of thought and expression are fundamental to the process of creating culture.
9. Feminist pedagogy assumes that the classroom is a public and political space, in which a set of interdisciplinary academic courses are taught, and in which it is possible to engage in critical thinking around social issues.
10. Feminist pedagogy wants to instruct and to impact the lives of the students.
11. Feminist pedagogy is linked with the creation of theory that it is possible to apply or to practice.

12. Feminist pedagogy uses the experience of students as a learning resource and gives the learners the principal role in the learning process experience.

### Gender and Creation of Vocabulary:

As you know, feminists are neither much loved, nor very popular. They are often not accepted and, more often, not even recognized. However, today there are marvelous studies of language of great depth and dimension that state that feminism has not been the exception and that the sexual analysis of languages has been in progress since the 1950s. In all languages and cultures, masculine and feminine roles, identities, or distinctions are assigned to all manner of things. These lines have been drawn, for the most part, by our reigning masculine patriarchy. As a teacher of Spanish with a strong perspective regarding gender, I will continue to encourage other teachers to consider gender, in a critical way, when they analyze words, concepts, and ideas with their students. Even today, Spanish words that refer to feminine aspects carry a very negative connotation. For example:

*Dios* (god): principal creator of the universe, whose divinity was transferred to his son  
*Diosa* (goddess): mythological being from obsolete, forgotten cultures, associated with superstition

*Patrimonio* (patrimony): property - in a positive sense

*Matrimonio* (marriage): property - in a negative sense

*Heroe* (hero): idol, leader, one with the ability to change the destiny of other people

*Heriona* (heroine; heroin): a drug

*Hombre publico* (public man): President; politician, leader; our legislators, deputies, congressmen, governors, diplomats, ambassadors

*Mujer publica* (public woman): prostitute

*Hombre ambicioso* (ambitious man): an intelligent individual with goals and personal aspirations

*Mujer ambiciosa* (ambitious woman): bloodsucker, witch, and harpy

*Perro* (dog): man's best friend

*Perra* (bitch): someone vile; someone selfish; prostitute; nagger; nymphomaniac

*Zorro* (fox): able, intelligent, brave

*Zorra*: selfish; accomplished whore; only interested in money; parasite

*Atrevido* (bold): brave, daring

*Atrevida*: insolent, uneducated, gross

*Soltero*: (bachelor): intelligent, able

*Soltera*: left behind; a spinster; unlucky with men; destined to take care of elderly parents

*Suegro* (father-in-law): political father and familiar authority

*Suegra* (mother-in-law): busybody, a pain in the butt; witch

*Aventurero* (adventurer): daring, fearless

*Aventurera*: a prostitute, an easy woman, available for sex

*Machista* (sexist): macho man; a traditional way of being

*Feminista* (feminist): frustrated; lesbian; ugly; unlucky with men; man-hater; murderer for believing in abortion as an alternative to family planning; witch

*Don Juan*: a literary work; conqueror of women, a "man" in every sense of the word.

*Dona Juana*: a servant, maid

We use words unconsciously every day. For many people, it is not important to respect gender. Even within groups of women, when speaking in the third person plural, we still hear the masculine form of *nosotros* (we). All it takes is the presence of one man to completely annul the use of the feminine *nosotras*. In that way, we perpetuate the morphological contradiction of using the masculine *nosotros* to refer to women. Since we are so respectful of tradition, no matter how oppressive, we don't change how we speak. And we have a million excuses for why we don't. However, the history of humanity offers proof, over and over again, of our mastery of the practice of oppression, of making

the presence of others invisible. Each time that we do not include both genders, we make invisible the richness and experience that women contribute - and have contributed, during each day of human existence.

This is an invitation to reflect and to create a language that is not oppressive.

## CHAPTER III

### **Dilemmas of Human Encounters and Human Groups in the Language Classroom**

Encounters between people and the encounter with one's self may be analyzed inside of a context of a philosophy of human relationships. *Un encuentro* (an encounter) happens in the center of what is going on between two people who are experiencing some kind of relationship. There are some relationships that, for me, work perfectly - at least for some period of time. Two examples are the relationship between two lovers, or between a mother and child, when there is an easy and natural process of giving and taking occurring. In each case, there is a change of identity if one is suddenly devoid of the other. Actors without an audience are not actors. Artists without a creative process are not artists. And finally, a teacher without learners is not a teacher. Learners, usually, in some moment of their process of learning, recognize or assume that they need a teacher. I believe it is a gift of the universe every time a teacher meets a learner who is ready to learn, and a learner meets a teacher who loves to teach. That is why I believe some relationships - especially those in which each exists for the other - are perfect.

To meet another person, *encontrarse con el otro/a* (to have an encounter) is more than to say:

*Nice to meet you!*

*Hi, how are you?*

*Who are you?*

*What is your name?*

*Encontrarse*, to have an encounter, is to open the complete being/spirit and to create a link where freedom of expression is possible. It is more than just pretending to be nice.

*Encuentro* means *en contra*, **to create a safe space to say the things that supposedly you should not say**. For example, this will give you an idea of the way in which I introduce myself at the beginning of a course:

*Hi, guys. I am Patricia. I am nervous about starting this new course. I have a syllabus that I am not sure will work very well. Besides the syllabus/program, I will explain to you all the feelings that I have at this moment. I am so bad at organizing a program for six months. I am nervous about starting to work with a new group, because I'm anxious to know quickly whether or not you like me. I will explain the program to you and all of the emotions that I'm feeling at this moment. I would love to take off my shoes and relax on the floor. Now that I have expressed my inner thoughts to you, I feel better, and I want to continue to express exactly how I am feeling and to work together with you on this journey of communication. Thank you. What about you?*

I, as a teacher, need to look for this moment in the encounter. I need to look for the opportunity to expose myself with my real being. I have shown them my own vulnerability. I have had the courage to expose what I believe to be true about being a teacher at that moment. If you had the opportunity to show the learners in your class your

own vulnerability, what would you share with them? What would you *like* to share with them?

The subject of connections between people is a subject as big as the universe. Connecting with another human being is an enormous mystery for me. I really believe I have come from another galaxy. Perhaps this is why this topic is so fascinating to me. Every time someone asks me: “What is the title of your thesis for your Master’s?”, I answer: “Encounters of the 15<sup>th</sup> Kind.”

I started using this title as a joke until I realized one night how important it is to me to be connected with other human beings. To meet people, to know people, to join together with people has been one of the most wonderful gifts that I have enjoyed along with the miracle of being alive on this planet.

