Innovative Approaches to Teaching Spanish and Portuguese in the Twenty First Century, and More . . .

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This year, the AATSP organized not one, but three sessions at the MLA convention that was held in Vancouver, Canada, between the 8th and the 11th of January. In addition to the regular (guaranteed) session to which the AATSP, as an allied organization, is entitled, the program selection committee approved a second (non-guaranteed) session, and a third one, in collaboration with the Division of Luso-Brazilian Language and Literature. The two first sessions had similar topics, in spite of a slight variation in title: “Meeting the Needs of the Global Economy: Mastering Spanish and Portuguese North of Rio Bravo,” and, respectively, “Teaching and Learning Spanish North of Rio Bravo: Innovative Approaches for the Twenty-First Century.”

The idea was to invite scholars from both the United States and Canada (hence the “North of Rio Bravo” part in the session titles), to present innovative methodological approaches and cutting edge pedagogical techniques for teaching Spanish and Portuguese in this century, characterized by the rapid spread of technology to all domains of human activity and the globalization of society as a whole. The call for papers was received with enthusiasm, and there were initially more excellent proposals than were presented in the end, due to unforeseen circumstances that prevented some participants (among them, renowned scholars such as Bill VanPatten, from Michigan State University, and Ana Clotilde Thomé-Williams, from Northwestern University) to attend the convention.

Nevertheless, the five papers that were read in those two sessions encompassed an exciting array of topics related to the teaching of Spanish and Portuguese from a wide variety of perspectives, keeping in mind the needs of the global economy and the fast changing field of language education in these “vulnerable times” for the humanities in general (cf. the Presidential Forum at the precedent MLA convention in Chicago). We all have heard arguments from critics of higher education about the need for the public universities and colleges (but not only) to become more “productive” and to better respond to the concrete demands of the society. Like many of their colleagues in the humanities, foreign language educators are constantly seeking to renew their methods, to increase their effectiveness, and to better prepare their students for the professions in which their language skills will be needed. Participants in these sessions shared their experience in this regard and discussed some innovative approaches to the teaching of these two major world languages, Spanish and Portuguese, the importance of which has increased exponentially in the United States, and, more recently, in Canada as well.

For instance, Douglas A. Jackson and Shannon M. Polchow, both from the University of South Carolina Upstate, in their paper titled “‘You know Spanish, right?’: Language for Specific Purposes and the Challenge of Teaching Content Areas and Lexical Domain” demonstrated convincingly how this simple question is actually one of the hardest to answer without context,
insofar as what it means, in fact, is something like “You know Spanish for health care, legal settings, or business, right?” and our students will have to answer this call after graduation. They argue that “the movement towards languages for specific purposes is gaining ground” and they discuss the courses that their department has developed to meet the need for Spanish speakers/writers with technical knowledge of different lexical domains, as well as the challenges any department going in the same direction is likely to face.

On the other hand, Alán José, from Wake Forest University, in his paper titled “Who Are We Addressing? The 5 Audiences of Language Studies,” discussed, taking the overhaul of Wake Forest University Language Studies Spanish Certificates as a case study, “the significance of negotiating the vision and mission of language programs in an economic context that includes all five audiences’ needs and wants: 1) students and parents; 2) administration; 3) the voices of potential public, private and social employers; 4) public officials; and 5) society in general.” His paper showed “how this discursive strategy results in a superior mechanism in negotiating intra and extramural resources, the position of the discipline, and also in being ultimately more effective and efficient in providing significant value to all stake- and stockholders alike.”

Moving to neighboring Canada, Josie Fisher, from Thompson River University, discussed the use of different social media—including, but not limited to Vine and Voki—in teaching Spanish grammar points to students, in order to increase their level of comfort and have them demonstrate their learning “in ways that are not only fun and interesting, but also familiar.” The title of her presentation was eloquent in this regard: “Using Social Media in Teaching and Learning Spanish: Not Just Another Pretty Facebook.”

As for Curtis Wasson, from Quest University, he talked about his singular—and yet immensely enriching—experience of being the only professor of Spanish at a small liberal arts college in British Columbia (hence the title of his presentation: “When You Are the Entire Department: Teaching Spanish Alone”). He commented on the main benefits of such a structure: “a deeper commitment to interdisciplinarity, as well as a firm commitment to collaborative pedagogical practices,” and then described his experience with project-based or task-based learning strategies “as a way of showing students the relevance of learning Spanish in Canada” and of treating them as “equal partners and collaborators both inside and outside the classroom.”

The teaching of Portuguese was the topic of Rebecca Jones-Kellogg, from the United States Military Academy at West Point. She spoke on “Gaining Proficiency through Task-based Activities in the Portuguese Classroom (Beginning and Intermediate Year Case Studies)” by specifically discussing “the use of isolated task-based activities in the classroom that allow for greater flexibility on the part of the teacher in aligning the task-based activity to the needs of their students.” She then analyzed one such task-based activity that she and her colleagues currently use in their first- through third-semester Portuguese language sequence, which they rather generically called the “Proficiencies” (Proficiências). Finally, she presented her ideas “on incidental vocabulary acquisition, increased student engagement in the classroom, and greater student responsibility in their language-learning process that develops while completing these activities.”

This presentation on Portuguese is included, in a condensed form, in this MLA feature section, alongside with another condensed paper on Spanish (randomly selected), and the overview of the third, collaborative session, with the Division of Luso-Brazilian Language and Literature, titled “Theorizing Iberian Studies,” whose initiator and actual organizer was Robert Newcomb, from the University of California, Davis. Thanks, Robert, for an outstanding panel that proposed a novel and more comprehensive approach to the traditional concepts of peninsular studies, offering instead a “new paradigm of Iberian studies that would replace the
traditional hierarchical configuration of Hispanism with a relational approach which would not only promote an equitable dialogue among the different national cultures of the peninsula, but also extend its ramifications beyond the geographical boundaries of the land, reaching into the Mediterranean and North African heritage that is an intrinsic part of the southern Iberian identity.” The readers will find more details in this regard in his fine contribution to this section.

NOTE

1 All the quotations included here are taken from the abstracts sent by the participants to the panels’ organizer.