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LATINOS IN THE US:

PROMOTING INTERACTION AMONG
HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS
THROUGH TELECOLLABORATION

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Slide 2

LATINOS IN THE US

- Design phase
 - Challenges
 - *Latinos in the US*
 - Goals
- Implementation phase
 - *Identities*
 - *Historias*
 - Preliminary results

Today I am going to describe a telecollaboration project called *Latinos in the US* that I designed in collaboration with a group of colleagues at the Center for Integrated Language Communities. This telecollaboration seeks to connect heritage language learners from different parts of the US that are taking the same college level Spanish course, specifically designed for

English/Spanish bilingual speakers. The objective is to have students discuss issues of language and identity through synchronous and asynchronous communications.

I will first talk about the design phase with a description of the challenges, characteristics, and goals of this project. Then I will present the two modules of this telecollaboration (identities and histories) as well as some preliminary conclusions from the pilot that we implemented this semester (Spring 2016).

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The slide is a white rectangle with a black border. At the top center, the word "CHALLENGES" is written in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font. Below this title, there is a list of five challenges, each on a new line, centered horizontally. The challenges are: "Identifying partner institutions", "Defining common learning objectives", "Aligning syllabi and calendars", "Creating multimedia materials", and "Selecting appropriate and accessible technology tools". At the bottom left of the slide, there is a thin horizontal line. At the bottom right, there is a small black semi-circle.

CHALLENGES

- Identifying partner institutions
- Defining common learning objectives
- Aligning syllabi and calendars
- Creating multimedia materials
- Selecting appropriate and accessible technology tools

I would like to start by sharing some challenges that I encountered in the design phase, since these shaped the actual project as it is today.

First, it was quite challenging to find partner institutions to work with. It was in fact in my experience the most difficult step in the design phase. My initial idea was to telecollaborate with two or three other classes so that my students had a variety of partners from different parts of the country to talk to, but this initial structure had to be modified precisely because of the difficulty in finding suitable partners. I did try different things (contacting institutions and departments directly, emailing professors whose research suggested possible interest in this kind of project, signing up for webpages to find telecollaborators and partner institutions, etc.). I finally found that the easiest and most reliable way of identifying partners was relying on colleagues that I knew. And even that way things did not always go as planned. Last year, when I first tried to launch the project, I was working with two institutions but ended up not being able

to pilot the project at all: the first one, a small college in a rural area, could not offer the course because of low enrollment. The other, a university in a big city with a large Latino population, did not work out because we (the other instructor and I) could not find common ground to implement the project in a way that would be beneficial for both classes.

The second key factor, as crucial as finding a class (or classes) to telecollaborate with, is to work with partner instructors whose vision and mission aligns with ours. Otherwise, finding learning goals may be challenging. *Latinos in the US* is a project that is supposed to make us rethink and reevaluate our own practices as heritage language instructors and so I needed to collaborate with a professor that was truly interested in the methodology that underpins this project rather than in telecollaboration as an attractive addition to a particular textbook. Also, the instructors that I would work with had to have the freedom to make vast modifications to the syllabus.

These challenges led me to redesign the project (which at first was much more comprehensive not only in the number of telecollaborators, as I said before, but also in the number of telecollaborative modules and activities planned). I was very lucky, however, to find a great partner, María Jesús Barros García from Saint Xavier University in Chicago, with whom I reworked the project. And together we have piloted the course this semester for the first time.

A main challenge that María Jesús and I found was aligning syllabi and, especially, calendars, since her semester started and ended three weeks before mine. Just to give you an idea of how complicated this was: as María Jesús' students were having their last class, mine were enjoying their Spring Break.

Two other challenges that we found were creating multimedia materials, which is a very time-consuming activity, and selecting accessible and easy-to-use technological tools. We were very lucky to have the support of two wonderful technical assistants, Valeria Belmonti and Michael Rolland, without whom we could not have identified as many options as they helped us identify nor prepared as many assignments as they helped us to get done.