Of course, as teachers, we assume that connecting with our learners is a fundamental part of creating a safe and communal environment in the classroom. When I reviewed a collection of evaluations from my students, I realized that they consider me to be a good teacher because “*I can see them.*” In general, I have received good evaluations about my energy and enthusiasm in class, but there are a considerable number of comments about how the students know “*that I know that they are in the classroom.*” What does it mean to *see* the students in the classroom? What does it mean to know the names of the learners? What does it mean to connect with the learners in a classroom?

In the process of writing this document, I wrote a lot about my own process of being a learner. I wrote many pages about remembering hours and hours of being bored in the classroom, listening to some of my teachers speaking about something with which I could never connect. Also, I wrote several stories about having fun in the classroom. I



needed to write almost seventy pages just to remember that, as a student, I had a place in the classroom! When I read over these memories, I observed three recurring themes that I identified as *essential to the connection of my teachers with me: love, speaking the truth, and simplicity.*

I strive to keep these principles in mind, in my current interaction with the learners in my practice of teaching. Despite the fact that these elements seem simple, their practice is not simple. As a result, I wrote about different levels or kind of encounters that I have observed that I create, in terms of the ongoing process of meeting the learners in the classroom.

#### Close Encounters of the First Kind:

**More than Names, Learners are Complete Persons:** Most teachers know how hard it is to learn all of the names of the learners, especially at the beginning of each course. There are hundreds of strategies to use to try to learn the names of the students, and I'm sure each of us has our favorites. However, the phenomenon is the same; some names come easily, while others are more difficult to learn.

More than their names, however, it is *the presence of the learners* that is most important. When I encounter a new group for the first time, the first thing that I do is to say *thank you* to each individual in the classroom, thus acknowledging the honor of their presence. Each presence has an energy that makes me aware that I have come into contact with complete, multidimensional, intelligent human beings.

I enjoy the light in the eyes of the learners; I enjoy their smiles, their gestures. I observe each face carefully. The varied forms of the faces are wonderful, each one so different. I try to establish visual contact at the deepest level that I can. I need to be careful, however; usually people are not used to making eye contact, and they can feel intimidated. It is also important to consider the student's cultural background. As a Mexican teacher, I come from a culture where touching, kissing, and looking directly into the eyes is "normal" in the daily interaction between people. In an effort to keep the balance and not to create intimidation, I try to direct my eyes toward a neutral location on the body. I try not to abuse the privilege of direct eye contact in order to make the students feel more comfortable. I take all the time I need to make visual contact with each new student and I allow them time to make eye contact with the rest of the group. Usually this takes a complete session. Initially, looking closely at other people in the classroom makes students feel nervous, laugh, and carry on all kind of distracting conversations. During the semester we repeat this exercise on different occasions, partly to observe the changes in the dynamics, and partly to recognize that some faces are familiar, while others still seem invisible. Also, we comment that, little by little, some people are becoming more familiar to us. We try to be aware of the closeness or the distance. Both responses are valid. I explain that it is not bad to feel more of a connection with some classmates than with others. I allow them to feel the connection and the disconnection. *Encuentros y desencuentros* (connections and disconnections) are both natural to human relationships.

## Close Encounters of the Second Kind:

**Seasons of the Body:** The human body has its time to be active or to be passive. We have different energy during the day. I love to call this ebb and flow of energy: seasons. We have seasons to rest, seasons to be active, seasons to study, and, in the Spanish class, seasons to conjugate verbs and to learn grammar!

The second encounter that I love to explore with the learners involves movement - connecting with how they feel in the class, and connecting with who they are as physical bodies. Of course, this dynamic includes movement in the classroom. Everybody needs to stand up, to breathe, to walk, to walk at different paces (slowly or quickly), to walk alone and to walk next to others, to walk in small groups and to walk as a complete group. We walk, imagining we are different ages, imagining we are in a Hispanic country, and thinking we speak Spanish fluently. In this way, we relax and become comfortable as a group. We develop trust. We learn that we have a life - as a group!

While we're engaged in this dynamic, we reflect on the next questions:

- What does it mean to connect with the body?
- How do I move?
- Do I like to move quickly?
- Do I like to move slowly?
- How does my body feel, during the time that the class meets?
- What is the energy that I bring to the classroom?
- What makes me feel anxious or relaxed, distracted or focused, able to receive or not to receive information, able to share or not to share in communication?

After finishing the walks, they need some time to think and to write about their responses.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind:

*We are souls.  
I am a soul.  
Learners are souls.*

In the book The Secret of Love, Harold Klemp mentions that the teachings of Eckankar, a modern religion, define the nature of Soul as a particle of God sent into the worlds (including Earth) to gain spiritual experience. *“People think that they have a soul. They say very proudly, ‘I have a soul,’ ”* but, he says: *“You can’t own Soul because you are Soul. You are a spark of God. You are divine Light and Sound put together in a form called Soul. And this Soul inhabits a human body...”* (1996, pp. 2-3).

When I, as a teacher, have such respect for the learners in the classroom, believing that they are these divine sparks of God, the privilege of being with them, sharing a lesson in Spanish, is also converted into a *divine experience*, an experience full of love and divine interaction between a group of Souls, a group of divine sparks, learning how to conjugate verbs - learning how to communicate the action of divine sparks in new ways. And in this way, those Souls before me become open to a larger universe of Souls. I have the opportunity to enjoy this spiritual connection with the learners as a result of the gift of coincidence and coexistence - the gift of being brought all together, in a moment in time, to attend a course during the academic year. Why this

semester and not another? Why these learners and not others? Why Spanish and not another language? These are questions that I am not interested in answering, because the Universe works with many external and internal circumstances to bring me, as a teacher, together with a group of learners. Conversely, sometimes there are people with whom I do not wish to be. And, I expect, there are people who do not wish to be with me. If we are together, it is because many aspects helped to bring us together inside of a classroom.

