DIARIES: DISCOVERING A STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT STRATEGY FOR ANY TEACHER

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ABSTRACT
Diarios (journals) were implemented in a qualitative study. Students used diarios daily to process, practice, and review what they were learning. I found that using diarios improved communication between my students and me, helped me to better know my students, and pushed me to use good instructional strategies. While this study takes place in a Spanish classroom, the strategies used as part of the diario routine can be implemented with any subject at a wide range of age and ability levels.

INTRODUCTION
How do I make sure every student is engaged? How do I give every student a voice? How do I encourage students to embrace challenges instead of seeing them as overwhelming obstacles that will lead to failure? Like many teachers, I ask myself these questions. I know that to improve my teaching, and consequently my students’ learning, I must search for answers. It seems like with every in-service or workshop there’s a new question whose importance is stressed above all others. How do I make my class rigorous? How do I develop relationships with the students? How do I make students connect with the material they’re learning? I used to think that I had to focus on one question or I’d overwhelm myself and burn out, like so many teachers do in their first years of teaching. So I chose to focus on encouraging my students to embrace challenges.

As a Spanish teacher I see the effect that being overwhelmed has on students. It affects their attitudes and performance. Specifically, when I ask students to write in Spanish, many panic. In fact, when I tell students to write, always about something that pertains to what we are or
have already studied, without fail I have students ask if they have to write in Spanish. When I say “of course” (which I’ve trained myself to say instead of “Duh!”), a handful of students look at me incredulously, like I’m asking them to walk barefoot on burning coals.

At that point, I know that whatever product results from that assignment will not be a true representation of their abilities. Fear and self-doubt, like vision impairments and dyslexia, hinder a student’s capability to achieve his potential, often to the point that the student quits the study of a foreign language altogether (Asher, 2010, p. 3; Sharer, Anastasio, & Perry, 2007, p. 38). Knowing that students with vision impairments often flourish simply by being given a pair of glasses, I asked myself, what accommodation can I make for my students that will help them see past their fear?

When people fear horseback riding they’re told to ride a horse. When they fear water they’re told to jump in the pool. So, preparing myself for the screaming—or, more common to the classroom, groans and eye-rolls—I set out to make writing an everyday occurrence for my students.

**PROCEDURE**

At the beginning of the year each student created a small book. Planning to dedicate one little book to each quarter in the year, we folded 14 sheets of computer paper in half and stapled them. I explained to the students that this was their “diario,” (which, in Spanish, in one sense, means “diary” or “journal”) and we would be writing in it every day.

The students were not always asked to write personal responses to open-ended questions or topics, as is often the case in conventional journals. In fact, it’s a bit misleading to call them “journals,” which is why I always refer to them as diarios. Perhaps a more accurate translation of the word diario, that would better represent their purpose, is “daily.”

On the whiteboard at the front of the room I designated an area for the topic for each class. Posting such information as agendas and objectives “reinforces organization, structure, purpose and seriousness of the learning experience,” (Sharer, Anastasio, & Perry, 2007, p. 63), “enhances the focus process for all students” (p. 62), and “help[s] us increase student retention of the content” (p. 60).

I taught them to write the date on the bottom corner of the page each day we wrote an entry. By referencing the date in their diario with my diario, in which I wrote the topic for each day, I knew what question my students were answering without them writing the topic for themselves. Every day that we wrote in the diario, which I can’t say in all honesty was *every* day, I would begin the class by saying “¡Saquen sus diarios!” which means “Take out your diarios!” The students would date the page and I would explain their task.

When the purpose of the task was to practice the vocabulary or grammar concept they were learning, they would be required to write in Spanish. When the purpose was to reflect on their performance or knowledge, they could write in English.
Almost every time the students completed a task in their diarios, they did so at the beginning of the period. According to Sharer et al. (2007), “it is important that you involve students in a short reinforcement and review activity to ‘whet their mental appetite’ for the content of the forthcoming lesson” (p. 59). Often the diario entry served such a purpose.

Beginning the class with the diario activity also increased student retention of the material, based on the idea of primacy, that “what you remember best is what you experienced first” (Sharer et al., 2007, p. 28). Used at the beginning of the class period, diarios are a type of “Bell Ringer,” an “introductory strategy that asks the learners to recall information that was previously learned” (p. 68). Sharer et al. explains the benefits of bell ringers:

Bell Ringers are one of, if not the most powerful practice activities that exist. Bell Ringers contribute to focus by getting students immediately engaged in learning upon arriving in class. When students are immediately engaged in meaningful learning activities at the outset of class, better overall focus occurs for the duration of the learning session (p 68).

