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Teaching Spanish Conversation Through the UAPs: A Pedagogy of Jesuit Values and Mission

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Abstract

This praxis piece explores the development of a Jesuit focused pedagogy within the context of a Spanish language conversation course. The author begins by defining the origins of the pedagogy employed in this course and how it came to be centered around the Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus (UAPs) which consist of the following goals: 1) Showing the way to God/goodness/hope through discernment; 2) Walking with the excluded, the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice; 3) Journeying with youth, to accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future; and 4) Caring for our Common Home to protect and renew creation. The author elaborates on various pedagogical strategies including community-based service learning, dual immersion, *tertulias*, interviews, geocaching project, immersion experiences, Role Playing Games (RPGs), and guest lectures; and demonstrates assessments and outcomes which align with and enhance the processes of discernment around the UAPs. The paper concludes with an examination of outcomes of this pedagogical approach through the processes of discernment, reflection, and action. A schedule/syllabus is also included in the appendix.

Background

I have been teaching some version of a Topics in Conversation course for a decade, every other semester, at Canisius College in Buffalo, NY. The course has evolved over time but has almost always been focused on the theme of movement within the context of Latin America. Gradually, the course came to focus primarily on migration, with a strong emphasis on migration into the US. At one point some students might have felt that it went too much into migration in the US without sufficient variety on other aspects of movement and migration, which I concede was probably true. In light of that, I was searching for ways to modify the class content and structure and I struck upon the idea of organizing the class around the [Universal Apostolic Preferences](#) of the Society of Jesus (UAPs) which consist of the following goals:

- 1) Showing the way to God/goodness/hope through discernment;
- 2) Walking with the excluded, the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice;

- 3) Journeying with youth, to accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future; and
- 4) Caring for our Common Home to protect and renew creation.

Combining the UAPs with the Jesuit pedagogical approach of reflection, discernment, and action has proven to be fruitful in organizing my teaching around themes of in/justice, contextualizing the course in real world experience, and deepening cultural understanding, all while immersing the students in Spanish language experiences through a variety of techniques outlined below.

The [UAPs](#), [the Ignatian Year](#) (lasting until June 2022, marking the 500th anniversary of St. Ignatius's conversion, which began when struck by a cannonball on May 20, 1521), Cannonball Moments, and similar Jesuit-informed ideas had been percolating in my head for a number of reasons in the last few years. This stemmed in part from the election of the first Jesuit Pope Francis, the beatification of Fr. Romero, an event I saw celebrated in San Salvador, and my own participation in the Canisius Colleagues' Program,

a program of formation about Jesuit values, mission, and identities (particularly around issues of in/justice and pedagogies of reflection, discernment, and action).

This curriculum was also developed through a Canisius College Mission & Identity Grant which I shared with my colleague Dr. Secil Ertorer in Sociology. Some of this pedagogical development was also in response to my own evolution on themes of migration thanks to Campus Ministry trips to El Salvador (where I met Sr. Peggy O'Neill of [Centro Arte para la Paz](#)) and twice to the US-Mexico Border with [Kino Border Initiative](#) (where I met Joanna Williams, Jaret Ornelas, and Fr. Pete Neely, among others). I had traveled with our former campus minister and Officer of Mission & Identity, Sarah Signorino, to KBI, and I had taught and later worked with another former campus minister, Kaitlynn Buehlmann. The three of us, along with other colleagues at the college, developed the [Borders & Migrations Initiative](#). I was inspired to found that initiative after seeing that students, upon returning from profound immersion experiences abroad, faded away. As the staff at KBI exhort us to do, I felt challenged and called to act after what I had witnessed at the border. From that contemplative challenge rose the [Borders & Migrations Initiative](#) at Canisius College which includes a bilingual speakers series featuring writers, artists, filmmakers, and social actors locally, nationally, and internationally, workshops, films, art installations, intentional service-learning partnerships, and a teaching toolkit.

Structure of Praxis

The integration of the UAPS into the conversation course was a natural fit and a perfect distillation of the approach I had been taking to the course, giving it a more cohesive narrative and structure. We start the course with a conversation about the UAPS and transformative experiences, also known as “[cannonballs](#)”, and discuss our own cannonball moments, and our search for God/the good/hope. The course is then broken down into component parts exploring different aspects of the UAPS.

