

Creativity and Writing: The Postcard Project

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The purpose of the conference presentation upon which this paper is inspired was to present an innovative approach to motivate students to write in a second language during a first-year Spanish class. Usually, students comply with writing exercises that convey basic thoughts, due to constrained vocabulary and limited knowledge of grammatical concepts. The pieces they create are often simple repetitions of material already present in the textbook. In this case, the idea was to create a project that would be developed during the whole academic year. It consisted of creating a story of 100 words or less that would provoke the reader to think beyond the text and also motivate him/her to make connections between the title, the content, and the hidden message of the story. The format was a postcard, and the students had to add a creative piece of art on one side of the postcard and a story on the opposite side. The artwork was intended to add to the story. The objective of the project was for students to use their higher order cognitive abilities and subsequently realize higher levels of achievement (Burrowes, 2003; Railsback, 2002).

The activity also aimed to encourage deeper student learning and self-regulated learning behaviours (Herington, 2008). The challenge was obvious: would students feel intimidated when presented with the project? How would they respond to the strict demands of the assignment? How would they deal with the creative aspect? How would they respond to formative feedback? How would they react to the public exhibition of their work? Throughout this article, responses to these queries are presented along with a discussion on how the activity could be applied across disciplines with similar end results. I hope this is the beginning of a productive dialogue.

Preamble

Creating challenging activities that foster critical thinking and promote lifelong learning is always at the top of my priorities as an instructor

of a second language. Students not only have to learn to express themselves in the target language, but they also have to be motivated to explore issues

that are relevant to them in order to make the connection between learning a foreign language and their own daily life. As part of my constant search for new and creative writing tasks, I learned about a project already established in Santiago, Chile in 2001 called *Santiago en 100 palabras* (*Santiago in 100 words*). The objective of this project is to give an opportunity to common people to write stories that reflect life in the city in 100 words or less. The format is a postcard that includes artwork created by the author or borrowed from another source. A selection committee chooses the best entries, which are exhibited in train and subway stations. Later, they are printed as a small book and handed to people in the subway. This is not only a great way to promote creativity and writing while reflecting on their city, but it is also a very positive approach to make the voices of the people heard all through the country.

As I learned more about the project, I thought it could work perfectly in my *Introduction to Spanish* class that has approximately 130 students each year. This is a full credit course. Creating challenging activities for such a large class can be risky. It usually also creates more work for the instructor, but the end result promises to be unforgettable and rewarding. I brought the project to the class, adapting the idea to make it meaningful for students and providing them with the opportunity to express themselves on topics relevant to them, while facilitating greater comprehension of course material (Davis, 1993).

Avoiding Anonymity

One of the most cumbersome problems to solve in a large class is the issue of anonymity. Students can feel lost in the immensity of the classroom and may find that they're not getting to know either their peers or the instructor. Also, their own learning style is sometimes not addressed by the method of instruction or evaluation. The Postcard Project was planned and structured in order to address various issues often encountered in a large class: it tries to accommodate different learning styles; emphasizes

the relevance of the project in relation to a student's own life experience; allows students to practise material learned using a creative approach, while promoting active learning; gives students the opportunity to experience formative feedback throughout the learning process; fosters a learning environment where a sense of community is encouraged, while trying to eliminate anonymity; and cultivates life-long learning experiences.

Active learning activities in a large class may seem like an insurmountable task, but if they are tailored according to students' needs, cultural backgrounds, and ability, the instructor may find that these are actually some of the most gratifying teaching and learning experiences for both instructor and students. Research has proven that active learning improves students' retention while enabling them to get to know their peers (Davis, 1993).

Project Guidelines

The goals and objectives for an activity must be clearly stated to students in order for them to take the task seriously (McClanahan & McClanahan, 2002). The project guidelines were included in the syllabus and the task was explained to students in detail. Enough time was allowed for questions and answers. Sample postcards were shown in class so students could have an idea of the final outcome. Among the many requisites for the project, the following were presented:

1. The story should have 100 words or less.
2. The title has to add to the story.
3. Look for a source of inspiration: a place, a person, an incident.
4. Since the story is short, keep the number of characters to a minimum.
5. Add a twist at the end, so readers will reflect on the content.
6. The story needs to fit on a regular postcard size: 16 cm by 11.5 cm.
7. The story will be printed on the back of the

postcard. On the front, you should create a graphic design to represent some aspect of the story. The graphic design could be created by you or by someone else. If the artwork comes from a different source, you need to cite the source. Some of your peers could be great artists; consult with them.