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LATINOS IN THE US

- Telecollaboration between Saint Xavier University and Queens College
 - Advanced heritage language course
 - Cross-cultural learning in the exploration of language and cultures in the US
 - Compare and contrast to understand the discursive configuration of identity
 - Value of students' experiences, memories, and connections
 - Technology-enhanced assignments and videoconferences
- Center for Integrated Language Communities – LRC
 - Language education at the community college, heritage language learners, and use of educational technology

Latinos in the US is a learning experience that connects students from Saint Xavier University and Queens College. Students at both universities are enrolled in an advanced language course specifically designed for heritage speakers, i.e., for students that were born and/or grew up in the US speaking a language other than, or in addition to, English at home, in our case, Spanish.

These courses traditionally focus on developing students' linguistic skills, mainly in writing, and on expanding their knowledge of the history and cultural productions of the Spanish-speaking world. To this structure we added, through the telecollaboration between the two classes in Chicago and NYC, an in-depth discussion of sociolinguistic issues and intercultural relations that are relevant for Latinos in the US.

Our main motivation to implement a collaborative online course was to open the possibility for our students to experience cross-cultural learning in order to expand their understanding of language and cultures in the US.

In order to do so we have selected readings and designed activities that rely on comparison and contrast of linguistic and cultural practices as a strategy to trigger discussion on the configuration of Latino identity.

We emphasized and valued our students' experiences, memories and connections with places and people in different parts of the world. We hope to encourage students to critically

reflect on their own definition of identity and thus deepen their understanding of themselves and their culture, at the same time that they question how they are perceived by others and how they perceive others and their identity.

In order to make this online collaboration between Saint Xavier University and Queens College happen, we designed two modules where students completed technology-enhanced assignments and telecollaborated with a classmate from the partner institution using a videoconferencing tool. This form of digital communication, largely used in foreign language classes at all levels around the globe, is not so common in heritage language instruction.

The course that we are piloting this semester is part of a broader research project financed by the US Department of Education through the Center for Integrated Language Communities, a National Language Resource Center that focuses on language education in the community college context, on heritage language learners, and on the use of educational technology to foster intercultural connections.

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GOALS

- Language proficiency (ACTFL 2012)
 - Advanced (intermediate high to advanced mid) in ACTFL
 - OPI and WPT
- Transcultural journey (Slimbach 2012)
 - The self and the other in a culturally complex world
 - Students' work and a final reflection
- Critical language awareness (Leeman 2015, Martinez 2003)
 - Ideas about language, language variation, and linguistic contact
 - Students' work and a final reflection

Our three main goals are the development of language proficiency, intercultural competence and critical language awareness.

For our first goal, we follow ACTFL proficiency guidelines and evaluation tools. For those of you who may not be familiar with this organization, ACTFL, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, has proposed a description of what language learners can do

at different stages in their learning process and designed oral and written assessment tools (the OPI and WPT respectively) to measure linguistic abilities. We want our students to be in the “Advanced” range of the scale.

We administered modified versions of both tests at the beginning of the semester and we are doing the same at the end to evaluate the linguistic progress of our students.

As is the case for many other Computer-Assisted Language Instruction initiatives, offering a cross-cultural experience is at the center of our project. We have designed activities and assigned readings that intend for students to be able to negotiate their understanding of themselves and the others in a culturally complex world. We found Slimbach’s transcultural journey particularly enlightening in the kind of turn that we hope that our students start experiencing in this class. In this sense, we expect students to be able to reflect on the relationship between the self, the culture, the other, and humanity; to be aware of the particular historical and sociopolitical circumstances that impact their viewpoints as well as their identity as Latinos in the US; and to be able to critically evaluate stereotypes (both those imposed by others on them and those they impose on others). We will analyze these learning objectives through our students’ productions in this course and a final reflection.

Finally, due to the nature of our course, language plays a major role. Many heritage speakers often perceive their language as inappropriate or incomplete. Some others value their moving between Spanish and English as part of their identity. Very few, however, can explain, let alone confront, negative representations of their linguistic practices that are based on a set of linguistic ideologies that value standard, pure norms while they disregard or censure non-standard varieties and language contact. Following the work done by Jenni Leeman and Glenn Martinez in the field of Critical Applied Linguistics, we spent quite a bit of time this semester discussing how languages work, the nature of language variation, and linguistic contact. And again we are going to analyze students’ critical language awareness through their productions this semester and a final reflection.