After explaining their task, I would give them a specific amount of time to write. According to Sharer et al., keeping students on-the-clock:

1. Trains students to listen, to focus and pay attention to directions and information given by the teacher;
2. Trains students to be on-task and on the teacher’s agenda for the learning session, not their own;
3. Both the students and the teacher get more done during a class session because less time is lost and/or wasted;
4. Students gain confidence in their ability to complete tasks completely in a reasonable length of time (p. 98)

At the end of that time, the students would share what they wrote, sometimes with a partner, a group, or the class. While the students shared with a partner, I had the opportunity to monitor student conversations and select students to share who I knew had the correct answer (or determine if re-teaching would be necessary). This is part of a beneficial strategy called the Interaction Sequence (Sharer et. al., 2007, p. 80-85). Among its many benefits, the most noteworthy are that “it provides for multiple repetitions of the correct answer” and it encourages peer negotiation (p. 84). When students have the opportunity to share and discuss their answers with a classmate, they improve their learning. According to Williams (2004), “Learning anything well requires the kind of social interaction that provides questions, conversations, scaffolding, and interest” (p. 60).

After sharing and discussion, I would say “¡Guarden sus diarios!” which means, “Put away your diarios!” and we would transition to the next activity. According to Jensen (2005), “using dependable activities that trigger specific, predictable states can be the perfect way to
bridge into learning. Appropriate rituals keep the stress levels low and can even eliminate threat responses,” (p. 111).

**Methodology**

At the time I began my qualitative research, I had a total of 120 students in Spanish I through Spanish IV. I chose 14 diarios to analyze. Of those 14, 9 belonged to Spanish I students, 1 to a Spanish II student, and 4 to Spanish III students. Six belonged to freshmen, 4 to sophomores, and 4 to juniors. Nine belonged to boys and 5 to girls. While I chose only 14 to analyze, every student kept a diario. The 14 that I chose were selected after the first time I read their entries because the students who created them demonstrated that they had put thought into their entries and were students who had the potential to benefit from the process thus providing the richest data.

I implemented the use of diarios with my students at the beginning of the school year and did a preliminary analysis during the second week of October. I stopped collecting data in the second week of January.

At the beginning of the school year, I collected the journals weekly. Finding it unrealistic to read them, comment, and return them the next day, I began to collect them less frequently, sometimes waiting two weeks between readings. I collected data in the form of quotes and observations, student surveys, and student interviews, the results of which I recorded in data summary charts. I organized the data into themes. I triangulated the data, consulted a peer to ensure the reliability of my coding, and created a data analysis chart (Blumenreich & Falk, 2005).

**Findings**

Through my analysis I found three themes that showed diarios improved communication between my students and me, helped me to better know my students, and pushed me to use good instructional strategies.

**Improved Communication**

I found that the use of diarios improved communication between my students and me. “Communication is the lifeblood of education” (Grabelle & Littky, 2004, p. 53). Diarios allowed me to read the response of every student. Before using the diarios I never heard from everyone in one class period, especially in my larger classes and with those students who didn’t feel comfortable speaking in front of their peers or face to face with an adult.

In their diarios, students had the opportunity to share their comments and suggestions with me, even when I didn’t directly ask for them. For example, during a unit on the weather, one Spanish I student told me she thought it would be beneficial to record the temperature daily for a week. I try to make the activities and projects my students complete interesting to them because research tells me that interest is directly related to motivation (Grabelle & Littky, 2004, p. 27). How much easier that task is when they are giving me suggestions of things that would interest them!
When I can read every student’s response, I am more likely to be aware of commonly held misconceptions that I can then work to correct. When my Spanish I students were exploring Spanish-speaking countries, one diario entry asked them to list as many Spanish-speaking countries as they could, as a way to assess what they already knew. The most important feedback I received from this entry was not that over half the class thought that Brazil spoke Spanish, which is a common misconception I had already anticipated, but that many believed Europe was a Spanish-speaking country. Had I not conducted this pre-test in the diario, I would have mistakenly assumed that they knew that Europe is not a country.

Many times, through the diario, I was able to ask students questions and receive more honest answers than I received by asking for a show of hands response. When Spanish I started learning verbs, I experimented with Total Physical Response (TPR), a strategy that utilizes actions and movement to remember vocabulary (“Longman Teaching Tips: What is TPR?”). The class created actions for the verbs and we played a type of Simon Says to practice them. I wrote in my observation notes that whenever I told them to stand up for the exercise, a few would roll their eyes and many would look around the room at their classmates. One day, after we were done with the review, I asked them to raise their hand if they thought the activity was helping them. A few raised their hand. Later, after the test over the verbs, I asked them to write in their diarios what they thought of the actions. Many students—more than who had raised their hands—responded favorably. Others told me they felt silly but could see the purpose.

