

Interview Transcription: Esther Poveda*Senior Lecturer, Department of Spanish, Italian, & Portuguese*

ANDREW KAUFMAN: The class that we're going to talk about today is the second class in a series. This class is called Cultural Conversations, but it sounds like it's related to a course you taught a year ago called Writing for Social Justice and Change.

ESTHER POVEDA: Yeah. The class that I taught this spring is part of a course sequence supported by the Civic and Community Engagement program and the way the program works is that students take a class with you for two semesters, with the idea that the community work that they do is more continuous in time and it allows them to draw deeper connections. Right now, there is not a specific community-based learning class in my department, so what I did was use two classes that already exist but gave them community-based learning content. The first one is our academic writing class and I gave it a subtitle of Writing for Social Justice and Change. And the second one that we're going to talk mostly about is a conversation class is called Cultural Conversations, and I gave it the subtitle *Sí se puede: Community Engagement in Spanish-Speaking Charlottesville*.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Tell me a little bit about the class, what the students do, how you engage the community, and what your learning goals are.

ESTHER POVEDA: The second class is a conversation class, so it's basically a language class in which the discussions are driven by the students and the teacher chooses a topic or a series of topics around it. My topic had to do with the Spanish-speaking community in Charlottesville, the immigrant community, the challenges they face, but also the contributions they make to our community. And students continued working with the same community agents that they had worked with in the fall and the two community agents are Latino Health Initiative, the UVA Latino Health Initiative, and Latinx and Migrant Aid, which is a program of Madison House. The areas in which they did community work were public health, some community organizing, and education. So, those were the main areas in which they got involved in projects.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Tell me, would you consider this a culture course, a language course? What do you hope the students will take away from the course?

ESTHER POVEDA: This is a language course, but the title has a combination of both, right? Cultural conversations. The main aim of the class is it is starting them in the whole curriculum of the department. It's an advanced language class in which students learn cultural information by engaging in conversations and this was very good because they were doing community work, and so their conversations that they engaged in were not only among themselves and with me, but with community members.

What I wanted for them to take away from these is the idea of culture is not something superficial, but culture is a representation of much more deeper experiences of humankind, of their own history, of their social class, of the experience of immigration. And the idea of conversation was that the conversation had to be respectful and the conversations had to put the other person on an equal standing, so that the conversations are fruitful and they're really cultural conversations.

The main goal of the classes did fit perfectly for the kind of work that I wanted students to do in the community and I organized the class around two main projects. One of the projects was students worked in groups and they created a podcast, and the podcast sought to showcase and celebrate the work of the community agents that the students had worked with since the fall in the Charlottesville community. The fact that the students had already done a semester of community work with these community agents was very important to really do this project well because the students had already built a relationship. They already had a conversation going on and they had built a relationship of trust. So, it was not odd for the students to start asking questions that then were going to be recorded and then made public.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: You get the news in mid-March that you have a week to transition this course entirely online. How did you react to this news? How did your students react? And how did your community partners react?

ESTHER POVEDA: I reacted pretty much like everybody else, right? How are we going to continue the community work that the students are doing, right? My students were going once a week to either tutor kids with their English homework or they were going to the Latino free clinic and they were interpreting for patients. So, that was not possible to be done anymore. The students were sad, and they were confused, all the emotions that the students felt.

The community agents reacted very beautifully by taking a little bit of time and then emailing the students with an update of how they were facing themselves the challenge and how they were seeking to continue supporting and helping the communities that they serve and thanking them for the work they had previously done. There was a break, but the break was done in a very nice, supportive way by sharing the information of what they were doing, but also by thanking them for having been part of the project. I thought that was very good. It was important for the students to understand that this time requires different challenges and people could be put at risk just by doing community work. We were in very unknown scenarios. The way that you serve the community had to be rethought and that's what the community agents were doing in a very respectful way for everyone involved and I thought that was very important that that was communicated to the students.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: How did it change the class? What did you do differently?