8. Before handing in your final version, a draft should be presented to the instructor by (date) before 10 a.m. There will be a box outside the office where you can drop your work. Also include a draft of the graphic design.
9. The final postcard will be evaluated out of 15%: story creativity and vocabulary 6%; introduction 3%; twist at the end 3%; and graphic design and presentation 3%.

This activity allows students enough time to work on the story. Students are presented with the project at the start of the course in September. In February, the first draft has to be submitted and the instructor provides formative feedback. The final copy is submitted in March. Some creative members of the class worked on the design for those students who were not artistic. Others consulted the instructor if they were facing difficulties in finding a topic. Mind-mapping exercises were shown in class in order to facilitate the writing process. Because the activity structure, objectives, and related course material were thoroughly explained, most students could ably complete the task on time while fulfilling the requirements. When students were lacking in some areas, they had enough time to revise their drafts and receive formative feedback from the instructor (Yazedjian & Kolkhorst, 2007). Students found that formative feedback gave them the opportunity to explore new possibilities and solve mistakes, which in the end resulted in a more positive learning experience and accommodated different learning styles, while promoting an increased interest in the learning outcome.

Process

While the course material was being covered, stu-

dents were made aware of possible topics to use in their postcards. The class used WebCT as a communication tool, and many students requested further information from the instructor via the communication board and/or contacted their peers searching for artistic people to help them with their graphic design. Throughout the creative process, the students and instructor got to know each other, which is unusual when dealing with a large class. The excitement was palpable in the classroom whenever the Postcard Project was mentioned. Students were aware that the end result was going to be exhibited to the University community at the end of the semester. The fact that the project was ongoing and always discussed during class time when questions arose, also promoted students' attendance. They felt personally responsible for the learning process and took ownership of the project with a deep sense of pride and responsibility. At the same time, they felt more motivated to learn since each new language structure, vocabulary, or grammatical concept could be used in the project.

As students worked on their postcards, they found themselves consulting with each other and the instructor while obtaining formative feedback. As the project came to an end, most of the postcards were completed on time, while a few students found themselves struggling to finish. Only two students out of 130 did not successfully complete the project; the rest obtained excellent results. The instructor laminated the completed postcards individually and prepared them for the exhibit. Students actively participated in this stage of the process also. Research has shown that when students are empowered to be active participants in the learning process, class size is not necessarily inversely proportionate to learning (Felder, 1997).

Using clotheslines and clothespins (a very affordable way to create an exhibit), a students' lounge was converted for one day into the venue where the postcard exhibit took place. All completed postcards were hung from clotheslines, creating a visually attractive setting. The postcards' topics addressed many issues that are usually not discussed in a first-year language class: suicide, drug abuse, violence against women, poverty, and family problems, among others.

Outcome and Conclusion

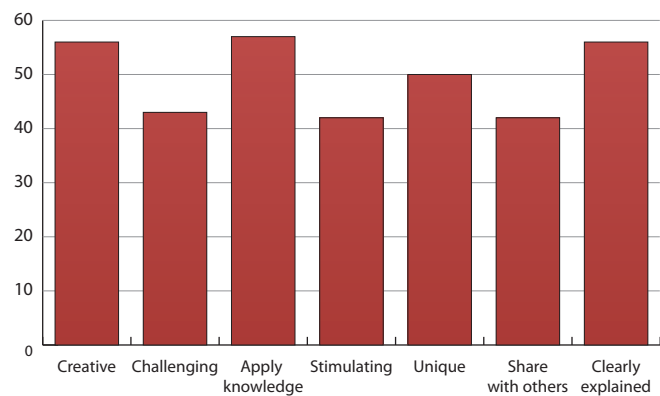
When planning an unusual activity such as this one, I am always concerned with students' response. I was anxious about having such high expectations for a beginner's class and found myself questioning the viability of the task. I was also aware of the time constraints that such an activity could create for me as the only person in charge of feedback and corrections. Since most of the postcards required changes, providing formative feedback could have resulted in a very time consuming endeavour. Fortunately, since the specifications for the project were clearly explained to students and the learning outcomes and process were noticeably explicit, though most of the students required some feedback, it was not as cumbersome as I anticipated. Since students got to know each other better throughout this activity, they became more engaged with class content and the aspect of anonymity in the classroom was evidently reduced (Cooper & Robinson, 2000; McClanahan & McClanahan, 2002; Michaelsen, 2002).