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IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

- Google Site
- Nosotros
- Identity survey
- Google Hangouts on Air
- Two modules: *Identities, Historias*

In the implementation of *Latinos in the US* we created a Google Site that allowed us to organize and keep a record of the collaborations between our students. First we had them post a picture and bio on a personal page under “About us” (“Nosotros”).

Then we paired students based on personality and interests using an identity survey. We used the comment bar built into each student profile page to let them know who their partner was and we asked them to communicate with each other through the comment bar as well.

Working in pairs (a couple of them actually worked in trios because our classes were not exactly the same size) students did two videoconferences this semester using Google Hangouts on Air, a tool that directly records the conversation as a YouTube video.

Each of these conversations were the center of the two telecollaboration modules that we designed, “Identities” (“Identities”) and “Histories” (“Historias”).

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IDENTIDADES

- The *Cultura* project
 - [Word association](#)
 - [Sentence completion](#)
- Telecollaboration
 - Compare and contrast results
 - Discuss how and when you use English, Spanish or a combination of both
 - Reflect on values that are important markers of identity in both classes
- Essay: Who are US Latinos?
 - Describe the characteristics shared by Latinos in the US
 - Compare and contrast different Latino values and experiences
 - How is Latino identity constructed from within and from outside the group

In the first module, students explored the discursive nature of group identities through readings, questionnaires, and a discussion with a telecollaborator in a synchronous communication via Google Hangouts on Air.

A good portion of the first module was inspired by the *Cultura* project, a telecollaboration initiative intended to promote intercultural competence and commonly used in foreign language courses. We modified the *Cultura* questionnaires to discuss ideas and opinions about our students' perception of the world that surrounds them. Each student answered a survey that asked them to write a couple of words that they associated with one or more given words. They also completed a number of sentences according to their own opinions to describe, for instance, what is for them the American dream or a good job. These surveys were created with Google Forms and posted on the website for students to complete. Once they completed these surveys, we discussed the results in class showing students the answers provided by their classmates but not the results from the other class.

Next, students had their first telecollaboration with their partner via Google Hangouts on Air. Based on the readings and in-class discussions, students were asked to compare and contrast ideas and results from the word association and sentence completion in each class, to discuss their linguistic practices by explaining and analyzing how and when they use Spanish/English, and when and how they mix them, and, finally, students were asked to reflect on the values that

they feel are important markers of their identity. These videoconferences were assigned as homework and took place outside the classroom. They lasted an average of 40 minutes.

The culmination of this first module was a multi-draft essay titled “Who are US Latinos?”

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HISTORIAS

- Family trees and routes to NYC/Chicago – [maps](#)
- [Material history](#)
- Telecollaboration
 - Share personal histories and discuss similarities/differences
 - Discuss language issues relevant for the history of your families/communities
 - Reflect on the significance of general historical events in the relocation and dislocation of human groups
- Essay: History of US Latinos?
 - Describe some trends in the history of Latinos in the US
 - Compare and contrast different eras and different parts of the country
 - Discuss how your own history converses with the general patterns in your city and the country

In the second module, “Historias,” students learned about the history of Latinos in Chicago, NYC and the US through a number of readings and activities. They also discussed the image of Latinos in the media and investigated different celebrations of Latino communities in their neighborhoods, in their cities and in the country as a whole.