The pedagogical aim for the course is to help students experience a *concientización*, a

transformative awakening that will continue beyond the confines of the class. While of course my focus is necessarily on teaching language skills, having students use language within the context of social interaction with those themes of the UAPS accomplishes the pedagogical goal of improving skills through a focus on a mission-oriented goal of showing the way to hope through constant reflection and discernment, accompanying the marginalized, journeying with the youth, and advocating for the environment in the process of advocating for a more just world. Consequently, the course employs a variety of communication strategies for students to practice and enhance their language skills. These strategies include the following practices.

UAP 1: Finding God, goodness, hope

Given that my students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and faith traditions, I look at the first UAP as a journey toward finding goodness and hope, to motivate us to reflect on the other UAP, discern and understand, and then take a hope-filled, hope-motivated action. This is done throughout the course, as students watch films and documentaries, speak with people from the various communities of marginalization, and perform their service-learning. We analyze approximately two films per week from Latin America, exposing the students to a wide variety of accents and cultural experiences. Students also read and hear testimonials from immigrants, deportees, and social actors locally, nationally, and internationally. These films, testimonials, and conversations present the narratives of migrants and other marginalized peoples and show students how people find and maintain their journey toward God, goodness, and hope. These activities also provide the students with a basis and framework for discernment, reflection, and action.

Some important examples of “showing the way to God” involve conversations with guest speakers such as Fr. Pete Neely of Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Arizona/Sonora, and Sr. Peggy O'Neill

of Centro Arte para la Paz in Suchitoto, El Salvador. These inspiring individuals share their own cannonball moments and their resultant lives of service. These elders are both personable and inspiring, and in addition to sharing their own

journeys toward God and their processes of reflection, discernment, and action, they do so in Spanish or Spanglish, demonstrating to my students that one's Spanish needn't be fluent to be impactful, and important lesson for language skills as well as for students who feel overwhelmed by the world's problems.

UAP 2: Walking with the excluded, the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice

This UAP is addressed through the films, and then more deeply through direct conversations with migrants, detainees, and social activists in the US and abroad. Some of these pedagogies which address both Spanish language fluency and themes of accompaniment include the following actions.

After exploring the UAPs and cannonball moments, students meet with and learn from lawyers (who also happen to be former students) who practice immigration law. Despite learning about the laws impacting immigrants, students don't fully appreciate the depth of the experience until they begin to walk with them. The process of accompaniment then takes several forms.

I employ a type of "Role Playing Game" or Real-World Simulation Activity. This takes the form of an Immigration Simulation which recreates the legal and extra-legal processes of immigration in an activity borrowed from KBI which we have expanded and developed to include both an English and a Spanish version, as well as an online format. The Immigration Simulation is designed around real people's stories, from immigrants with multiple backgrounds and statuses, to visa interviewers, ICE officers, coyotes and drug smugglers/human traffickers, and detention centers. This simulation, though lasting less than an hour, and obviously artificial, helps students understand more viscerally the deeply emotional traumas and frustrations of immigration. The activity is followed by reflections on Catholic teachings on migration, and students' own reflection on their experience.

Having established a framework for understanding immigration, students are then prepared for their community-based learning with [Justice for](#)

[Migrant Families](#). Prior to COVID this involved students visiting the Federal Migrant Detention Facility in Batavia, NY, forty-five minutes from campus, and sitting in accompaniment with detainees and listening to their stories and collecting information for their cases; students also could attend court hearings for detainees in deportation proceedings and asylum hearings to sit in communal support with them. As COVID has shut these mechanisms down for now, we now perform advocacy and accompaniment through a pen pal program, manning the bilingual phone bank, and helping coordinate the food bank for families impacted by migration policies.

There has been more than one occasion where detainees whom some of the students had met in Batavia were successful in their petitions for release. In those cases, we have been extremely fortunate to have them come to our class to share their experiences. It is moving to see how these people, once free, are deeply grateful for the accompaniment provided during their lonely incarceration.

