

Claire Darmstadter

Hey, everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Paola Hernández, UW-Madison Professor of Latin American Theatre Studies. Thank you so much for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me.

Paola Hernandez

Thank you for having me.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So first it'd be great if you could just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you ended up at UW.

Paola Hernandez

Well, I'm originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina and I studied here in the United States. And my PhD is from the University of Kansas, in Latin American Theater with a concentration in Latin American Theatre studies. And I became a professor, an assistant professor in the year 2005.

Claire Darmstadter

And so you have what I think is a really awesome position where you get to teach classes, not only in Spanish, but related to the arts. And I don't want to make a blanket statement or act as though, you know, intro classes aren't as incredible as the upper level ones. But often, when you have those intro level classes, you have a lot of students who may be there for a requirement, or there may be there because, you know, they just have to fill that requirement to get to a higher level class. And there's not always as much culture or other aspects embedded into it that you might get with upper level classes. So I know if I understand correctly, that you've taught some kind of introductory classes as well. So how do you try to embed what you teach in your upper level classes with students who don't have as high proficiency or as much exposure to the Spanish language and culture?

Paola Hernandez

I actually love teaching introductory courses to Latin American literature, that's what we usually do. And also culture because many of the times, students who thought that they hated literature, or that they hated theater, or they hated poetry ended up literally loving it. And sometimes it even changes what they thought that they were going to study. And they're very interested in learning about the Latin American history, literature, culture aspects of our life. And so I think that we are lucky, you said, You said it very well, we are in a great position to bring this to fruition. And I, you know, by the time I get you guys, on the upper level classes, you pretty much either are there because you want to Spanish major, or you're interested in learning, but I really love it when I see students kind of become so interested that they continue down that path.

Claire Darmstadter

And so personally, in the class I took with you, which was fabulous by the way, there is a big emphasis on inclusive language. So can you talk a little bit about why this is important and some context or rationale on why you choose to use or not use certain terms?

Paola Hernandez

Yeah, I mean, I believe that inclusive language, as you know, Spanish is a gendered language. So we have feminine and masculine which you do not really have that in English as much. So I decided about two years ago that it was the right thing to do to include everybody and to make language inclusive, and not the kind of patriarchal way of doing it. In Spanish, anytime you pluralize something, it becomes male. And so I believe that I try my hardest. It is difficult to use inclusive language all the time, because you know, it comes when the norm comes back, unfortunately. But that's what I do for everybody to feel inclusive, and also to see how to make my students understand that language is also a political tool that can be used to, you know, make us aware of the world that we live in.

Claire Darmstadter

And so you do a lot of work with the Center for Visual Cultures. Can you just kind of talk about your involvement here, and how teachers perhaps can maybe use or learn from some of your programming to enrich their teaching or just in general, how arts can have a more prominent position in the language classroom?

Paola Hernandez

Yeah, I mean, I've been directing the Center for Visual Cultures for three years now. And it is a wonderful place, a wonderful center that I work with incredible colleagues from all over the arts and humanities, and also education. And what we do is we try to think of themes that are relevant to what we are living, as scholars, as people of Madison as well as people in academia, but also to people of our community. And so I bring together ideas for themes. And then a group of colleagues of mine work with me too, to get those things in line. And then we think of a variety of people, usually scholars, artists, but also activists have come to the center. And we try to include that kind of lineup and make it very available to anybody who wants to come. They're all public and free. And of course, during COVID we've been doing them online. So we've been able to invite artists who are usually very hard, very hard to get because they're very committed to their work to actually come. And as a matter of fact, this spring lineup for 2021 is all female, all artists and LGBTQ and, you know, ideas of how to represent people from all over the world when we actually can use the internet to our advantage. Also, the center has a PhD minor and a graduate certificate. So we are also always paying attention to what courses we can link to the Center that have a visual component that can actually help students think visually in other fields.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, I will leave a couple links to those in the transcript because it sounds super interesting. So more on a personal side, you're also a mother. So can you talk a little bit about how you approach languages with your family? Did you raise your daughters in a strictly planned

Spanish Immersion household, was more kind of loosey and free flow? Or how do you decide how you wanted to approach languages with them?