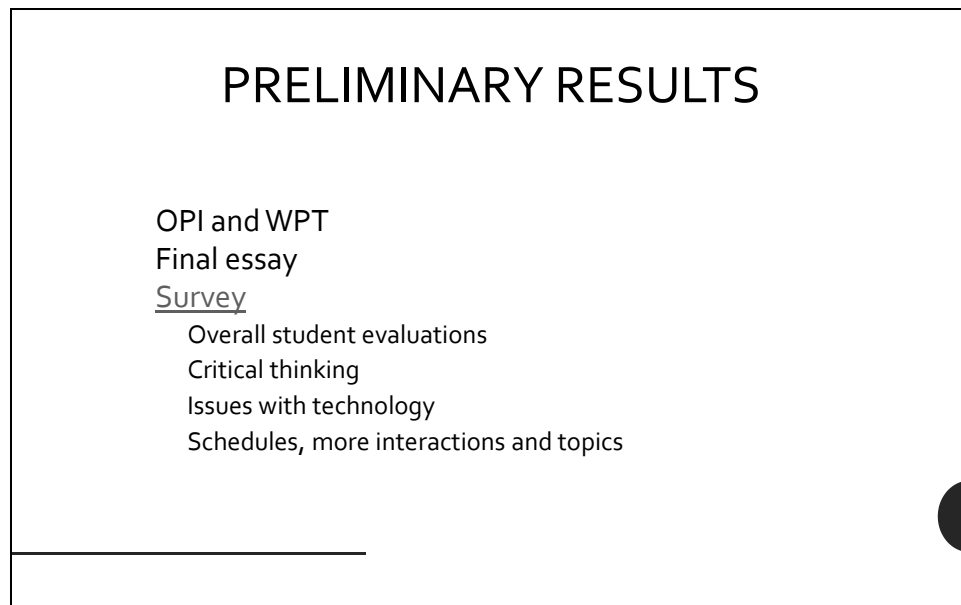
As with the first module, students had to complete different tasks. First, we asked them to create a family tree and describe their families’ routes from their place of origin to NYC and Chicago. In this project students were given some freedom to go back as many generations as they wanted, and also to only talk about their family/community members that they preferred. We created a Google Map and, as students were presenting their family to the class, we (the instructors) added a line on the map for each of them that represented the route that their family took to NYC or Chicago. Both maps were posted in the “Historias” page. Then, we asked students to compare and contrast trajectories by looking at the map created by the other class, which allowed us to have an in-depth in-class discussion on past and present migration trends and patterns.

Each student worked on material history through a 3- to 5-minute oral presentation of a meaningful object to talk about their family or community. This task was a central piece of this second module. Students again recorded their presentations using Google Hangouts on Air and posted their narrated pictures on the webpage. They described objects such as a sewing machine, a medallion, a machete or the number 88.

After this, students had their second telecollaboration with the same partner as in the first telecollaboration. With their partner, and based on the readings and in-class discussions, students had to share their histories and discuss similarities/differences, talk about language issues that are important for the history of families/communities, and reflect on the significance of general historical events in the relocation and dislocation of human groups. This time the videoconferences lasted a bit longer, almost 1 hour on average.

As with the first telecollaboration, students had to write a multi-draft essay on the histories of Latinos in the US, describing trends, comparing and contrasting times and different parts of the country, and discussing how their own history converses with the general patterns in their city and the country.

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The slide is titled "PRELIMINARY RESULTS" in a large, bold, black font. Below the title, there is a list of items: "OPI and WPT", "Final essay", and "Survey". Under the "Survey" item, there are four sub-points: "Overall student evaluations", "Critical thinking", "Issues with technology", and "Schedules, more interactions and topics". The slide has a black border and a small black semi-circle in the bottom right corner.

As I mentioned before, the three main goals of *Latinos in the US* are the development of language proficiency, transcultural competence, and critical language awareness. I will measure the extent to which these goals have been achieved through the results of the OPI and WPT, my

students' final essays, and a final survey. The first two have not yet been completed, so in this presentation, I am going to talk about some preliminary results based on the answers to the survey.

In general, students report having had an overall good or very good experience in this class. Some answers concentrate on their perceived improvement of linguistic skills, others comment on the positive experience of having learned about Latino history and culture in the US, and still others single out the telecollaboration with their partner from Chicago as the best experience in the class.

There is a mix of responses in relation to students' critical evaluation of language use, cultural practices, and the configuration of identity. Some students seem to recognize the sociopolitical forces that underlie the configuration of identity and to understand the nature of language contact and its negative representations in our society. Yet, others continue to acritically reproduce mainstream ideas about Latino language and identity and take for granted notions such as the American dream or the melting pot.

In regards to technological tools, students report that they think that all the Google tools employed this semester will be valuable in their personal and professional future. They also feel comfortable or very comfortable using Gmail, Google Sites and Google Maps. However, a third of them feel they did not learn to use Google Hangouts, which was the most central technological tool they used throughout the semester.

Finally, when asked what we could change to make this learning experience better, students asked us to take their schedules into account when matching them up with their partner and incorporate more modules and more opportunities for students to interact with each other.

We are going to take these answers into account to modify the course and pilot it again next Spring. Any other suggestions or ideas from the audience here today and online will also be greatly appreciated.

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Slide 11

Thank you very much!

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