There is a Spanish song that I love to use to explain *the gift of the coincidence, el regalo divino de la coincidencia*, to my students:

**“Coincidir”**  
by Mexicanto

<i>Soy vecino de este mundo por un rato</i>	I am a neighbor of this world for a while
<i>Y hoy coincide</i>	and today I agree
<i>Que también tu estas aquí</i>	that you are here too
<i>Coincidencias tan extrañas</i>	What a curious coincidence
<i>de la vida</i>	in this life
<i>Tantos siglos, tantos mundos</i>	so many centuries, so many worlds
<i>Tanto espacio</i>	so much space
<i>Y coincidir</i>	and to coincide
<i>Si navego con la mente</i>	If I travel through space
<i>Los espacios</i>	in my mind
<i>O si quiero a mis ancestros</i>	Or I want to remember my
<i>Recordar</i>	ancestors
<i>Agobiada me detengo</i>	overwhelmed I stop myself
<i>Y no imagino</i>	and I cannot imagine
<i>Tantos siglos, tantos mundos</i>	so many centuries, so many worlds
<i>Tanto espacio</i>	so much space
<i>Y coincidir</i>	and to coincide
<i>Si en la noche me entretengo</i>	If at night I entertain myself
<i>En las estrellas</i>	in the stars
<i>Y capturo, la que empieza</i>	and I capture one that begins
<i>A florecer</i>	to bloom
<i>La sostengo entre mis manos</i>	I hold it in my hands
<i>Mas me alarma</i>	but I am alarmed
<i>Tantos siglos, tantos mundos</i>	so many centuries, so many worlds

<i>Tanto espacio</i>	so much space
<i>Y coincidir</i>	and to coincide
<i>Si la vida se sostiene</i>	If life holds itself together
<i>Por instantes</i>	for instants
<i>Y un instante</i>	and an instant
<i>Es un momento de existir</i>	is a moment of existence
<i>Si tu vida es otro instante</i>	if your life is another instant
<i>No comprendo</i>	I do not understand
<i>Tantos siglos, tantos mundos</i>	so many centuries, so many worlds
<i>Tanto espacio</i>	so much space
<i>Y coincidir</i>	and to coincide

I say to the learners: We coincide here and I have many messages for you, but believe me, ***I am more interested in the messages that you have for me.*** I am the professor of this Spanish class, and, since we have had the good fortune to coincide in this class, I will share with you many wonderful aspects of the Spanish language - ***just for the pleasure of sharing with you*** in this space of coincidence in which we have all arrived.

I have the messages of the sounds of my native language:

***a e i o u***

I can teach you the vocabulary that you may want to know:

***Sexo*** (sex), ***orgasmo*** (orgasm), ***amor*** (love), ***mamá, papá, cantar*** (to sing), ***reír*** (to laugh), ***amar*** (to love), ***amante*** (lover), ***comer*** (to eat), ***dormir*** (to sleep), ***bailar*** (to dance), ***cine*** (cinema), ***teatro*** (theater), ***chocolate, paz*** (peace)...

I can teach you wonderful Spanish expressions:

***“Bendita sea la boca que da besos y no traga monedas.”***  
 (“Blessed is the mouth that kisses without being coin-operated.” --Joaquín Sabina)

*¿Qué onda?* (What's up? *Onda* = "wave"; literally: Which wave [are you riding]?)

Fellow Souls, these are some of the ways in which I can open you up to a larger

Soul-world:

- You can travel through 24 countries where people speak Spanish. So, Spanish is multinational.
- In the United States, Spanish is the official second language.
- It is true that Spanish is not the language that conquered the world, but you can be connected with the sounds of the Opera, because Spanish has Latin sounds that are big and deep...Can you imagine being an opera singer?
- You can learn about the romance languages and find similar sounds, grammar, and meanings in Latin, French, Italian, Portuguese, Rumanian, and Spanish.
- Touching Spanish, you can touch the cosmic race: *the mestizo race*, which includes people of all colors - yellow, black, brown, white, and all their variations. In fact, Spanish is a language that could be described as Mestiza, the mixed-race child of people with widely diverse backgrounds.
- Today, the history of Spanish is the history of more than 2,000 native indigenous and extinct languages that were spoken on this continent before "civilization" arrived from Europe.
- Touching Spanish, you can touch the history of centuries of colonization and destruction. You can touch people who have survived the most horrible political regimes, yet who are still somehow singing, working, and living with joy - while usually working to benefit other more powerful economies.
- Touching Spanish, you can touch the history of civilizations which have honored a multitude of goddesses and gods, and which maintain strong traditions built around such ideas as loving your death and venerating your ancestors.
- Touching Spanish, you can dive into deeply enigmatic indigenous cultures - and confront the dark impulse to kill, usually with great speed and determination, our indigenous roots.
- In our language class, we will talk about how often and easily humanity encounters new and unfamiliar cultures. Our borders - economical, political, social, and cultural - are infinite. Yet the ease with which we can travel

physically, by vehicles of all sorts, and intellectually, by printed and wired and wireless means, makes the world an increasingly small place - a place in which the experience and expression of diverse thought and language is both wondrous and unavoidable.

- You can be in touch with the reality that you can travel around the American continent and hear and speak three main languages: French, English, and Spanish.
- Languages evolve and grow in different ways; and, unfortunately, many languages are disappearing because today they are a big business. Some people believe that certain languages give you “more for your money than others.” One of them, the language that is responsible for what some authors call “the MacDonalidization process,” tends to be regarded as the “universal” language. We should consider: What is the meaning of this? What is the meaning in social and linguistic terms? in cultural terms? What does this say about our respect for other cultures?
- Remember that every time you use the word “America” to refer to only one country, you make the rest of the continent invisible. To disregard others is a subtle form of colonization that invalidates the presence and the soul of others.

I can open you up, as Souls, to more of these Soul-ideas, Soul-examinations, and Soul-questions in our Spanish language class.

However, more important to me are the messages that you have for me. The most important is to know who you are. Being a language teacher, it is important to know how we cross borders, how we meet people. Why is it a gift to know people? Perhaps it is just because *we*, as humans, *are fascinated with other people*.

Another little exercise we do, with everyone sitting in a circle, is to ask ourselves what we are fascinated by, in other people. We start with this phrase:

I am fascinated by people who (fill in the blank).

(I am fascinated by people who love to laugh.)

(I am fascinated by people who love dogs.)

(I am fascinated by people who share a concern for the ecology.)



(I am fascinated by people who speak more than one language.)

When we finish this circle of sharing, I tell the class: Accept my silence and open this space of coincidence and interconnection between you and me, between me and you, *between all of us*.

### Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind:

As a teacher, I work with *groups*. The group works in a classroom. Humans beings are born, grow up, live and learn in groups. Human beings are connecting, linking beings. We create bonds and ties, and we create groups. In groups we love each other or we hate each other; we are tolerant or intolerant. We play in groups, we have fun - and we create conflicts. We create culture and society in groups.

A group has requirements. A group, to be a group, needs to be “in union”; it needs to be together. You may think this is obvious - and it is! Something that I love about psychodrama theory is that it has the wisdom of *simplicity*. If we are together, we are a group; we form a group, when we are together. To be a member of a group, you must need others and be able to listen to others.

