

Philosophy of Teaching Statement – Damian Romero, job search stage

I believe that, in today's world, education must both help students build solid knowledge bases and grant students the ability to perceive, acknowledge, and coexist with other people, cultures, and points of view. In my teaching, I will integrate these goals through the use of critical thinking inside a safe, technology-rich, and collaborative learning environment. Students in my class will become thorough analytical thinkers able to face real-world problems from a place of understanding and compassion. In addition to the hard skills they learn in my courses, they will also learn and hone soft, transferrable skills that will prove invaluable in both their careers and personal lives.

A safe and welcoming environment is inclusive and empowering. It is a place where students can exercise their creativity and freedom of expression, but being able to express themselves is not enough; students should feel the certainty that their points of view and experiences contribute to the joint development of knowledge. These characteristics are crucial to help students reconsider their own beliefs and behaviors because they promote spaces of genuine dialogue and debate, promoting the integration of external points of view.

As a teacher, I will strive to promote safe and welcoming environments both inside and outside my classes, for example, during tutoring or extra-curricular activities. Creating such spaces has helped me develop mutual trust between students and has helped me enhance my classroom teaching experience. As an example of this, in 2017, I created the first Online Spanish Club at The University of Arizona on the online teaching platform Canvas. The club was a space free of criticism, where I provided feedback and only offered my help when students requested it. Students that attended the club meetings formed strong bonds between them and often brought to class what they learned.

Safe and welcoming environments in themselves, however, are not enough to create the conditions for students to understand others. A student may be in a safe environment, protected by an information bubble that does not expose her to the otherness. In my practice, I will expose students to different cultures and ways of thinking by:

- Making use of collaborative learning with their peers.
- Fostering intercultural communication through digital literacy.
- Integrating their learning process with their own local and professional communities.

In my classes, students use collaborative learning in different ways but always paired with critical thinking. Recently, my advanced grammar and composition Spanish class read through [an interactive article](#) about a comparison between four countries with different policies regarding social distancing in the times of COVID-19. Each student took a role just as if they were performing a post-hoc fact-checking for a newspaper and shared their findings and opinions with the rest of the class on a virtual discussion forum. Students were instructed to keep an open mind and openly offer constructive and compassionate criticism in the forum. In this way, students used collaborative learning to integrate their knowledge of Spanish grammar and composition with critical thinking, understanding of otherness, compassion, and self-evaluation.

For online and in-person classes, videoconferencing is a useful tool that students will likely require in any modern workplace. In the language classroom, videoconferencing is helpful in honing intercultural communication. After learning about the different policies of social distancing, my students held a virtual exchange with students from Spanish speaking countries on an online platform. In this videoconference, they first talked about what they had previously learned from different mitigation and suppression policies. Then, they interviewed the international students about the policies and their effects on their communities. This activity helped students practice effective communication and listening skills in their second language with people outside their immediate environment.

Community-based learning is an excellent way to expose students to different beliefs and ways of thinking. As a teacher, I will provide students with a student-centered opportunity to engage and give back to their local communities, whether online or in-person. As a final project, my Spanish 425 online class explored an aspect of their future career by interviewing working professionals. The activity was engaging for students because they focused on topics that were motivating to them, for example, the mental health issues of healthcare professionals. They did further research using mixed methodologies (surveys, literature reviews, and other interviews) based on their first interview. In the end, students turned their findings into infographics and distributed them among their professional and home communities. During the process, students learned to work on real-world problems and practiced networking, communication, and problem-solving skills. The success of this activity is evidence of the usefulness of community-based learning in online and in-person teaching. It can offer a myriad of possibilities to the teacher who is interested in going beyond classroom activities. A classroom must not be isolated from its context; after all, students will use the skills and knowledge developed in class in the world outside academia.

As a space, a classroom must be designed with one thing in mind: for students to work with the least possible number of barriers. It must take universal design into account, it must be intuitive, and it must be flexible. In my career as a teacher for world languages under the supervision of Dr. Carmen King de Ramirez, director of the Spanish Online program at The University of Arizona, I have come to believe that the distinction between an online and a physical classroom needs to be re-conceptualized. The classroom has to be a space where students may enter at any time. In-person classrooms need to be extended through technology for remote access, and remote classrooms need to have a physical correlate within the student's communities. I am confident that we are making progress in this area. Recently, Amazon Web Services (AWS) announced [Amazon AppStream 2.0](#) for education, which allows students to access applications through any computer independently from the operating system in their computers. This is a step in the right direction towards inclusivity and flexibility.

In the future, I hope I can keep growing as a teacher, and I also hope to contribute to the innovation of new teaching and learning methodologies using big data and computational linguistics for teaching. I believe that machines can be extremely handy in automatizing repetitive tasks in education, for example, by creating individualized reports based on student performance in specific assignments, which, in turn, will help teachers design focus groups for teaching. By integrating these technologies into existing platforms, teachers could make better use of their time and understand students' learning more deeply.