Paola Hernandez

Yeah, my daughters are both bilingual. And we raised them speaking Spanish in the house. My husband is also a Spanish professor, he teaches at Marquette University. And so we both speak Spanish to them constantly. Even when they were little, and they had friends at home, I would speak to them in Spanish, and kind of translate sometimes to a friend or, but find a way to make that inclusive to see that it's not something odd or foreign. And it has worked very well. I mean, their language skills have improved when they went to college, and they were able to take Spanish classes. But you know, it's something that I am very committed to doing, because all of my family's in Argentina still and they need to communicate, but also to learn that knowing two languages, or three or four, is a really prolific, productive way for your brain and for you and to be part of a more inclusive society.

Claire Darmstadter

And so you work within a university bubble that I would imagine is pretty supportive of language diversity. So do you feel like the wider Madison community reflects this hospitality towards those who speak more than one or a non English language? Or does it kind of depend on the language or where you are in the community? Or what's kind of the vibe there?

Paola Hernandez

Actually, it's a really good question. I don't live in Madison. I live in Wauwatosa, which is a suburb of Milwaukee. And my daughters went to a school where they were seen as a little odd and strange, because they were the only ones who came from a household of speaking Spanish. And actually, the K4 teacher told me about my second daughter, my youngest daughter, that in November now, classes begin, usually in September and November, beginning of November, at a conference, she told me that my daughter had to retake 4k because she couldn't count 1-10. And when I, you know, I asked her, the more about that. She said, well, she does, but she changes languages. And so I had to explain to her what a bilingual brain does at that age, that you're jumping from languages to languages. And in a child's brain, the language does not separate, it's kind of all one of the same. And so sometimes they don't know what language they're speaking in. And so it was not that easy. I was lucky that being a professor, I was taken more seriously. But it made me wonder how many people might be put in that position that might not have had the tools that I had at my disposal to show the teacher and the principal why bilingual kids should have kind of a different approach to learning.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, that's a really important point about the advocacy aspect. And I think there's a couple colleges around the state that are focusing not specifically with teachers, how can you empower your families and your students to kind of feel like they can talk to you and they can, you know, talk about these issues, not even issues, but these different characteristics that their children have. And that's really important. So finally, I think you talked about this a little bit earlier, but the last question I ask everyone, we tell little kids all the time, that's a superpower to speak more

than one language. So can you give me one reason in English, in Spanish, a mix of both, whatever you want, why it's a superpower to be multilingual?

Paola Hernandez

Well, especially if you live in the United States, Spanish is such a part of our lives. I mean, you know, maybe Wisconsin is not as much but still you can go here in the southern part of Milwaukee and you know, we have a huge community, but also because it makes you see who you are, what you're about, and you can actually understand people, you can actually help people out when you are seeing them in distress and when might not be able to communicate you have those tools to actually help them. And a bilingual brain, I always told my daughters is like having two brains. So, you know, it kind of expands your notions and your understanding and things start making more sense. Things click, you know, sometimes you, you might not be interested in linguistics or the history of language, but all of a sudden you're like, Oh, wait, that word sounds exactly the same as in Spanish. But even though they're both like, they're so super different languages, so, you know, as a kid, you start seeing some of the connections to you know — and finally, I think that being able to speak to other people that otherwise you would not be is just key to understanding why is so important in you, as a student, you know, that sometimes translation is not there. And so if you really want to learn about the culture and traditions of society, the best way to get through it is through language.

Claire Darmstadter

So all said. Well, thank you so much. I know you are very busy this semester. So appreciate you taking a couple of minutes to chat with me. But I hope that your ends as well as possible despite the conditions.

Paola Hernandez

Thank you. Thank you for having me.