The connections between learners within a group are an interesting phenomena that I love to explore in my classes. I observe carefully how the learners decide to work with each other. Before asking the learners to work with someone that they don't know, I prefer to respect their right of free association, allowing them to decide in the moment to work in a couple or in a small group of three or four. When I give them freedom of

choice, I can easily see who is isolated, why it is easy for others to work together, or why some learners insist on working with one person in particular.

There are different kinds of “little groups” inside of the larger group. For example: The couple - in which both prefer to work with only one other person. Triangles - in which two may be active, or discuss very easily, while the third plays the role of mediator perhaps. In a triangle, also, sometimes two will work very hard, while the third just takes the information created by the others. Groups of four or more - in which excellent discussion can occur and the work is easily divided up, in which it is practical to create collaborative work. When I observe how they make their first choice in selecting their peers, it is easy for me later to try to organize them into different groups. I consider that, in fact, it is good for the groups to change peers, so that everyone gets to know everyone else in the whole group. But I prefer that they have the option first of selecting their own team. Afterwards, they will work with others, and I will ask them to be aware of the ways in which it is different for them. If they prefer to work only with one person during the complete term, it is OK with me, but they need to know why they prefer to do that. To know this is part of being connected with themselves in their process of being a learner inside of a group.

As part of the dynamic inside of the classroom, it is important for me to keep the balance between each learner as an individual and the group as a whole. I like to work with each individual necessity, but, at the same time, there is a group necessity. To maintain the balance between the individual and the group requires some art and mastery. I seek that balance every time I start a new course.

I have summarized now my process of trying to connect with the learners in my classroom: First, looking into their eyes, being thankful for their presence, respecting their physical energy, recognizing their divine presence, assuming that they have wonderful and unique skills as complete human beings, teaching the things that I consider to be great about my culture and my language, sharing my passion for the process of crossing borders, and connecting with them individually and as a group. This - working together in a connected way in a language class - is just the prelude to deciding what kind of methodology I would like to use with the learners.

## CHAPTER IV

### **Drama as Philosophy and Methodology**

*Drama (Greek) means ACTION.  
Drama is a tool that many teachers use in the classroom.  
Drama implies a creative work, and creative work is play.*

In his book Free Play, Stephen Nachmanovitch writes:

*Improvisation, composition, writing, painting, theater, invention, all creative acts are forms of play, the starting place of creativity in the human growth cycle, and one of the great primal life functions. Without play, learning and evolution are impossible. Play is the taproot from which original art springs; it is the raw stuff that the artist channels and organizes with all his learning and technique...The creative mind plays with the objects it loves. Artists play with color and space. Musicians play with sound and silence. Eros plays with lovers. Gods play with the universe. Children play with everything they can get their hands on.*

(1990, p. 42)

As a teacher, I play with language and culture, grammar, lesson plans, reading and speaking exercises, and exercises for developing other skills. I love to be playful in the classroom. Many years ago, I made a decision: *If somebody in my classroom is going*

*to have fun, it's going to be me.* Every time I prepare a class, I look for a way to have fun (besides playing with the balance of the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.)

I can't control whether all the learners will love the dynamics and the topics of each class, but I'm sure that it helps a lot to have joy in the class.

Nachmanovitch is one of my favorite authors as he describes the action of **play**: “ ‘Play’ is different from ‘game.’ *Play is the free spirit of exploration, doing and being for its own pure joy. Game is an activity defined by a set of rules...Play is an attitude, a spirit, a way of doing things...* ” (Ibid., p. 43).

What does drama mean to me in the classroom? When I say drama is my philosophy, it is because I integrate action with almost all of my activities inside of the classroom. ***Drama is my attitude in the classroom.***

When I was working as an actress, I was trained to look for the dramatic action on the stage. It is the difference between “pretending” and being alive. When we observe children playing, we see that they are absolutely immersed in the action. They are not worried about “pretending”; they really believe in the world and the universe that they are experiencing. They are not worried about how they speak and what ideas they communicate; they are not worried if others are watching. They are complete beings as they play. Children are the perfect actors because they are playing with “acts,” and, as Nachmanovitch says: “*Acts are pulled from their normal context into the special context of play*” (Ibid., p. 43).

Like the stage, the classroom needs to be an established and protected setting for play. We need safety in order to feel free enough to play even in the face of great danger -

such as a Spanish grammar exam on the subjunctive, conditional, or imperative! The tool that helps me to create this safe space in the classroom is connected with the theory of psychodrama.

I need to clarify that in this document I will not be developing in a deep way techniques for using psychodrama in the classroom. My reasons are: First, it is my experience that psychodrama has been used primarily in group therapy and conflict-resolution. Certainly it has been used in education, too. But right now I do not know of any approach that uses psychodrama to teach languages. And second, to prove the potential of psychodrama as an approach to teach languages would be a complete thesis dissertation in itself and would require, in my opinion, at least three years of observation and work with other psychodramatists. This is obviously beyond the scope of my current endeavor. However, I mention psychodrama because I have studied and practiced it for the last seven years. And, since the philosophy of psychodrama changed my perspective as a teacher completely, naturally I wanted to integrate it into my practice of teaching.

I had the opportunity to learn how to use psychodrama in 1996 at the Mexican School of Psychodrama in Mexico City with Jaime Winkler and Carmen Bello. I also had the opportunity to take some workshops with Dalmiro Bustos and Elena Nosedá from Argentina, both of whom were pioneers of Pedagogical Psychodrama in Latin America.

In teaching, psychodrama can create openings for the learners to get a better grasp of the topics that are explored in class.

*Conceived and developed in 1946 by Jacob L. Moreno, MD,  
psychodrama employs guided dramatic action to examine problems or  
issues raised by an individual (psychodrama) or a group (sociodrama).*

*Using experiential methods, sociometry, role theory, and group dynamics, Psychodrama facilitates insight, personal growth, and integration of cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. It clarifies issues, increases physical and emotional well-being, enhances learning and develops new skills. (<http://www.asgpp.org/pdrama1.htm>)*

Below are the basic elements of classic psychodrama, as I have adapted them to apply in my classes, when I feel that it would be beneficial to use drama in the classroom:

- A. The Protagonist:** the student(s) who become(s) the voice of the complete group, helping to identify the topics that the class needs to review.
- B. The Auxiliary Egos:** four or five volunteers who will help the protagonist in this collaborative process.
- C. The Audience:** the rest of the learners, who will learn by watching and experiencing the dramatization.
- D. The Stage:** the safe space that we have created so that the learners feel comfortable speaking up and engaging in dramatization inside of the classroom.
- E. The Director:** The professor.