ESTHER POVEDA: I talked about the first project. The first project would not have been impossible to do, but very difficult to do if we had the pandemic starting early in the semester, but the podcast was finished before spring break. So, that worked very well because that involved the students interviewing a lot of people and the interviews happened while they did their community work because they already had that community established. It was very organic and full of trust, the conversations they were having, conversations with people that they were working with already. That was great because all the interviews and editing, all that project was finalized before the break.

What happened is that the second part of the semester we did a completely different project that involved working with a testimony, which is the life story of a community member, Spanish-speaking community member from Central America who has come to the United States. And she wrote this beautiful account of her life story in which she basically explains all different events in her life and how those have contributed in a way to her decision to come to the United States. She touches upon the main historical events of Guatemalan history since the 1950s and kind of like history from below. She tells her life story. She mentioned a very important earthquake that happened and that exposed a lot of inequalities. She went through the civil war in Guatemala and she's indigenous, so she had to face also a lot of challenges in her access to health and education and the professional world. Her testimony was very rich and she wanted help to get her story out.

I myself am part of several organizations, so I do a lot of community work, and that's why I had access to this text, and she asked me last summer to translate it so that she could share it with other people. Also, my area of interest academically is Central American literature and the role of testimonial writing in indigenous literature, so that's also my area of specialty, my training, and for me was a great opportunity to work on such a document. And what I did was translated really fast for her to have it in English, but I thought it would be a great project for the students to learn many things. It's a conversation with someone and through that conversation and working with this text, students could learn a lot of things. They could learn about testimonial writing and the role that it has played in Latin American literature, and culture and history. They could learn about Guatemalan history. They could also read about U.S.-international relations.

With her permission and with her support, the second half of the semester revolved around testimonial writing in Latin America. So, students read other testimonials and read academic articles on the role of testimony. We read indigenous literature. We watched documentaries on Guatemalan history and so I provided all that background. We met with her through Zoom and they asked her questions, clarifications. They got to meet her and to know her. Originally, we were going to meet with her in person, but we did all this through Zoom, which you know worked very well because the class is very small, so everybody could be seen. And the conversations, they were very fluid.

What the students did was they polished my translation. I'm not an English speaker and the original text is very oral and it's hard for me to know what sounds oral in English. I just did a very literal translation to get the information across, but the students, they read it in Spanish. They met with her and they tried to convey in English the quality of her voice because it's a very oral text. Then they worked in pairs to do a little bit of research and write several footnotes to provide context for some of the events that she mentions in passing. And for someone that is not familiar with Guatemalan history, they may lose the implications of her story. So, what they did was a bilingual edited edition of her text and the idea was, it was a conversation. She taught them so much and at the same time, they supported her, getting her story out in a different language and in a different cultural context.

That was planned originally from the get-go, but one of the things that I added to the project in order to provide more hours of community work, I mean they were doing community work by doing the project, they were doubling in community work because they would have kept doing their volunteer hours with their community agents, but they were also working with this community member, assisting her with her story. And the students transcribed the text in Spanish, which took a fair amount of work, and that will come handy if we do a kind of digital edition of the text both in English and in Spanish. So, that was some work that I was going to do little by little, but my students transcribed the text and the way I presented it is like, okay, this is going to complete your actual community hours of work by doing this

service to her. I mean you're doing already a lot of service, but we're going to add this component that is going to substitute the hours that you would have done for your community agents.

The students thought it was a great idea. They were absolutely engaged. They learned a lot. I was actually, before our conversation, rereading their final essay, which was a reflection essay, and the question was what did you learn doing this project? It was kind of like a very vague prompt, which is unlikely that I do, but I just wanted to see what each student got away from working on a project like this and, I mean I'm still moved by the reactions. Of course, they learned Spanish, right? Because all the conversations were in Spanish. They learned to listen. They researched. They wrote in Spanish. So, there was all the skills and then the cultural element, right? They learned tons about indigenous culture. They learned tons about the importance of testimonial, human rights in Latin America, but what really stands out in those reflections goes beyond that and has to do with issues of respect and representation, like what is your role when working in a project like this. It goes beyond. It's much deeper what they got away from, like some students said that they learned to be allies, what to be an ally means. They learned to listen, or they learned the importance of speaking in the name of others and how you have to be very careful and the politics involved in that.

