

## **June, 2001 - Patricia Santoro, Modern/Classical Languages**

This month's contribution comes from Patricia Santoro, Modern/Classical Languages.

Most of my teaching tips are geared to core courses which are large and are mainly populated by freshmen. In our department these courses are Introductory Spanish I and II, Basic Review of Spanish I and II, and Intermediate Spanish I and II, both for the native and non-native speaker.

A very wise teacher once told me that she does not feel she is doing her job unless her students are doing more work than she is. I have attempted to incorporate this philosophy into my own teaching ever since. I facilitate this philosophy by stating my expectations of the students' responsibilities in my syllabus. This is becoming increasingly longer, since I have found that some students making the transition from high school to college, especially for a course such as Spanish, carry with them the baggage of their expectations from their language class in high school. To wit: the class will be easy, we can fool around, and the expectations of the professors will be low. I have also found that some students have heard that college is a breeze: you can attend class when you feel like it, arrive late, and leave early. These myths are what I must dispel with my syllabus.

Students understand that the syllabus is their contract with me and that, once it is read and questions are asked, the students are wholly responsible for its content. The expectations are straightforward: arrive at class on time, do not leave early, do not exceed absences, do not share books, hand work in on time, be responsible for work missed, turn off beepers and cell phones, do not chat in class or bring in food or drink except water .

I am embarrassed at times for myself and for the students that I must enforce these rules, and I perceive some resentment from a very few students, but experience has proved that chaos would soon ensue without rules. In fact, I had considered experimenting and conducting a class with none of these rules in place until I came to the realization that many of these core students would receive low grades or even fail the course. No. The structure must be in place, and the students are responsible for adhering to it. Ultimately, it is the students who truly earn their grade, not the teacher who assigns it.

Percentages are clearly stated for a variety of categories: homework, quizzes/dictations/oral presentations, compositions, attendance, and midterm and final exams. Quizzes and dictations are short but frequent in language classes. There are no make-up quizzes or dictations, and students receive a zero if these are missed. However, I do drop the two lowest grades at the end of the semester. Compositions must be handed in on time, and no composition may be missed. Compositions are graded with a symbol sheet, and students must

correct their own, in a second draft, to receive full credit. Homework is corrected in class or by the students themselves at home using an answer key. I collect the homework, check it in my grade book, and return it by the next class. This procedure may sound a bit like high school or even junior high, but, by the end of the semester, each student has a file of work undertaken from the simplest verb quiz to the analysis of a poem or a composition on their dreams and expectations for the future. I make it clear to the students that quizzes and exams will come from or be based on their homework. I do not want it ever to be perceived by them that the work they do on their own is simply that dreaded busy work one associates with workbooks and fill-in-the-blank exercises. Students are told that homework is a process and is time well spent.

Another strategy that I have learned from another language teacher is the use of note cards for 1) calling on students at random to respond to a question, 2) forming pairs and groups, and 3) picking the order of students for oral presentations and oral exams. This strategy is especially useful for classes of more than twenty students. I pass out the cards on the first day of class and ask the students to write the name they want to be called, their address, phone number, and other vital information, such as travel, previous study of Spanish or another language, and their reason for studying Spanish. While use of cards may seem like a vestige from high school, the practice ensures that 1) I am fair, 2) I call on all students, and, most important, 3) students know that they must remain alert, since they will be called on in each class for any number of reasons. In addition, in these introductory and intermediate classes, the students are asked to do a great deal of paired and small group work. The cards assure all of us that their pairs and groups are totally random and they are given the opportunity to work with and get to know a variety of students.

There is a lot of bookkeeping involved in these core classes, but, at the end of the semester, each student knows exactly where he or she stands regarding grades from all categories, and there is little room or reason to dispute a grade. More important, students begin the semester and each class knowing that they are responsible for being in class and on time to each class, that they must be prepared because they will be called on, and that it is totally within their reach to obtain a decent if not high grade in the class if they fulfill their obligations. As we say in Spanish, "*He dicho.*" (I have spoken.)

### Conclusion

This is one approach to executing a midterm. If you decide to try this exercise, please share with me your own experience so that I can know if you enjoyed a similarly positive response from your students.