The structure of a session/class of psychodrama also involves *three distinct phases:*

- 1. The Warm-up:** in which the group theme is identified and a protagonist is selected.
- 2. The Action:** in which the theme is dramatized and the protagonist explores new

methods of resolving a problem, or explores new strategies to reinforce the use of the language.

- 3. The Sharing/Processing:** in which the audience is invited to express their connection with, or response to, the protagonist's analysis/answer/discovery/new linguistic insight...etc.

### An Example of a Lesson Using Dramatic Pedagogy:

**Non-specific Warm-up Phase:** *Hola, ¿como están hoy?* The whole group needs to walk and create movements that reflect the energy of the group at the time of the class. They need to ask at least three people in the classroom how they are and how they prepared for the class. Little by little, everyone gets to know how everyone else feels for this specific session.

**Specific Warm-up Phase:** I ask the class which grammar point they believe they need to review in class, as part of the current program that we are studying. They can suggest two, three, or maybe five subjects. It is necessary to take notes on the topics that they suggest. I say to them: It is not possible to review everything in one day, so select one topic. They need to prioritize, deciding which topic is the most urgent and necessary. Each topic is represented by a learner. If we have five topics, we need to have five learners. After some discussion, topics are eliminated until we have only two. When we have identified the two finalists, then the group decides which is to be the subject of the day. For this example, I am using the topic of indirect pronouns that are typically a little confusing in Spanish. When we have narrowed our topics down to one, which will be



represented by one learner, we have selected *our protagonist for the exercise. **The protagonist is the pronouns, NOT the learner.***

**Action:** We will dramatize talking with the pronouns, and try to identify where exactly our problem is with these specific pronouns. The group directs questions to the student about pronouns, such as - and this is typical: “*Why are you guys so difficult to learn?!*” The student, in her/his role as “pronoun,” answers with whatever ideas pop into her/his head. If she or he has no answer, the role is shared with others (auxiliary egos). *All of a sudden the complete class is involved in a dialogue with the pronouns, not with the learner!* The class usually runs in a “logical” sequence, with the group giving examples, helping each other, asking questions, playing with structures - and having fun! Of course, the teacher (the director) needs to be ready to clarify any questions and to guide the process. For me, this is a time of “light,” or clarity, revealing to me questions that the students have, or what they are wondering about the topic, or the level of grammar information that they actually have.

This is a simple example of the use of *dramatic action* in the classroom. We choose a topic, and the learners explore it with questions, thus exposing and sharing a vulnerability in the learning process, as a group. To be vulnerable in the learning process means, to me, to remain in the dark about something - which is usually a frightening experience. But we do not create the typical skit or dramatization, which can be intimidating. Instead, this process is more relaxed and free flowing. Of course, the next step is to practice writing, reading, speaking, and listening exercises that reinforce the use and application of pronouns, and perhaps engage in some additional dramatizations.

**Sharing:** In this part, every one has the opportunity to express what they have learned and what still needs to be clarified. Usually I ask my class to think of a homework exercise that they believe will be good for them, to help them remember and practice what has been learned. In my experience, they have wonderful suggestions, and they work harder at the homework because it has been their own idea. I just reinforce something, if it seems necessary.

This is the end of the session. In terms of time, it is possible to do this in fifty-five minutes. A session of an hour and a half is perfect.

I would like to emphasize that in psychodrama the protagonist is the manifestation of the doubts of the group with regard to their mastery of some material. Pedagogical psychodrama is different than drama. A psychodrama session is a session in which we watch the Psyche in action. Psychodrama is the science that seeks to arrive at the truth through dramatic methodology. Psychodrama explores the soul's truth - the gospel truth - through action, and connects a group together through shared truths. In a classroom, each learner is different; each learner has different answers, different responses. In order to create a space for the expression or manifestation of personal skills, a process is required. Psychodrama is a tool for creating a space in which people can interact, talk, discuss, learn, and create *encounters* with freedom.

When I want to draw out the creativity of the learners in my classes, I also rely on the concepts of creativity and spontaneity from the theory of psychodrama. The E/C factor, or *Esponaneidad/Creatividad* (Spontaneity/Creativity) factor, is an important one in the theory of psychodrama

*“La espontaneidad opera en el presente, en el aquí y ahora, estimula al individuo hacia una respuesta adecuada a una situación nueva o a una respuesta nueva a una situación ya conocida”* (qtd. in Boria 2001, p. 99). Without translating Moreno’s words above literally, the idea here is: *Spontaneity operates, here and now, in present time. It is the appropriate response to a new situation or the new response to an old situation.* Spontaneity and creativity are merged in a concrete act. They operate together. Very simply: If we do not have spontaneity, we do not have creativity; and if we do not have creativity, we do not have spontaneity. The catalyst for creativity is spontaneity. Moreno explores these ideas more deeply in his book Who Shall Survive?, in which he articulates his vision of spontaneity.

In Spanish we have expressions that, for me, obviously reflect the spontaneity of the Latin culture:

*¿Qué se te antoja?* (What do you feel like doing/saying/going?)

*¿Qué te nace en este momento?* (At this moment, what is being born inside you?)

*¿Qué te nace decir desde el corazón?* (What is being born inside your heart?)

When a person is asked: *¿Qué te nace decir?* (What do you feel like saying?), maybe he/she doesn’t feel like saying anything; therefore, his/her spontaneous answer is silence. It is very important to respect that. I need to respect equally the person who speaks out and the person who says nothing - both are spontaneous behaviors. It is very important for me as a teacher to keep in mind these thoughts about spontaneity because, in the classroom, I am often confronted with the complete apathy of the learners. That’s why I need to connect with my own spontaneity and creativity as a teacher and to answer

the next question: *Why are we here in this classroom?... We are here to learn Spanish. At least, that is what I believe!*

But, no, the students are there because:

- They need the credits for graduation. (Usually English Majors require a foreign language credit.)
- The Division of Art and Humanities requires it.
- It is required for General Education accreditation.
- They believe that Spanish is “easier” than French or German.

Faced with this reality frequently, I need to remember how to get in touch with my own creativity and to put into practice all of my beliefs about connecting with the learners. I do not want to connect with the idea that they are there because they are obligated by general education requirements; I’d rather take the risk of confronting their apathy. And in order to confront their apathy, I need to be entirely authentic; I need to find my true self. To reconnect with my intellectual self, I ask myself questions. To reconnect with my spiritual self, I sometimes write poetry. Here are examples of both:

- When do words become literature?
- When is instruction teaching?
- How do I balance structure and spontaneity, and discipline and freedom in my classroom?
- Who am I?
- How do the others/learners see me?
- What is the mystery of the encounter of the self with the other?