It’s reassuring, as a teacher, to know that the students can see the purpose behind an activity or assignment. It’s even more encouraging when they believe that purpose is more than a grade. Perhaps it’s because of the routine nature that the diarios brought to all of the tasks the students do, or maybe it can be attributed to a decreased importance placed on grades. No matter the cause, this year I have not heard students ask, “Will this be graded?” nearly as often as in past years.

**Know Students Better**

As a result of improving teacher-student communication, diarios have helped me to know my students better. According to Kohn (2006), “good teaching, effective teaching is not just about using whatever science says ‘usually’ works best. It is about finding out what works best for the individual child and the group of children in front of you” (p. 2). More often than ever before, I found myself conducting student surveys, sometimes with the purpose of gaining information for myself, and other times with the purpose of making my students reflect. One of my students joined Spanish I mid-year last year having learned very little during the first semester at her previous school. This year, in Spanish II, the gaps in her learning were becoming more apparent. She had spoken with both the guidance counselor and me about feeling lost. In one diario entry around the time of parent-teacher conferences when I asked students to name one way they could improve in Spanish, she wrote that she didn’t know how to improve. Even more beneficial to both of us than knowing she needed help, was knowing that she needed help and asking for help.
When the students returned from Christmas break, I asked them to reflect over the past semester and tell me one thing they did well, one thing they could improve on, what their favorite part of the class was, and what their least favorite part had been. Not only did this give the students the opportunity to remember all they had studied, but it also gave me the opportunity to hear their opinion of what went well and what didn’t and collect data to influence the coming semester. For example, a majority of the Spanish I students wrote that their least favorite part of first semester was taking notes and writing vocabulary lists. While I couldn’t eliminate those two activities, I could find ways to do them differently.

Brooks and Brooks (2000) make a very important point when they say, “valuing students’ points of view means not only recognizing them but also addressing them” (p. 61). Therefore, after I had read all the students’ comments—which, in addition to providing feedback, served as reassurance that they were enjoying at least some of the activities we had done—I thanked them for what they had written, stressing that they do have a voice and I do value their feedback. I would then prove that claim by telling the students that I was trying one of their suggestions whenever I would do a familiar task in an unfamiliar way.

According to Jensen (2005), “getting enough good-quality, accurate feedback may be the single greatest variable for improving learning” (p. 55). Obtaining student feedback not only influences the activities I incorporate into their learning, but according to Brooks and Brooks (2000), it also has the potential to influence how meaningful I can make the information for my students.

*Students’ points of view are windows into their reasoning. Awareness of students’ points of view helps teachers challenge students, making school experiences both contextual and meaningful. Each student’s point of view is an instructional entry point that sits at the gateway of personalized education. Teachers who operate without awareness of their students’ points of view often doom students to dull, irrelevant experiences, and even failure* (p. 60).

One way the diario helped me to make the learning more relevant for my students was when they told me what learning strategies worked best for them. One boy told me he disliked the actions his class did to remember verbs, but added that he preferred word associations. As a result I made sure to share the word associations I used to help me remember the words.

The routine of the diario itself taught me about some of my students. One student was always asking for the diario topic from previous days because he consistently misplaced his diario and had to catch up when he found it again. I learned that he needed help staying organized, but that he cared enough to make up the work. Another girl loved routines; she was always waiting when the bell rang, diario open and pen in hand.

Around parent-teacher conference time the students were asked to reflect about their performance in their diaries. I asked them to imagine they were the teacher, speaking with their parents, and to list three things they would say they did well during the quarter and one thing they could do to improve. My intent was to make them aware of their own performance, both academically and behaviorally, to celebrate their successes by
emphasizing those more than their failures, and to realize potential goals they could set. Goal setting is an integral tool to improving student learning. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics states that “Students learn more and learn better when they can take control of their learning by defining their goals and monitoring their progress” (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2000, p. 21).

I was amazed at how well the students knew themselves. One student, who was continually off task, wrote that he could work on being more focused during class. Another student, who talked constantly, wrote that he needed to listen more. Other students wrote that they should study little chunks of information over a long period of time instead of cramming the night (or even the class) before the test.

