

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, today I am joined by Sarli Mercado, UW-Madison Spanish Professor and more specifically one of my former professors. So thank you so much for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me today.

Sarli Mercado

Great to be here. And I'm glad to have this opportunity to talk to you. Excited.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, thank you. So first would be great if you could just give us a very general overview of your education background, your linguistic background, and how you ended up here at UW.

Sarli Mercado

Well, I have a PhD in Latin American literature, mainly in poetry. And I'm originally actually from Nicaragua. And I arrived to the US in the 80s, a long time ago, and I came to, to New York, and then to Boston and ended up in Madison at the University, and I teach in the department Spanish and Portuguese courses on language literature, writing, urban cultural studies, all of those, right. And so I had you in my classes, and it's been , it's been a great privilege to do that, right.

Claire Darmstadter

And so I took a class, it was a little bit more specialized in a certain part of Spanish. But I know you also teach some of the introductory or the writing intensive classes that a lot of kids have to take either in their early years, or it's a requisite for other classes. So sometimes kids aren't necessarily as enthusiastic to take those ones that might not be as fun, you know, upper level application ones. So when you're working with students with different backgrounds, different interest levels, how do you keep things fun and engaging when some of them are like, oh, I really don't want to be here.

Sarli Mercado

Yes, I understand that, you know, that feeling of how to engage students and how to inspire them. To me, I always go back to what would inspire me if I were a student and coming from the idea that language is a door that opens into so many cultures. And so teaching, like writing, teaching, writing, to me, there's a course that I teach this Spanish 311. And it deals with teaching students how to narrate how to write like an expository essay, or argue, you know argumentative writing. And so what I tried is to combine different ways for us to analyze and study how it's done, not just verbally, but also visually in movies, documentaries, art, and even museums. So how are those techniques that we use in writing, different strategies of writing are also implemented in order, you know, other ways of communicating ideas. And so what we do in my classes is to explore, you know, culture as well, through many visuals. Thinking that we are in a visual right now with the Internet, and all of that, using visual materials, that talk to us about so many important issues, contemporary issues, that students will, you know, be engage from, you know, to Latin America, to Spain, and human rights violations, to migration, you know, all of those topics that are important to talk about, but also how to write about them. And so, I think, I

hope that so far, you know, I see my students that do get engaged in those topics. I also, you know, the class on translation, the idea of thinking beyond one discipline, and going to other disciplines and making the connections, right, because our world is not divided like that. It's knowledge is all connected. So, translation is, you know, as we'll discuss in class is the sum of cultural context of writing and translating, is knowing or those cultures and again, it's exploring, it's, it's going beyond, you know, what you have in front of you and read, you know, read other, what other societies do that, you know, sort of teachers are we learn from them, or we connect with them or not, right. So that's what I try to do in my classroom.

Claire Darmstadter

Most definitely. And also, there's kids who come into classes with a bunch of different backgrounds, so they might be heritage speakers, they might have just taken Spanish in high school, maybe they studied abroad, so a lot of different perspectives, and especially when with students who might have a heritage background and grew up speaking the language, but don't necessarily have a formal academic study of Spanish, how do you both respect and celebrate the linguistic background that they have, at the same time recognizing in your classes in a university setting, you are helping to help them develop this academic writing, even if it kind of contradicts what they might have grown up speaking or writing or how they interacted with the language in the past?

Sarli Mercado

Yeah, that's a very interesting question. Because, yes, I do have students that are, for example, first generation students that come from Latino families, or I have students that have a connection to indigenous populations in Latin America, in the United States. So that is through the topics that we discuss, right? I think that it makes makes it available, the possibility of connecting, you know, feeling recognized in the material itself, you know, that you have a voice also, creating, dialogue, constant dialogue, you know, critical thinking that is important to be able to even learn how to discuss ideas that is, is key as well, you know, to create community. And so, when it comes from students that have connections to indigenous populations, for example, we have studied the impact of they do have or have religious rituals in so many and so many cultures, right. So, but when it comes to writing, it is getting the one on one approach as well. Right. And that is so important to have students that feel they have the support of the of the professor, the teacher, the individual, you know, is I think that's, to me, at least I try to practice that to, to get to know my students to know who they are, what's their family, you know, where do they come from, and, and how they feel in with the material in the course. So, that's another way of doing it. Right. And, and then just using the techniques and trying to, to fill in the gaps, you know, and make sure that they are not falling through, because we're going fast in this world, which is always complete this material, let's go. That's not an indication to me, you know, to me, it's seeing the student that is growing and learning.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So you have the perspective as a professor, but also you're a mother, and you have your daughter who has been raised with some Spanish background. So I know she participated and attended a school I currently work at the Spanish immersion school, but also I imagine at home

you have an approach to language learning. So for you guys, could you just talk a little bit about why you enrolled her in the school and what her Spanish upbringing has kind of been like. Is it something that's very rigidly planned as a kind of go with the flow? How have you approached languages with her?