- I am a language teacher because I want to be a link between people and cultures. Is this possible?
- How do I connect with my culture?
- If I don't identify myself as Mexican, then who am I?
- If I tell you that I am from Mexico, what do you assume about me?
- If I tell you that I am from Greece, what do you assume about me?
- Are you sure you can see me without stereotypes?
- What questions do you have for me?
- How can I recognize you if I see United States' citizens and United States' culture in my own stereotypical ways?
- How can I go beyond the ideas that I have heard about the apathy of United States college students?
- How can I define genealogy? Cultural genealogy?
- Who constructed my ideas?
- Who invented my history?
- What is under the banner of my history?
- How can I merge my culture with the culture of others?

-----  
*Patricia, send these questions wrapped as a gift in the shape of a dove*

*Rolled up like historical epigrams*

*Cradle this dove in your hands for a long time, Patricia*

*Caress its body softly, and take a good look at it*

*Before its contents pour inside of you*

*You will never be the same professor, Patricia*

*Every day is an opportunity to teach with new energy*

*In ancient times, poetry was used as an instrument to achieve solid goals*

*You, Patricia, can restore to poetry its noble role*

*Patricia-teacher, please come back*

*If you say yes, that you want to come back*

*What other choice would I have but to make you happy?*

*Patricia-teacher, what are you waiting for?*

After doing these kinds of exercises, I feel the power to be the “perfect teacher in the perfect class.” I feel the energy to prepare my lesson plan.

In the next chapter, I will offer some examples of the kind of lesson plans that I create without “recipes” and without “magic formulas,” but with the spontaneity and creativity that the methodologies of psychodrama and drama offer to me.

## CHAPTER V

### *¿Ser o Estar? That is the Question.*

*Teach as you like and die happy.*

--Patricia Pedroza

**To be = *ser* and *estar***

**I am a teacher. = *Soy una maestra.***

In English it is enough to say: I am a teacher. But in Spanish it is not the same. It is not the same *ser una maestra que estar una maestra*. As a Spanish teacher, I am sure I can share with you, if you teach Spanish, how long it takes for English speakers to understand the difference between *ser* and *estar*. For me, the difference involves both philosophy and perception about life, so I will use this analogy, as I close my document:

I am a teacher when I decide *how to teach*. I have written about my philosophy of teaching in this paper. I am a teacher when I use my complete intelligence, with all of my dimensions, in creative ways. *Soy una maestra, but no estoy una maestra. Estoy una maestra* is like being a plant: *Estoy ahí*, I am here or there, but I cannot move. *Soy una maestra*, I am a teacher, implies to be in the classroom with a holistic presence, my complete humanity, and an awareness of how I am connected with the class, the learners, and the subject that I am teaching, for instance: grammar.

## Grammaring:

I did not know what it means to confuse a gerund and an adjective until I learned the different terms and understood them. I was able to be more playful with my native language when I began to learn another language. I do not want to write this as a directive; I am speaking about my personal process of connecting with my own language through the learning of my second language, English. Other symbols and metaphors, other grammar structures, and other meanings are discovered during the process of learning a second language. For example, while thinking about the plural form and the singular form, I wrote:

*I am a woman of PLURALS. I can tell you: This is me. I have PLURAL identities.*

*I was born into a PLURAL family.*

*PLURAL! Not one - but two, three, four, five, six, seven.*

*What is the difference between PLURAL and BIG?*

*I knew THE BIG, not with the meaning of big, but with the meaning of PLURAL.*

*I felt THE NUMBER!*

*I was a SINGULAR girl between PLURAL brothers. I grew up feeling that THE I was not enough against THE THEY. THEY were always the majority!*

*Being a PLURAL sister, I learned to add not only letters to words, but also to add chairs to the table at mealtime, to add bread to the shopping list, and to add dates to the list of birthdays of my family.*



As Diane Larsen-Freeman has said, *grammaring is a skill* that can be developed (qtd. in Murcia, Larson-Freeman 1999, p. 6). I've created some of my own concepts for grammar exercises, in order to have fun in my Spanish classes:

***Gramanita:*** *Manito* and *Manita* are short words that refer to your brothers and sisters in the Mexican tradition. Little brother = *Hermanito* = *Manito*; Little sister = *Hermanita* = *Manita*. *Gramanita* is the process of viewing grammar as a little sister that you can play with in class.

***Gramaticalizando:*** the process of analyzing the use grammar.

***Gramaticoligizando:*** the process of combating the idea that grammar is illogical.

***Gramagineceo:*** the process of thinking of the feminine and feminist attributes of grammar.

***Gramarockandoleando:*** the process of learning and practicing grammar using Rock and Roll.

***Gramarapeando:*** the process of learning and practicing grammar skills using “Rap.”

***Gramahollywood:*** the process of pointing out to the learners that, if they can absorb tremendous amounts of trivia about the currently popular “stars” of Hollywood (i.e., Madonna, Antonio Banderas, Ricky Martín, Jennifer Lopez...), then absorbing the rules of grammar should be a cinch!

***Gramagringolandia:*** the process of understanding the typical patterns of English speakers called *gringos*, like: *Yo gusto viajar. Yo soy 18 años. Yo comprar muchas cervezas. Mi querer dormir.*

***Gramaconociéndonos:*** the process of learning greetings and introductions.

***Gramatocádonos:*** the process of playing with physical movement while learning grammar structures.

***Gramachocolateando:*** the process of rewarding the learners with chocolates after a test!

***Megagramática:*** the ongoing process of combating the idea that grammar is boring.

### Introducing the Spanish Verb *Gustar* (To Like):

1. “OK, guys, I explained to you and showed you how to use the verb *gustar* in Spanish. Would one of you act like me and repeat exactly what I said? In that way, I can see if I have shared the ideas that I think should be helpful to you, regarding Spanish communication, expression, grammar, and sentences related to, and using, the verb *gustar*. Who will do it? Oh, thank you, Jesse!”

2. Jesse acts like Patricia and ***repeats*** exactly the things that she said. “Thank you, Jesse!”

3. “Did Jesse forget anything? Does anyone want to try to communicate the ideas in a different way, using other examples? Thank you, Stacy! OK, the stage is yours, thank you so much!”

Why do I use this process? ***I follow the practices of psychodrama:***

- I share some information and I check to see if my message was transmitted.
- It is very important to ask the student to repeat the information in exactly the

same way that I relayed it. I need to know how the message was received, in order to know whether or not I have created a safe space.