Students also conduct several projects throughout the semester that are structured under the theme of accompaniment. These include a geocaching project where students investigate and report on Latinx community artifacts in the city (murals, businesses, museums, etc.), as well as a project conducting interviews with immigrants.

Students are assigned partners to conduct interviews with Spanish-speaking immigrants to the US or US immigrants to Latin America—the latter helps to complicate students' understanding of immigration as not unidirectional. This activity is usually intergenerational (thus there are various forms of accompaniment: the students with immigrants, and the older immigrants with the youth). Furthermore, the activity creates more personal connections and understandings of migration. However, the subjects with whom students are paired are also not "just" immigrants; they also experience other forms of marginalization as they are usually women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and/or POC (people of color), which is an important facet in a PWI (primarily white institution) such as Canisius has been historically. Notably, students have frequently expressed how happy they were to

have had this opportunity as they gained new friends around the globe, and someone with whom they could continue to learn and share, and the interview subjects are always happy to participate in this activity.

Since the course is not exclusively focused on the marginalization of migrants, students also meet with activists from Mexico and other locales focusing on the rights of women, LGBTQIA+, and other marginalized groups. These speakers include: Tamara Blanca, a feminist activist in Puebla, Mexico; Karla Rey, a trans/muxe activist and cultural leader from Oaxaca & Mexico City; [Onán Vázquez](#), an LGBTQIA+ and Indigenous Rights activist in Puebla, Mexico; and Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, an Afro-Boricua lesbian feminist author and activist from Puerto Rico.

In furtherance of the UAP directive to accompany the marginalized, and given the wide diversity of marginalized peoples, students are required to attend a variety of the Borders & Migrations public events; exceptional students help plan and coordinate them. The series features artists, filmmakers, photographers, writers, and social activists who expose students to various forms of accompaniment, discernment, reflection, and action in ways that lead us toward hope (returning us to UAP 1).

UAP 3: Journey with Youth, to accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future

This UAP is met through a variety of activities that on the surface are more focused on language instruction and practice but in experience, fulfill this UAP goal, primarily through our program of Dual Immersion and *tertulias*.

One of the more impactful activities within this UAP is the use of Dual Immersion, a Jesuit AUSJAL/AJCU collaboration involving virtual conversation practice with peer English-language learners in Mexico: students spend half a session speaking in English, and the other half in Spanish. In addition to language practice and cultural exchange, students often develop profound friendships. These semi-structured conversations (themes are provided and professors visit the groups) had traditionally been done via Skype,

computers, and phones, but is now done entirely via Zoom and breakout rooms, which has provided significant group independence and has allowed students at Canisius in partnership with English-language learners in different Jesuit Universities throughout Latin America to learn about the lives, concerns, and interests of their peers. Students talk about typical things like holidays, foods, film, and music, but also serious topics such as crime, poverty, and immigration. In addition, students learn a lot of slang and gain a whole different perspective on youth culture. I have had students who, after graduation, or during an internship abroad, or during study abroad write me to thank our program for organizing these virtual exchanges: they establish friendships and visit each other. Dual Immersion allows students to forge new friendships through an exploration of problems, perspectives, and hope through a bilingual, bicultural, international collaboration.

Another youth accompaniment activity is our *tertulias* which are informal conversation practice with peers fluent in both languages. Our advanced students pair with exchange students from Spain or Latin America for in person conversation. We also structure virtual *tertulias* with students in Latin America. These activities are entirely organized by the students, without any direct faculty involvement; leaders are financially compensated for their work through a scholarship, and present on their evolution as bicultural, bilingual leaders at the end of the year. *Tertulias* offer our students the opportunity to develop as culturally competent leaders through peer-to-peer youth engagement.

Many of our films also deal with immigrant youth, adding another dimension to the UAPs of marginalization and youth accompaniment. Students have had occasion to interact with young children, primarily children who are US citizens of undocumented parents, DACA youth, or children of families of mixed status. Interactions with these children have usually happened through a Borders & Migrations event or through the service-learning food bank activity which includes communal meals with immigrant families.