The project worked very well at many levels and the fact that each of us were behind a computer screen, I think they had a sense that they could still work for the community from their homes because the work that they were doing was very important at so many levels. And for me, what really moved me from the reaction was that reflective part—what does it mean to be an ally? What does the work that I've done mean? How do you do it carefully and respectfully? Of course, they learned Guatemalan history, but I think that lesson that has to do with process, with respect, was the deeper lesson that they learned by doing this.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Was there any conversation in your class or reflection on the actual moment in which this is taking place, the backdrop of the pandemic? Or was there some kind of learning of your subject matter for the students that came out of that reality as well?

ESTHER POVEDA: In a way, yes. Because the students also they had their ability to move limited, right? So, they could really understand what it means to be an immigrant or to have limited ability to move in a much deeper way. It gave them I think a sense of purpose. I guess it showed them what to be an ally is and it can have many different forms. And the main form is that respect and that caution with which you approach human relationships, right? And that can be done from home. You don't have to be on site to do it.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Did you have any conversations with the students about what you just said about this discovery of what it's like to be to have limited mobility? Were there conversations in the class about that?

ESTHER POVEDA: Yeah. Their class, the way I have created it, it comes with a lot of opportunities for growth and reflection and for sharing. And that's my way of bringing together the actual community work with the classroom work because otherwise how do you incorporate in a way that is constructive and productive, and that leads to more of a transformative moment, the experience that they're doing community work? Because it can be very repetitive. If you think, they go every Tuesday, let's say to assist kids with their homework, which could be very repetitive task, right? But the reflective moments that I incorporated, word-guided reflections, and they were targeted to help them process that

experience and link it with the topics of the class. So, yes, we had, we had a lot of guided reflections and discussions that allowed them to voice those thoughts.

For example, I remember a class in which they had already worked on polishing my translation. And they were kind of like, very cautious and I asked them, so what's going on? And they said, well, we feel very responsible, that they felt the responsibility of really, really representing who she was, the voice of this person that had trust them enough to share her story with them. The way the project was and the additional readings that they were doing that I brought to the class led to those reflective moments. So, we not only discussed the content of the articles or the literature that we were reading on the side, but the more ethical issues that were more reflective in nature, like issues of representation, for example, which are very important.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: As you look back on this experience, what was your biggest challenge as a teacher?

ESTHER POVEDA: After March, when we stayed at home, my biggest challenge as a teacher is to maintain that sense of community within the class, and with the outside world. We were only seeing each other through the screen of a computer. It's very unique, and then you leave that meeting. It's kind of like everybody vanishes. There is no materiality to it, and that was really odd. So, that was a big challenge.

But the fact that I had these students already for a second semester, we had a very strong relationship built. And they had a sense of the importance of the work that they were doing, that they were not only learning Spanish, an advanced level Spanish, Latin American culture, but they were doing something else. They were learning to listen. And they were learning to interact in a respectful way, right? And I saw that awareness of that was extremely helpful for all of us to kind of build this sense of community.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: As you think about this experience that you had this past semester, did this give you any new insights into teaching or maybe enhance or change any paradigms in your thinking about teaching?

ESTHER POVEDA: I think it reinforced the idea of the importance of reflection, but not reflection just for the sake of reflection. It had to be really well built into the class. They're getting a lot of information and they're getting a lot of emotions, too, because working in the community is not only content; it's also emotional. Their emotions can be contradictory and hard to process. Building a space for reflection, I think it proved very important in these times when we're far apart. I respond to what they reflect. And so, in a way, it's kind of like getting a letter back with somebody that is addressing your thoughts. And their thoughts have academic content, but they also have emotional content, if you wish. I thought the role of reflection proved even more important in this time period. It allowed us to accompany each other in a way in the distance.