The Postcard Project resulted in one of the most rewarding teaching and learning experiences of my career. The expectations were high, the demands on students were many, and the challenge posted to them seemed complex. What could have been considered disincentives to attempt an activity such as this one resulted in positive outcomes; some of them, like the actual content of the short stories, were completely unexpected for me. I was not only surprised by the stories, but I was also moved by the openness of students to convey such risky topics. I believe part of their response to the challenge was the fact that they knew that their postcards were going to be exhibited publicly. It seems that projects like this, where students are offered the opportunity to express their feelings exploring affective learning, are not often found within the university classroom. The merging of writing and art is not something that they had encountered in other classes.

The uniqueness of the project was a perfect avenue for students to push boundaries, explore pos-

sibilities and find a forum for their voices. In a questionnaire completed by 60 students during the last week of classes, the following question was asked: How does the postcard project compare to assignments done in other classes? Table 1 shows the number of responses to the questionnaire regarding the Postcard Project. The questionnaire was voluntary. Of the total of respondents, 95% stated that the project should be kept as part of the course components in the future. The activity was relevant to students, according to the responses to the questionnaire because they found that the project supported rather than distracted them from the course content (McKeachie, 1999). Overall, the Postcard Project was a success.

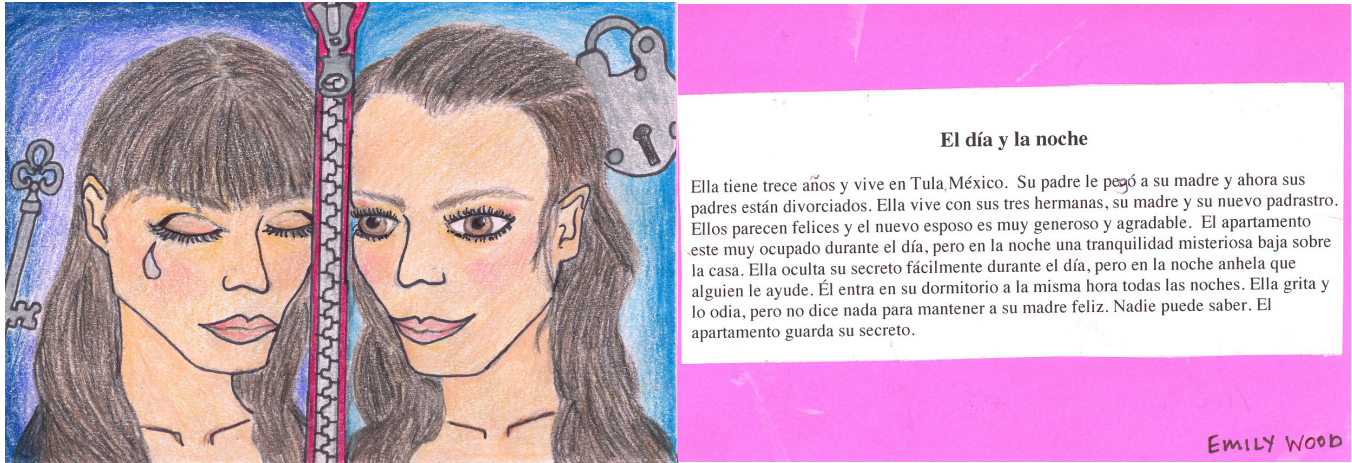
TABLE 1
Postcard Project Questionnaire Results



The project could be tailored to various disciplines, offering students the opportunity to be creative and to explore ideas, concepts, and reflections about many topics. The exhibit component was extremely well received because, according to students, it is not often that they are offered the opportunity to observe their peers' work in higher education.

Figures 1 and 2 depict a sample postcard from the exhibit, and the exhibit on the day it was open to the University community.

I hope this article will inspire others to try this innovative approach to exploring active learning in their classes.



Day and Night (Translation)

She is thirteen years old and lives in Tula, Mexico. Her father used to beat her mother and now they are divorced. She lives with her three sisters, her mother and her new stepfather. They seem happy and the new husband is generous and charming. The apartment is very busy during the day, but at night a mysterious quietness comes down on it. She easily hides her secret during the day, but at night she hopes that someone would help her. He comes into her bedroom at the same time each night. She shouts and she hates him, but she doesn't say anything to keep her mother happy. Nobody must know. The apartment keeps her secret.

FIGURE 1¹
Sample Postcard



FIGURE 2
Exhibit on the Opening Day

¹ Permission for publication was obtained, 2009.

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Biography

Mercedes Rowinsky-Geurts is an Associate Professor in the Department of Languages and Literatures at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU). She received the WLU Outstanding Teacher Award in 2000, the Faculty Mentoring Award in 2005, and the 3M National Teaching Fellowship in 2008.