



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ALLEVIATING ANXIETY FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

For a nontraditional student, just walking into a classroom can be a daunting experience. Add the fact that I use immersion, a method in which students in my world language classes hear only the target language from day one, and you have the stuff of which nightmares are made. Actually, I do not use 100% immersion. I speak some English on the first day to go over course policies, but only after students have experienced their first lesson taught entirely in Spanish. I think it is important to set the mood of the class from the first minute of the first day. As my students will be hearing Spanish almost entirely for the rest of the semester, I start from the very beginning.

When I look at the faces of my students during this first lesson, I see their fear. Some of them do not seem to bat an eyelash (usually the ones who have not been out of high school very long), but I see others eyeing the door to see if there is an escape route available. The more nontraditional students seem to take it worse. Often they have been out of school for years, and just stepping into a classroom is difficult, let alone a class in which they have to speak another language. How can we lower the affective filter enough to help these students reach their educational goals? How can we keep them from walking out the door and never coming back?

Maintaining High Standards

Many of my students—before, during, or after the first class meeting—tell me that they took Spanish in high school 20 years ago and that it was their worst class. I often hear: “I took three years of Spanish in high school, but I can’t speak a word.” Often these students expect to fail again. Spanish (or math, or English, etc.) is just too hard, they tell me. I respond to their concerns with the truth—Spanish is not easy, and research tells us that the older we are, the more difficult it is for us to acquire a new language. I repeat that it is difficult—but not impossible. During the first class, I explain that I

expect all of them to learn and speak Spanish. I understand that it can be difficult, but I believe that they are all capable of reaching the high standards I have set. By expressing my positive expectations, I show a confidence in my students that many of them do not begin to have in themselves. When they reach the goals that they considered beyond their reach before, their self-esteem improves; and they become even more successful in all areas.

Being Flexible and Available

Many nontraditional students have numerous other life commitments outside of school. They hold full-time jobs and are busy raising families. I do not allow these students to use their other commitments as excuses (as they have made a commitment to their education, as well), but I do keep in mind their diverse and busy schedules. In that regard, I hold study sessions and conversation groups in the evenings and on weekends when nontraditional students are more likely to be available. We sometimes meet in Mexican restaurants or the college cafeteria because these places are less threatening than a traditional classroom. Some students bring their children to these meetings. It is a great opportunity for students to ask me questions that might not have come up in class, and they can make connections with other students in similar life situations with whom they often form their own study groups.

Employing Alternate Learning and Instructional Methods

Students have unique gifts and talents, and should be encouraged to demonstrate them in classroom activities. Often, the life experiences of nontraditional students bring an array of different perspectives to the classroom. When I walk around my classroom and listen to my students as they are working in small groups, I frequently hear students explaining concepts to the others; and sometimes they make points that I had not thought to make. Nontraditional students are great problem solvers, and skills that they have learned in real-life job situations often can help them tackle difficult concepts in the classroom with greater ease. As I watch a 50-year-



old mother of three explain to an 18-year-old with a nose ring why they should approach an exercise from a certain point of view, I see her sense of accomplishment growing. Using technology to create digital portfolios for student assessment helps alleviate the stress of a test-taking situation. Moreover, when students can apply the technology skills they have learned in my class to their jobs, it creates more positive feelings towards learning Spanish, as well.

Pointing Out Student Successes

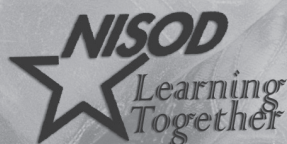
In the past, I would find myself pointing out students' mistakes instead of their successes. Now I take some time every two weeks and ask students to reflect on how far they have come. I remind them of the first day of class and the fear they felt. Then I play a song in Spanish, or we read an article in Spanish that they never

could have handled the first day of class. It reassures them that even though they still do not understand all of what they are hearing or reading, they understand considerably more than they did just two weeks before.

When working with nontraditional students in a language classroom, it is important to maintain high standards, give them the tools that they need to meet those standards, and celebrate their successes to help make them more confident. As I do those things, I enjoy the ultimate experience of seeing more successful learners.

Elizabeth M. Padden, *Assistant Professor, Modern Languages*

For further information, contact the author at Lord Fairfax Community College, 173 Skirmisher Lane, Middletown, VA 22645. Email: epadden@lfcc.edu



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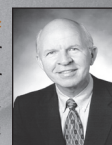
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Suanne D. Roueche
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Senior Lecturer, Educational Administration
The University of Texas at Austin

Mark David Milliron
Suanne Davis Roueche Endowed Fellow
Senior Lecturer, Educational Administration
Director, NISOD
The University of Texas at Austin



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