UAP 4: Caring for Our Common Home

The final UAP is addressed through films and conversations with environmental activists such as José Ignacio Escorriola from Costa Rica. This theme is connected to the second UAP as it is often poverty induced by climate change, monoculture (too often to feed the narcotics market), neoliberal economic policies, and extractive capitalism which contribute to the push/pull factors of migration. Through their conversation with José Ignacio, students learn of the impact of climate change, the challenges faced in developing nations such as Costa Rica, and the strategies employed to help protect the natural environment which is such an integral part of the economic infrastructure of the country.

Outcomes

Throughout the semester, then, students are exposed to theories, practices, and direct experiences of in/justice (both juridical and extrajudicial) which result from practices around the following themes: Immigration, Children's Rights, Women's Rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, LABIPOC rights, and Environmental Rights. The theories and practices of justice which inform the actions in favor of justice focus on liberation theology, restorative/reparative justice, reconciliation, social activism, and revolution, as well as learning about the US judicial system and strategies of criminalizing marginalized bodies.


Through these various activities addressing the four UAPs as outlined above, students gain a deeper understanding of legal constructs around race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, migration status, and the laws and social structures that define an individual's relationship to the state (both in the US and abroad), as well as alternative practices of justice that confront these injustices. Students learn the push/pull factors of immigration, the US's culpability in these injustices, and the consequences of racial, gender, and sexuality discrimination, the impacts of war and poverty, and the criminalization of marginalized bodies (the female, black, brown, and queer body), and how people attempt to escape, navigate, or change these oppressive systems. We also explore environmental in/justice and its causes and consequences. Students

experience how discriminatory enforcement of power is part of the US justice system (particularly vis-à-vis immigration policy) and the social structure (from the economics of migrant labor to the profit motives of our carceral system); additionally, students learn how power structures maintain systems of oppression based on categories of disenfranchisement relative to women, LABIPOC, and LGBTQIA+, both in the US and Latin America.

In the final project for the course, students are tasked with describing the factors that lead to injustice for a given group of people of their choosing, from the UAP framework, and their relationship to power/powerlessness. At the end of the semester students are expected to explore these various approaches to justice and how they themselves may play a role in crafting a more just and equitable world. This is done through a reflection wherein students discuss the theories, practices, and experience of in/justice they have encountered and how justice is defined and enacted in the US toward a specific group. Reflecting on what they learned and their own experiences of the problems the UAPs address, they discern the causes of injustice and form a plan of action about how they will, in their own personal lives, take action to effect change and address injustice. The final project demonstrates the students' ability to synthesize what they have learned in terms of theories and practices of justice and injustice, the lived experience of those who have been marginalized by systems of in/justice, and the work of those confronting injustice by asking them to reflect on what they have learned and develop an action plan to confront a particular area of injustice. Students learn to take responsibility for the mitigation of injustice and the promotion of justice. This is meant to return the focus of the course to UAP 1: Finding God, goodness, and hope. The expectation of the final reflection is that they see the course's various elements as cannonball moments, prompting reflection and discernment, with the tools to empower them to see God, goodness, and hope in their lives, motivating them to take action.

These final projects, along with the conversations with our guest speakers, the interviews with immigrants, and the reflections on their

community-based learning are included in the [Borders & Migrations Teaching Toolkit](#) via our [YouTube channel](#). The results of this pedagogy are clear. Students produce deeply moving, thoughtful, and reflective projects, discerning through their experience of others' tragedies and challenges, determined to take action. Sometimes the action is as simple as finding their courage and their voice to confront their family members who have less evolved views on these issues. Others take even bolder steps to run the social media for Justice for Migrant Families, to continue service learning, or to continue volunteering their services to Borders & Migrations Initiative. Students have said how this integrated, multi-pronged approach provides them with a variety of tools and knowledge to respond to those who express points of view that are inaccurate. More than one student has been inspired to take action by volunteering a year of service either through Jesuit Volunteer Corps or other volunteer post-graduate actions. Because of student interest in the issue of migration resulting from their experiences in this course, I established a volunteer, credit-bearing internship partnership with KBI in Dos Nogales Arizona/Sonora. A significant number of students have, as a result of the reflective, experiential

process of the course, completely changed their majors. An African American recent graduate abandoned her business degree to focus on a graduate degree in community communication strategies to help organizations develop more effective messaging around these issues; a large number of students who never did the prelaw program decide to go to law school to practice law advocating for justice on various of the issues explored in this class. One student who studies prelaw and criminal justice was offered a prestigious internship with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) but turned it down after she learned about the problems in our system and the problems of injustice. One student was so inspired by our conversation with Sr. Peggy that she very nearly left school to move to Suchitoto so that she could become the next Sr. Peggy. As another student said: "watching films of such emotional impact is important but what do you do with that? Reading statistics on immigration is also important but lacks contextual meaning. Combining the films, the statistics, and the actual experience of people, and making personal connections helps me understand the realities and makes it personal." 

