



Spanish: A final trial to bring literature to life

A Spanish literature course by A. Robert Lauer, University of Oklahoma (1998)

Course Design:

The course deals with a survey of Spanish literature, including Baroque works with such ambiguous characters as those in Lope Félix de Vega Carpio's *Fuenteovejuna*. The main character of this play is Fernán Gómez de Guzmán, the Knight Commander (*Comendador*) of the village of Fuenteovejuna, who was brutally murdered for having allegedly abused his subordinates. The class read, analyzed, and discussed the play, watched the film version directed by Juan Guerrero Zamora (1980), and then read critical essays on the play. For their final examination, students wrote a short (2-3 page) composition from the point of view of one of the characters in the play and enacted a ninety minute trial of the infamous *Comendador*. For the trial, students divided themselves into six groups of four students each, representing the various parties accusing and supporting the *Comendador*. The first twenty minutes of class were dedicated to last minute strategizing; each group then presented its testimony to the court which was presided over by the instructor dressed as the royal inquisitor. The accusers and the defenders each had one half hour to state their case. Once both sides had spoken, ten minutes were allotted for rebuttals from both sides, and then the jury was instructed to vote its conscience. Students left their assumed character, symbolically changing seats, and voted on the fate of the deceased defendant's honor.

The course promotes not only a deeper understanding of the play, but it also prompts students to become intimately familiar with the social and historical context of the play. Students are challenged to confirm and refute the other side's allegations in Spanish, on a sophisticated conceptual and linguistic level. In addition, the dynamic and competitive nature of the trial requires attentive listening and immediate feedback, testing both students understanding of the context and of the language.

Higher Level Learning:

The trial illustrates for students the importance of the link between a play and its historical and social context (**Connecting**). This new understanding of literary work provides students with a better view of how to critically analyze literature and how to identify multiple perspectives within a play filled with ambiguous characters (**Acting**). The exercise of having to do all of this in Spanish strengthened students command of the language by providing reading, writing, and oral practice (**Learning**). Students also gained a better understanding of the skills that they will need as Spanish majors to perform good linguistic and critical analyses (**Learning**).

Active Learning:

By working in student teams (**Dialogue with Others**), students were able to devise a strategy to use the facts in the original play to their advantage. Crafting an argument required the teams to carefully read the play and to skillfully apply their language abilities to making the necessary arguments (**Doing**). By virtue of working in student teams and by the nature of the final presentations, students were able to learn from each other and were led to try the linguistic and analytical strategies successfully used by others (**Observing**).

Lauer, A. R. (1998). Trials. [On-line] Available:
<http://www.coh.arizona.edu/spanish/comedia/lauer98.htm>