

Spanish as a Learning Event

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Abstract

Learning to speak Spanish has been a continuous process for the past eight years. As a high school freshman, I was required to complete two units of study in a foreign language. At that time, I did not know that the language I had chosen (primarily because I heard it was the easiest) would become personally meaningful in my life.

The path between that first day in high school Spanish, and level of knowledge I have reached today, is marked with many milestones and accomplishments. I have gained a greater understanding of the language and culture and have decided to make acquiring Spanish a life-long learning event.

In the Beginning...

As a freshman in high school, I randomly chose Spanish as the language I would study for two years. My father would remind me over and over that soon the United States would have many Spanish speaking individuals blah, blah, blah and being able to speak the language would make me more marketable in my career. Yeah Dad, heard it all before! To a fourteen-year-old, these paternal ramblings only succeeded in going in one ear and out the other. I resolved to do just enough work to get by and finish my requirement as soon as possible. I had unknowingly employed the first step in the search for personal meaning, rote memorization of facts. I memorized vocabulary and basic grammatical structure in order to achieve good grades and the approval of others. My desire to please was an attempt to satisfy the most important of Glasser's

four biological needs, the need for belonging (p. 18). I wanted to impress my father with all of the “knowledge” I had acquired.

When I had completed the required two years of high school Spanish, I was forced to make a decision. Would I be thankful that this horribly difficult task was complete, or would I continue taking the classes that prevented me from having fun, a second biological need described by Glasser? My father was urging me onward, and to satisfy the need for belonging, I continued with my high school foreign language education.

After four years of diligent study, I received honors for my accomplishments and felt that I had gained a sense of power, a third of Glasser’s biological needs. However, Spanish still failed to be personally meaningful for me. I was really looking forward to college where, if I scheduled my classes effectively, I would not have to endure any more foreign language.

Spanish Becomes Meaningful

I distinctly remember when the Spanish language became personally meaningful. During the summer before my sophomore year at Truman, I was one of nine students to travel to Honduras for ten days. The purpose of our trip was to complete construction on a house for a homeless mother and her six children. We were also going to spend some time in a local high school teaching students English. I had a solid Spanish background, even more than the other members of the group, but I still found myself lost in a sea of cultural differences and language barriers. I realized that it was not enough to memorize nouns and verbs, but in order to gain true knowledge of the language, I must learn everything there is to learn about the Spanish heritage and culture.

This was my learning contract, a pact with myself to engage in authentic learning of the Spanish language. Newmann and Wehlage (1993) describe authentic learning as “achievement that is significant and meaningful” not “trivial and useless.” Up until this point, I had considered Spanish “trivial and useless.” However, the feeling of seclusion and the barriers that prevented our group from helping Hondurans in need learn basic hygiene and sanitation procedures, was enough to spark a learning conversation with myself. I desperately wanted to help, and the language barrier was preventing me from doing so. If I wanted to achieve my goal, I must commit to learning all aspects of the Spanish language.

Harri-Augstein defines a learning conversation as the act of “putting learners in conversations with themselves” to ultimately “increase awareness of the learning process” (p.3). Essentially, in order for me to actually learn Spanish I had to figure out how to effectively process the information to which I was exposed. This learning conversation allowed me to analyze why I wanted to learn Spanish and marked the beginning of my learning process.

Personal Myths

If I were to be successful in my endeavor, I would have to dispel the personal myths and mental blocks that had prevented previous learning attempts (Von Oech 2). I held beliefs that Spanish was just too hard, I was never going to learn the language, and on top of that, I simply did not have the natural ability to understand it like other girls in my class had. I was concentrating on my perceived fixed ability, the belief that achievement is predetermined by natural ability. I refused to accept the fact that I could indeed learn Spanish. This can be compared to Von Oech’s discussion of learning to be creative. He describes the importance of getting past the belief that you just “can’t” do something (Von Oech 2). The effectiveness of

this personal learning conversation is supported by Harri-Augustein's suggestion that the capacity for learning increases as the ability to engage in effective learning conversations increases (Harri-Augustine et. al. 2). This theory dispels the myth that fixed ability affects the extent to which an individual can learn. I carried this idea with me at I entered my sophomore year at Truman State University.

I enrolled in Intermediate Spanish I in the fall of 1996. I was so excited to begin learning the language and become a fluent speaker of Spanish. Unfortunately, I failed in my attempts to increase my knowledge of the language to the extent that I desired. What I didn't know then was that my attitude toward the material had changed, but I did not modify my approach to learning. The concept of total behavior presented in class has helped me to understand why I failed in my attempt to learn the language. I modified my thinking and my feelings about learning Spanish, but I did not take an appropriate course of action. I continued to memorize facts and grammatical structure and became easily discouraged. In the spring, I enrolled in Intermediate Spanish II and the trend continued. I found myself hating Spanish once again and could not believe that I actually thought I could learn to speak the language. Six years of "study" down the drain.

By this time, I had realized that my father was right and yes, I was wrong! I had decided on pursuing a career as a Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP), and if I could become a bilingual SLP, I would be able to get a job anywhere I wanted. I would have so much power and freedom to choose my course in life. Power and freedom are two additional biological needs defined by Glasser (p. 18). I was again determined to succeed. I *had* to make the learning experience personally meaningful. I decided to live in Spain during the summer of '97 to immerse myself in the culture. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test suggests that I am an extroverted individual

that will seek out interaction with a variety of individuals. As a “feeler” I examine life from a “people-point-of-view”. My attempts to learn Spanish in the past were inhibited due to my approach conflicting with my “perceiving personality”. I much prefer a spontaneous learning style and strive to seek out more information; in this case, I sought information that I was not receiving in the classroom (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator).

During my summer abroad, I finally gained personal meaning by studying every aspect of Spanish culture, art, history, literature, and customs. I began to acquire those elusive vocabulary words, and I found myself gradually creating increasingly difficult sentences. I was speaking Spanish! I succeeded in learning the language because I had internal motivation. I created my own reinforcement by succeeding in learning something that had personal meaning (Glasser 18).

A Continuing Process

I am definitely not a fluent speaker of Spanish. Learning the language will be a life long process, and I am committed to learning more with each passing year. In December 1998, I will spend ten days in Mexico where I will acclimate myself to a different type of Hispanic culture. Upon graduation from Truman State University, I hope to gain employment with a company that deals with the communication problems of Hispanic individuals in the United States.

Teaching Others

My brother has entered the same verbal agreement with himself; his ambition is to teach Spanish in a Secondary Education classroom. I see him struggling with the same issues that held me back in the beginning. I try to explain to him that he must find personal meaning and make a contract with himself in order to be successful. With the knowledge I have gained in this class, I can observe his learning process and help him to better understand how and why he is learning the language.

In Conclusion

Fortunately, there is no conclusion. I continue to learn more about my learning styles and gain a greater understanding in my pursuit of fluency. I feel that I have succeeded in developing a system of self-organized learning (SOL) that Harri-Augustine confirms is crucial to the successful learning process. SOL is being in control of your individual learning process and maximizing your learning potential by understanding unique learning techniques. I have found personal meaning and have overcome many personal myths that I previously held. My strategies and approaches to learning have changed to become more conducive to my personality type and learning styles. This life long process continues to challenge me, but with a greater understanding of the learning process, I have achieved a level of understanding far beyond what I originally thought possible.

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