- We put a protagonist in front of an audience.
- The class has the opportunity to repeat and to explore the new information in their own code.
- I receive feedback from the learners by paying attention to their interpretation.
- They help each other.
- They love to imitate me. They love to use their own examples.
- The self-correction happens automatically.

4. The whole group is divided into small groups to write and practice the models and examples that we've created in class. The class may check the grammar information in the book to see if it now makes more sense to them.

5. The small groups decide what kind of homework assignment would be the most helpful for them, in order to remember and practice the information that they've learned.

6. The class closes with a general sharing of feedback about the session.

7. In the next class, any homework that the learners have done is checked. At this time, the students discover common problems that they may have encountered while completing the assignment.

These are the things that I have learned, using this kind of approach:

- If I place the responsibility on the learners, they love to take it!
- They think of excellent ways to practice the target language.

- I quickly realize what the learners do not understand. For example, when I observe that they are using the same vocabulary, it could mean that they do not really understand other expressions. If they are repeating the same mistakes, they quickly figure out what is not clear, when the whole groups gets involved in the correction process - and nobody feels that she/he was the *only person* who did not understand. Sometimes we baptize the day with the name of that error, and we remember that mistake with joy; for instance: The Day of *me gusto la pizza* (instead of *me gusta la pizza*). When I read their class evaluations, they usually write jokes about “The Day of *me gusto la pizza*,” referring to how many times they needed to hear this until they finally got it correct.

It’s easy to say that this is just a classroom strategy, but it’s more than that. In order to create a safe space where learners feel free to “imitate” the teacher, where they will take “the stage,” where they will be the “protagonist,” etc., the teacher must have the humility to know that she/he does not always have the “best” explanation, that everybody in the classroom is able to create theory and practice, and that she/he cannot make assumptions about the needs of the learners. This practice assumes that the teacher needs to encounter the learners exactly in the place in which they are, with their own intellectuality, their own spontaneous thoughts and ideas, and their own learning process. This practice assumes that the classroom is the stage on which the *truth* about the learning process is explored and revealed - with respect, creativity, and spontaneity.

In the classroom, we experience the encounter. ***I, as a teacher, need to look for that moment of the encounter.*** Looking for that moment means:

- I have created a process of connection with the learners.
- I have told them the truth about how I feel in class and how I love to teach.
- I have told them that, in the same way that they may have a favorite way to learn, I also have a favorite way to teach; and I need the freedom to use and to express my creativity.
- I have told them that I am not the only person in charge of the class.
- I have told them I am not perfect, and sometimes I really do not know how to explain some grammar concepts.
- I have shown them how “to act” and how to enjoy the class.
- I have shown them my own vulnerability.
- I have done a warm-up exercise with my class.
- I have had the courage to expose myself and everything that I believe to be true about being a teacher at that moment.

#### Developing Reading Skills with a Short Novel:

**“Latinos in the USA” - Introduction:** The goal of my class, “Latinos in the USA,” is to review the impact and presence of the Latin population in the USA after the 1960s. The class is conducted in Spanish and the learners will study culture, history, and literature through Latin texts. The learners will need to read at least three novels in Spanish. The authors that I present are Cristina Garcia (Cuba), Esmeralda Santiago (Puerto Rico), and Sandra Cisneros (Mexico). The most difficult text that they will face is the novel *Soñar en Cubano* by Cristina Garcia. I start the semester with this book.

The class meets two days per week in sessions of one hour and twenty minutes. Most of the students are usually from the USA; a few may be native Spanish speakers. The students will be required to keep a journal in Spanish, in which they will explore how they are connecting with the text, writing down personal reflections about *who they are as readers in a foreign language (Spanish)*.

**Pre-reading Activities - Session One:** To provide some background and context for the novel, we watch a short video in which a Cuban woman tells the story of her mother's family, which was split up by the circumstances of the Civil War in Spain during the 1940s. Some of the family members fled to Cuba as political refugees, where they were subsequently split up once again by the Cuban Revolution of the 50s and 60s. The video is in Spanish with English subtitles; it's only about ten minutes long.

After watching the video, the students discuss the separation of families and the circumstances that can lead to separation. They will converse in Spanish, and, in the safe space of my classroom, they will have the freedom to connect personally with the subject. Perhaps they have experiences of their own, or experiences of friends or acquaintances, that they feel comfortable enough to share with the group. The discussion is extended to all kinds and causes of separations of families.

Next, I introduce some relevant vocabulary:

*Cruzar la frontera*

*Refugiado/a político/a*

*Mojados de México*

*Braceros*

*Balseros de Cuba*

*Gusanos de Miami*

*Migración voluntaria*

*Migración forzada*

As a homework assignment, I ask the learners to reflect personally and to write freely (in Spanish) about the various circumstances that may cause families to separate and about the effects that separation can have on the various family members.

**Session Two:** To understand the context of the US military invasion of the Cuban coast during the 1960s and to learn how Cuban people took turns being watchful and vigilant, we read and listen to a song by Silvio Rodríguez, in Spanish with English translation. This is followed by a free discussion in Spanish about the topic and any additional historical information that the learners may have.

**Session Three - *Testimonio* (Testimony):** In this class, we listen to the personal experiences of a citizen of Cuba who fled to the USA, as a result of the Cuban Revolution. Students will ask interview questions that we all (professor and students) work to develop in class, for the guest who will visit our classroom. The book should inspire some of the questions. The role of the students is to ask questions that they think a Cuban person can answer, and to listen.

As a homework assignment, I ask the learners to write freely in Spanish about their impressions of, or reactions to, the guest's presentation to the class and about the ways in which the presentation may have helped them to connect with the novel.

**Reading Activities - Session One:** The objective of the exercise that I have invented for this session and the next one is to connect the students with the feelings of three of the characters in the novel. I bring to class materials in the color blue that will be

used to symbolize the ocean between Cuba and the USA. The class covers the floor of the classroom with these blue materials.

Next, the class does an exercise that will serve as *a warm-up* for the next session.

I, as the teacher, guide this warm-up:

- After dividing up into groups of three, comment on whether you have had experiences of separation from loved ones: family, friends, or animals.
- After commenting, stand up and imagine this separation physically. Since there are three of you, play with physical action, letting one person play the role of “separation,” or “separator,” and acting between, or upon, the other two.
- After feeling the “force” of separation, change roles so that you can experience both positions: that of the separator and the separated.
- Comment on your personal reactions to this experience within your small group.