Sarli Mercado

Well, it's a family thing, right? Because I come from Latin America, and my husband comes from Spain. So we will take her to us as much as possible to be with a family. Not right now, because of the pandemic. And that's creating some difficulty when it comes to school for her, you know, the online method, but she has had the opportunity to learn Spanish. Although, because she has been in a monolingual school at Shorewood Elementary that there is no opportunity, which is too bad, you know, because at that age, when students are like a sponge, it will be great to have the entire nation to have that idea of multilingual approach, but it's not. It's, you know, it's sort of focused on having students learn the basics, you know, in knowledge that they have to learn, but when it comes to languages, Sofia has learned it, she participated in Creando, for example, and she was one of the older students. So for her, she told me that it was easy, but she enjoyed the activities, the artistic approach to, to culture and to explore her own experience of Spanish. So that is met mostly Sophia is learning Spanish right now also in her school, right? She's in Hamilton. And so she's, she's taking classes with her teacher. But yeah it's, I think, she's the first generation in a way Madisonian. And, and she is the typical event that happens with families that you know, there's the children, either you know, go there searching for a way of identifying with her peers. And so there's the struggle of the parents trying to teach them and try to not forget where you know, where we come from actually, right. But she understands most of it, she speaks it, but she's not fluent. Right. And that's where our work is. It's, it comes in, you know, we, we want her to speak the language and to learn other languages as well. And hopefully, she'll have the opportunity to do that in the future.

Claire Darmstadter

And finally, so you work in the university and kind of that insular University bubble, but you're also just kind of a quote unquote, regular citizen. So kind of comparing the two parts of being in Madison, do you feel like both, neither, a mix are supportive of language diversity, Spanish, specifically in the community? Is it something that's looked down upon if you're speaking it outside of work? Or how does Madison kind of support or not people who speak more than one language?

Sarli Mercado

Yeah, I think I definitely support, you know, the idea of having a multicultural, multi-linguistic, city, you know, because, but it's, I think that, because we -- it's not Madison, Wisconsin, you know, we're in the Midwest. It's geography as well, you know, and, and the communities that we have, we have our Latino community, and we have Afro American communities, indigenous communities, but a Hmong community, right, and so I think there are schools and the Asian community as well. I'm thinking of Japanese, Chinese, etc. Right. So in that sense, Madison, I believe it has it, although in schools, I think it still needs to grow. It needs to grow a lot. I'm not sure if it's because of the geography or if you go to or because if we go to a city like Chicago,

like New York City, the experience of the presence of immigrants is stronger. Right. But support, there is support, if we think about, you know, there are schools that have immersion, right. Also, we have bilingual programs. So there is some support, you know, I think Madison, it's, you know, it's different in that sense. And I assume that, in other cities, it depends, you know, I'm wondering, perhaps you can tell me, Milwaukee right, or other cities may have a stronger presence of other languages there. Right. But it's a city that is not a large city, 250,000 more or less, you know, inhabitants. So I assume that that has also, you know, it's just growing.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. And I think that's an interesting point, right? Because there's a lot of growth of immigrant or Spanish speaking individuals in rural areas of Wisconsin, we also know Milwaukee is a very large city, but Madison's kind of in between. So it's interesting how it kind of has elements of both, but then might not be there at the same time. So finally, to wrap us up, can you give me one reason if you can pick one, why we should be speaking more than one language as a superpower? And you can answer in English, in Spanish, a mix of both, whatever makes you feel most comfortable to express yourself?

Sarli Mercado

Well, definitely speaking more than one language is just, I just, I think it's just a way of living in, in our present society, right. And a globalized world. It's a superpower because it teaches you to see beyond what you have next to you, right? It teaches you to understand other cultures but yourself as well. It's, it's, it's a way to, to communicate with so many and learn so many things about other parts of the world. I think that's that in itself, and the idea that you can the idea that knowledge is power, it's it explains it right. And it in itself, a lot of fun. It's a lot of fun because you discover so many things about yourself in those other languages, right that you wouldn't do it just if you only speak one language. I don't know. I think it's very creative. It's a creative way of thinking about the world to learn other languages.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. Well, thank you so much. I appreciate all your time and chatting with me. I think people will really find the professor and the parent perspective. Really interesting. So hope you have a great rest of your weekend and thank you so much.

Sarli Mercado

Well, thank you so much, Claire, and lovely to talk to you.