When I asked students to write what they did well and what they could improve on, they often were quick to think of the negative and struggled to list their accomplishments. Since I know that confidence affects learning (Smith, 1998, p. 35), I have more consciously celebrated students’ successes.

I must celebrate those successes even with the students who I assume know they are successful, because sometimes, as an entry by one student taught me, how students view themselves and how I view them don’t always match. One student in particular had always acted very outgoing, speaking up in class and joking around with his classmates. I was surprised to read that his goal at the beginning of the second quarter was to “not take things way too seriously.”

When I know my students, I can use their interests, abilities, and weaknesses to motivate and engage them. When I know good instructional strategies I can use their motivation and engagement to teach them. Like any tool, the diario in and of itself is useless without sound instructional strategies to power it.

**Use Instructional Strategies**

With the diarios, I found myself frequently using instructional strategies I had been introduced to as many as three years ago, but had yet to implement in my classroom. Checking for understanding is an instructional strategy that, when done often, provides teachers with valuable data to influence the pace and direction of their teaching. It also influences student retention of the material being learned (Sharer et al., 2007, p. 15). Sometimes I used the diarios to determine if students had accurately retained what they had learned, in other words, if they had developed an accurate prior knowledge of the material to which they could connect new material. Jensen (2005) emphasizes the importance of utilizing prior knowledge:

> We’ve all heard of the importance of prior knowledge, but I’d like you to elevate its importance; whatever you thought about its value before, multiply that by 10. Here are some considerations:

> All students will have some prior knowledge, even if it’s just random or unconscious learning.
Prior knowledge is not a mythical concoction. It consists of real, physical brain matter (synapses, neurons, and related, connected networks).

Prior knowledge fundamentally influences whether and how a student will gain an accurate or deep understanding of the topic.

Prior knowledge is personal, complex, and highly resistant to change.

The best way to teach is to understand, respect, and build on the student’s prior knowledge (p. 45-46).

Dewey (1934) comments on how prior knowledge and new material affect one another: “The junction of the new and old is not a mere composition of forces, but is a re-creation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the ‘stored,’ material is literally revived, given new life and soul through having to meet a new situation” (p. 60).

I often used diarios as a way to bring to mind specific chunks of prior knowledge so that my students could create a connection with the new information they were about to learn. For example, my Spanish I students learned infinitives and used them with “me gusta” and “ir + a + infinitive” constructions before they learned how to conjugate verbs in the present tense. On the day I introduced present-tense conjugation, their diario entry was “In two minutes, list as many verbs as you can.” We then compared lists with a partner, in a group of 2 pairs of partners, in a larger group, and as a class to determine how many verbs the students knew. Through this sharing process, students were able to receive confirmation that, whether few or many, they had learned verbs; they were reminded of verbs they hadn't initially remembered; and they were able to cooperatively celebrate their success with their classmates. After reminding them of what they already knew, and in the processes boosting their confidence, we dove into the unfamiliar topic of present-tense conjugation.

Other times, the purpose of the diario entry was to prepare students to prepare themselves for an upcoming assessment. For example, often, a day or two before an assessment, the students would be asked to create a “Click and Clunk” chart, a strategy recommended to me by Ashley Clark, a classmate during a summer course. By drawing a simple two-column chart, placing in the “click” column the information that the student felt confident he understood, and placing in the “clunk” column that information which confused him or was difficult for him to remember, each student created a study plan to help prepare for the test. They revealed questions they needed to ask and topics I needed to re-teach. By isolating the problem information, each student could more efficiently use his study time.

Another useful strategy is called Wait-Time (Sharer et al., 2007, p. 77-79). When teachers ask questions, often they don't give students enough time to process the question and arrive at an answer. By giving students time to write and think, the answers they give are more likely to be accurate. When students are accurate, their confidence increases, they're helping to reinforce to their classmates the correct response, and they're more likely to stay engaged in the lesson.
Some diario entries were used as an anticipatory set, a tool to grab students’ attention and get them interested in what they were about to learn. An anticipatory set “provides the opportunity to activate memory as a type of advanced organizer for the new content to facilitate both learning and retention” (Sherer et al., 2007, p. 73). On the day we studied “La Tomatina,” which is a town-wide tomato fight in the Spanish village of Buñol, I asked the students to tell me about a food fight they had been a part of, or, for those who hadn’t (or weren’t willing to admit it), if they would ever like to be in a food fight, with whom, where, and with what food. Talk about engaged! We laughed about spaghetti and pudding and a few dreamily imagined edible pandemoniums in our cafeteria. (That entire morning I prayed that no one would be inspired enough to make their dreams a reality, and fortunately the lunch hour passed without incident. Although, had a food fight occurred, I can’t say that a small part of me wouldn’t have celebrated that the students had taken an interest in what they were learning in Spanish.)