**Session Two:** At this point, students should be familiar with the three main characters in the novel:

*Celia* - the grandmother who represents the Cuban people who never left Cuba.

*Lourdes* - The daughter who represents the Cuban people who left Cuba.

*Pilar* - The granddaughter who represents the conflict between Cubans in the USA and Cubans in Cuba.

Dividing up into the same groups of three as in the previous session, the learners decide which member of the group will represent which character. The three members of each



group then begin a dialogue, exploring, explaining, and defending the actions of these three main characters.

As a homework assignment after this exercise, I ask the learners to write a letter to the author of the novel, Cristina Garcia, relating their feelings toward the story and the characters, and whether they are at ease or are struggling with the Spanish of the text, as well as asking any questions that they may have. Usually, the students ask very good questions about the text. Between the class dialogues and the letters, I get a very clear idea about which parts, or aspects, of the story we should spend more time discussing.

In addition to the homework assignments I've mentioned, I also assign homework using the technique of "annotating" that I have borrowed from Ruth Spack.

*Annotating involves recording your reactions to what you read. You can make notes in the margins of the text, within the text itself, or on a separate sheet of paper. This process may help you interact with the reading and also clarify your understanding. (2002, p. 5)*

At the end of the first part of the novel, the learners are asked to write a two-page response paper using the technique above. It is important to me to combine and balance the practice of reading skills with activities that develop reading comprehension.

Finally, I will mention briefly, in a very general way, teaching considerations (>); practices that I use (-); and issues that I feel are important for the learners and that I must look for ways to address, during the entire reading process (+):

- > Decide which reading techniques I will use.
- Divide the learners into small groups for reading and discussions.

- Have the learners paraphrase their favorite passage(s) and think not only about the meaning of the passage, but also its tone. Also, have them consider how the author/characters describe their feelings. Show them how to look for clues in the text.
- Allow the learners to compare homework papers, in order to share ideas. In this way, they can learn together and share perceptions, feelings, and thoughts about the novel.
- Listen to Cuban music.
- + How can I connect the learners with themselves and their process, as they learn to read a foreign language?
- + How can I get the learners to enjoy the experience of reading in Spanish?
- + How can I connect the learners with the problems of Cuban families who have suffered and who are suffering, as a result of being separated from the people whom they love?
- + How can I connect the learners with the reality of this large Latin population living in the USA?
- + How can I help the learners gain a deeper understanding of the history and culture of the Latin population in the USA?
- + How can I get the learners to review their journals and notes, work in groups, engage in class activities, etc., and be thoughtful in choosing the part(s) of the novel that they will write about?
- + How can I get the learners to think about what the writer was feeling when she/he was writing?
- + How can I get the learners to observe how the passages that they read fit with their general perception of the text?
- + How can I get the learners to review and self-correct their homework assignments, and to ask me questions, or talk to me, when they are having problems?
- + How can I get the learners to come to the class prepared to share their thoughts and feelings about the novel, as well as the problems that they may encounter during the process of reading the novel?
- > Decide how to close the reading process.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I have said earlier in this paper that *the construction of my philosophy of teaching is still a work in progress*. I know that my life as a teacher is a series of successes, failures, and “not sures.” I am on a learning/teaching path that has been full of its share of challenges, struggles, and obstacles. But it is also one that has been wonderfully illuminated by teachers, students, and colleagues.

I am a feminist Spanish teacher coming from a different cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic background, and even, perhaps, from a different planet than that of the learners in my classes. Yet it is my wish to connect with them despite all these differences. An additional difficulty has been that English is my second language. Trying to learn this language has been one of the most challenging endeavors in my life, yet an experience that I wanted to have - to learn a new language - and to be, at the same time, a teacher of my native language. This process has given me a special empathy with the process of the learners in my Spanish classes.

In the opening of my document, I used the word “*saturation*.” As I finish this document, we, as humanity, are again confronting the possibility of a war. Because I am so connected right now with my teaching process, when I have participated in some dialogues in favor of peace, I have looked at the faces of the students/learners, confused by the saturation of information from the media, confused by the conflicting opinions and

the frustrations of people around them, and again, I have felt the need simply to connect with them. I have felt the need simply to be in silence, looking for my own answers and formulating my own opinions with regard to political situations. And I have felt the need simply to open up the learners in my classes to the possibilities of looking for their own answers.

First and foremost, for me, teaching is simply an act of love, an act of connection: with myself; with the learners; with my subject; with my approach; with my lesson plan; with my classroom as physical space; and with creative and dramatic pedagogy, for which a comfortable and respectful environment is essential.

Our voices in the classroom are diverse. To welcome diversity is to accept differences. The need to have diversity in my teaching methods jumps in front of me when something is boring in my class. If I become tired in my teaching, if my teaching becomes nothing more than a comfortable routine, then it could be a sign of teaching stagnation. It is here, in these moments, that I must look for different and creative pedagogy - even when that kind of process confronts me with new doubts. Everyone has doubts. However, doubts are not a problem for me. Instead, they are the salt of life, *la sal de la vida*; they make life interesting. I know that my dilemmas arise when I am searching for my own truth with regard to my teaching practice. But the whole point of this journey is to arrive at our own truths. Today I understand the fact that I teach who I am. When I am confronted with doubts, I ask myself again: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? The way that I regain my incentive to be “a new teacher in each class” is by *connecting with myself*. My doubts and dilemmas as a teacher-educator are fundamental to this process. To have doubts about my teaching is to have a wonderful

invitation to explore and to explore, to change and to change, as many times as it is necessary. Discovery and new discovery will be forever a part of my teaching process. I am open to continual discovery. I have the ability to change. And I am ready to embark on the next phase - in my eternal training as a teacher.

I can use any approach or any technique or method to teach. I can choose one method and be still there. But when I'm lost, I go to the quiet place within my heart. When I go inside of my heart and I listen, I hear the voice of "my internal teacher," and I receive the answers to this great mystery: What does it mean "to teach"?

During my SMAT classes (2001-2003), I gave my classmates these next thoughts in a magnetic sleeve to stick on their refrigerators. Today, as I close this project, I want to repeat these words to myself:

*You are the light of your classroom.*

*You are an instrument of learning.*

*You are the greatest teacher in the world.*

*The truth of who you are cannot be altered or changed.*

*The way you teach determines how others will teach.*

And, I will add a few last thoughts from my "internal creative teacher":

*Theater is life. Cinema is art. Television is furniture.*

**TEACHING IS CONNECTION AND LOVE.**

Incredible as it may seem, my life as a teacher is based on a true story.

***May the blessings be.***

***--Patricia Pedroza***

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