The podcast, we're still in the process of getting everybody comfortable with what the students said and how they said it. So, everybody's listening to it. And the idea is for the community agents to share them through their websites, if they feel that that would be a good promotional material, like what is LHI (Latino Health Initiative)? Well, you can listen to this podcast and know what we're about, right? And the same with the other text. It could live online. And the fact that the work, which is not perfect by any

means, some of the footnotes were great and some had to be polished. They're undergraduates, but the fact that they also produce those artifacts that had a purpose, I thought also was very important.

It also really showed me that you have to be also very careful and detailed in presenting these projects. Because they involve people's stories, right? So, you cannot do these lightly. It has to have a real purpose. It has to come from a need. That you don't impose. The ethics element goes both ways, you know my way, too, as somebody that is providing or building the opportunity for the students and community to interact. As an intermediary, I also need to be very careful of how I do those things and why I do those things.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: You've talked a little bit about your students and what their discoveries were, some of your discoveries as a teacher. Can you share any life lessons that you learned as a human being, as a citizen, not necessarily just in your role as a teacher, but as a person? Were there any lessons that you took away from this experience of the past few months?

ESTHER POVEDA: I think the importance of education, the importance of what we do. I'm glad, really, learning and teaching means—

ANDREW KAUFMAN: What do they mean?

ESTHER POVEDA: Right? What do they mean? What does teaching mean? Is it only giving content or is it also giving opportunities for students to sometimes second guess themselves or to struggle through issues? What is your role as a teacher? How do you accompany those and for what purpose? So, it really makes you think of the importance of education as a life project, and how instrumental it is to be more fair and just societies.

I love teaching but sometimes you kind of forget why you love it, right? And I learned a lot in this process. The projects were not traditional and sometimes I had doubts, and I was trying to be, if anything, I try to be extra careful. If I was going to make a mistake, it was to be too careful.

And I learned a lot in that as a teacher. How do you present a project? What is the purpose? Why are we doing these, how are we doing it? What are the students gaining from it? What are my expectations from the students? So, that was very powerful for me. I learned a lot from everyone involved in the process.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: You've gone through this experience once. What advice do you have for other community-engaged teachers who are teaching in this moment?

ESTHER POVEDA: My advice to other faculty members or faculty that are teaching community-engaged courses in the next academic year, as we face the challenges of teaching online or hybrid courses, my advice would be to really work very closely with the community agent to define what the needs are. Those needs may have a different form of what you already envisioned when you thought about teaching that class.

So, I think my biggest advice is to listen, to listen very closely, and to try to adapt your class to what their real needs are, knowing that those needs may evolve and change, and you will have to shift gears. It's kind of very big advice, very vague advice, but I guess my experience has been this spring that you don't have to be on site to support a community or to feel part of a community. And that you can shift gears and find a purpose to what you do. I would say listen. Acknowledge the difficulties. Be very transparent

with everyone, the students involved, explain why you do things or why you change things. Get everybody involved in the conversation.

I think actually a situation like this falls into more of a normality pattern for doing community work than an anomaly, right? Because it's life and you have to be able to listen and to shift gears.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: What does it mean to you to be a community-engaged teacher in a time of trauma?

ESTHER POVEDA: I think the fact that I teach a language and a culture is very important to me and that's what motivates everything that I do. And I think being a teacher of Spanish in this time of trauma, it's even more meaningful because it's a language that is spoken where we live in our small community, in our larger community. It's the second language in the United States. And the communities that are having additional issues in this time of trauma may not be speakers of English. So, teaching Spanish or being a Spanish teacher is even more important to me these days and it gives me more of a sense of purpose. Because, yes, I teach how to use the subjunctive correctly, but the subjunctive is used to communicate emotions, needs, opinions, right? So, I think language teachers are very important. Learning another language is very important because at the end of the day it's the tool that you communicate with and you learn about others, right? So, it's kind of like a renewed sense of purpose in what I do. It's very important.