

Writing the Present

A reflection from a Spanish composition instructor during COVID-19



After the last in-person class of my course Spanish Composition I at Hostos Community College. March 11 2020

Catastrophe starts as a rumor; you could hear it in the hallways like an underground buzz: “Are we going to stop coming to class?”, “We could contaminate others living with vulnerable family members”, “When is the Governor taking the decision?” “Yo no sé que nos va a pasar, profesora”. The questions that emerged as the public health crisis of COVID-19 unfolded had a special nuance coming from CUNY students from the Bronx. As I was approaching my classroom the last week of in-person teaching, I could hear debates between students and their professors just before the start of their classes. In my classroom it was no different. We didn’t know what would happen. We had no information or precedent. Today, it sounds exceptional to narrate that by mid-March of last year, we didn’t know what to do. We were wondering and waiting in crowded elevators, active gyms, and classrooms filled to capacity, life in the university pulsed in the way it always had. These scenarios seem almost impossible a year later.

That day I got a chamomile tea in the food truck outside Hostos’ Building B entrance. I was going over the lesson plan in my head on my way to the room. I was teaching a course of Spanish Composition I, and for that time we had already covered

description, and narrative writing in a language that for some is part of their heritage and for others, their native tongue. We met Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Our class objective was to improve students' Spanish writing skills so that they could address, in writing, complex ideas about their homes, home countries, families, personal stories of exile and struggles as college students. There was even, of course, an intense love story written in poem form.

By that day, I already decided that it was necessary to change my lesson plan to help the class cope with what we were experiencing. We had to talk about our transition to online instruction: how were we going to meet. Safety was the priority, and then creating a Zoom account. Considering how important it was for the class to meet as a grounding experience, and after consulting with my coordinator and with them, I decided to continue teaching my class in a synchronous way. It was my first time teaching online in my life.

Aside from my profile as instructor and researcher of Spanish Language, Culture, and Literature, I took inspiration from my personal experience. I'm an adjunct from Venezuela, who had been granted political asylum by the United States of America a few months before that moment. I had very recently undergone a major spine surgery to recover my overall health. That specific group of students saw me entering the classroom with a cane, and then slowly leaving the tool behind me as the time passed. I also take care of my mother. I have confronted struggles. During all those moments, writing has helped me understand my present time. Writing in Spanish has allowed me to express moments of extreme humanity. Inspired by that, and by the subject that I teach, I made the decision to pivot the remaining writing lessons of my Spanish Composition I class to autobiographical narrative.

The public health crisis of COVID-19 called for the radicalization of writing as a mode of self-expression. The articulation in conversations, and with writing prompts allowed for a profound reflection around the moment in history that we were experiencing. We couldn't ignore the space outside of our classroom anymore. It was too present, too strong like the image of recently evacuated classrooms, and the non-stopping sirens. The rumor had become too vocal to be indifferent about. We had to write about it. When we met for the first time via Zoom, we discussed it as a group. I, as the instructor, needed to care for and evaluate the best thing to do to keep going with our lessons while being attentive to the shared catastrophe. The pandemic made me adjust my syllabus starting that day, March 11 of 2020, three months into the spring semester.

In the Zoom environment, I tried to welcome students with a sense of calmness every class. We met the days we were supposed to, because after some weeks into confinement the students told me that my class was the only one they were meeting and that gave them a sense of grounding, a sort of stability while everything was in suspense. I started seeing their children and their surroundings through the cameras. It felt fresh and candid while the reality was hitting us hard. I then asked them to start a journal to the following prompt in Blackboard:

Considerando las lecciones de narrativa que hemos estudiado, especialmente las de autobiografía, empieza un diario (journal). Describe cómo fue tu día, cómo te has sentido y qué has pensado. El diarismo requiere la fecha de cada entrada y se nutre de toda escritura. Usa libremente el lenguaje simple y complejo. ¿Quieres hacer un poema tonto o uno de amor desgarrado? ¡Házlo! Pero siempre observa y pon atención al

lenguaje sensible. La extensión deberá ser media página, pero puedes extenderte. Asegúrate de dejarle un comentario a al menos otra compañera de clase.

(Considering the narrative lessons that we have studied, especially those of autobiography, start a diary. Describe how your day was, how you have felt, and what you have thought about. Journaling requires the date for every entry and it nurtures itself from every kind of writing. Feel free to use simple and complex language. Feel like writing a silly poem or an intense love poem? Do it! But always observe and be attentive to the sensible language. The extension should be half page, but you can extend yourself. Be sure to leave a comment to at least one classmate.)

After some entries, catastrophe was conveyed as either profound or funny or very passionate. We would have class (via Zoom) and we would workshop the texts with kindness. I had students comparing this moment with the moment they had to emigrate from their home country, so the writing became a comparative exercise of “this moment I am living that will later be known as a struggle”. If this was a present time for something, it was, it is, a time for kindness. Students kept forgetting the accent marks, indeed, but this was a ‘becoming a writer’ moment for some students. I later had a letter of recommendation request.

The CUNY students from the Bronx are potent writers in Spanish. Some of them come to the Spanish composition class as a homecoming, proud, ready to showcase what they know they are good at: the individual variation with which they identify and they thrive, making this class a highlight of their quest for a better future. Other CUNY students have inherited the Spanish language, and take their mother tongue, an emotional language, to new scholarly levels. Wherever they are coming from, they have been communicating between each other powerfully, and that is the new rumor my ear is turned towards.

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