Appendix: Sample Syllabus/Schedule
Conversation: Latin America in Movement

**UAP 1: Showing the Way to
God/Goodness/Hope**

Week 1

UAPs Introduction: ¿What are the UAPs? What do they mean? Why study them?

- 1) Know God/Goodness
- 2) Walk with the Excluded
- 3) Walk with the Youth
- 4) Care for Our Common Home

Cannonball Moments; UAPS (videos)

Film: *Cuento Chino/Chinese Take Away*

**UAP 2 & 3: Walk with the Marginalized &
Accompanying the Youth**

Who are the marginalized and excluded?

Immigrant, the LGBTQIA+ community, youth and women

Part 1: Immigrants

Week 2

Films: *Bestia* and *Which Way Home*

JFMF Community-Based Learning Training and
“What Is Service Learning?”

Week 3

Films: *Sin Nombre* and *¿Quién es Dayani Cristal?*

JFMF Community-Based Learning Training part 2

Video 1: Who Am I?

Week 4

Desert Walk, Backpack Activity, the Border. Virtual class visit from KBI: Jaret Ornelas and Fr. Pete Neely (and their own cannonball experiences)

Video 2: DUE: “What Would Be in My Backpack”

Virtual class discussion with Immigration Lawyers explaining the processes of immigration and the consequences of irregular immigration.

Week 5

Immigration Simulation (in partnership with participants in Mexico)

Begin AUSJAL/AJCU Dual Immersion/Inmersión Dual

Week 6

Films: *Crossing Arizona* and *Desierto*

Dual Immersion/Inmersión Dual

Week 7

Dual Immersion/Inmersión Dual

Video 3: Geocaching Project: Exploring LatinX Buffalo

UAP 3: Walking with the Youth

Week 8

Films: *7 Soles* and *Misma Luna*

Dual Immersion/Inmersión Dual

UAP 3: Our LGBTQIA+ Family

Week 9

Films: *Jornaleros* and *Nadie Nos Mira* (gay immigrants)

Dual Immersion/Inmersión Dual

Week 10

Virtual conversation with LGBTQIA+ Immigrants

Films: *Contracorriente/Undertow* and *Etiqueta no rigurosa/No Dress Code Required*

Week 11

Virtual conversation with Onán Vázquez LGBTQIA+ and Indigenous Rights activist from Puebla, Mexico

Film: *Carmin Tropical*

Virtual conversation with Karla Rey, *muexe* community leader from Oaxaca

Video 4: Migrant Interviews

UAP 3: Women

Week 12

Films: *Camila* and *Crimen del Padre Amaro/The Crime of Padre Amaro* (women, misogyny, and the Church)

Conversation with Tamara Blanca, feminist activist from Puebla

**Back to UAP 1: Concientización/Awakening and
Awareness & Cannonballs**

Cannonball Moments/ Ignatian Transformations:

Change Leaders

(even if one disagrees with their methods of change)

Week 13

Film: *Romero* (with readings on Liberation Theology and Pedagogy of the Oppressed)

Virtual conversation with Sr. Peggy from Casa de Arte para la Paz, Suchitoto, El Salvador

Week 14

Films: *Diarios de Motocicleta/Motorcycle Diaries*
(Che) and *Sin Mapa (Residente/René de Calle*
13)

UAP 4 Caring for Our Home: The Environment

Week 15

Video shorts of Rigoberta Menchú and other
indigenous women environmental activists on
religion, the environment, and indigenous women
leaders, and the death threats they have faced
Virtual conversation with environmental activist
Nacho Escorriola from San José, Costa Rica