On a test some months after the lesson, the students were asked to tell me what they could remember about La Tomatina as a bonus question. Every single person who attempted the question not only told me accurate information, but also provided details I would never have expected them to remember, especially so long after the lesson.

Another strategy that increases engagement is the Think/Pair-Share strategy (Sharer et al., 2007, p. 80; Theiler, 2009). The day after an activity about Spanish tapas with Spanish III, I told them to say everything they could remember about tapas as their Think-Pair-Share topic. Students had two minutes to write independently, were then given two minutes to share with a partner, and finally two minutes to share with another pair. Similar to this is the 45/30/15 strategy (Theiler, 2009). Given the topic of “Spanish tapas,” the first student would have 45 seconds of uninterrupted time to tell the partner everything he could remember. During the next 30 seconds the partner could repeat, disagree with, and embellish on what the first person had said. Finally the first person would have 15 seconds to respond. When some students can barely get a word in during class, this strategy gives them the opportunity to speak. While it doesn’t involve writing, I would sometimes use this activity as the diario topic.

I learned that modeling diario entries on the board and using On the Clock (Sharer et al., 2007, p. 97-98) helped to keep students on task and improved both the quantity and quality of their writing. At the beginning of the year in Spanish III and IV, I created many topics for the sole purpose of applying our current objectives to their writing. The students would write one or two sentences, put their pencils down and close their diarios, thinking they had fulfilled the requirement of that day’s topic. When providing written feedback did not increase the quantity of their writing, I put the batteries in my timer. I then set the timer for five minutes and told students they needed to write for the entire time. They wrote more. But of course, quantity means nothing if quality suffers. I began to write my own diario entry on the whiteboard while the students were writing theirs. While my Spanish III students were writing about their favorite and least favorite chores, so was I. Not only was I modeling correct grammar, I was giving the students an opportunity to learn about me. I realize that some students spent time observing me model the process instead of writing their own entry, however, much learning takes place through observation of modeling the correct procedure.
In fact, Plato goes as far as saying, “Modeling is not the best way to teach—it’s the only way to teach” (Sharer et al., 2007, p. 111).

In addition, writing on the board helped me reinforce student independence. Instead of helping students with unknown words, I developed the mantra “I don’t know,” which one student aptly interpreted to mean, “She does too know—she’s just going to make you look it up yourself!”

I wrote in a reflection that using the diario forced me to think of purposeful topics. Often the value did not lie with the topic as much as with the task. One day my students and I walked through the routine: I said “¡Saquen sus diarios!” They got them out, dated the bottom of the page, and waited for instructions. “Across the top of the page I need you to write ‘pop quiz.’” Instantly I had their attention. I told them there would be five questions and they would have to write in Spanish the sentences I said in English. For the first four, one by one, I recited the questions they were taught to use at the beginning of the year when they’d like to leave the room: Can I go to the bathroom? Can I go to the fountain? Can I go to the office? and Can I go to my locker? With each question I saw their confidence grow, a few looking at me like I was crazy, and a couple sneaking glances to the sign by the door where the questions were posted, not realizing I was completely aware of it and not doing a thing about it—that wasn’t the point of the quiz. When we arrived at the fifth question I paused, letting the fact sink in that there were five questions on this quiz but only four questions posted by the door. I pointed to a collage of present-tense endings they had created on the wall and said, “Using what you know about present tense verbs, and the four sentences you just wrote, write in Spanish the sentence ‘Yes, you can.’” I knew that if they could connect the two seemingly unrelated pieces of knowledge in their minds on their own with just the slightest suggestion from me that there was a connection to make, the results would stick with them ever so much more than copying notes from the board. And with that we dove into the Spanish boot verb poder (to be able to), to learn the rules to this irregular verb in order to use the verb more freely than simply in the memorized question “May I go to the restroom?”

CONCLUSIONS

I implemented diarios with the hope of finding the answer to one question, and instead I found an answer to many. Originally, I had intended to reduce my students’ fear of Spanish writing assignments. I still have students ask if I want them to write in Spanish (to which my response has gone from a rather restrained “of course” to a tongue-in-cheek “or Russian or Japanese, I’ll take any of them”) but their writing has improved, leading me to conclude that their fear has subsided.

I would say that using diarios in my classroom these past few months has been the decision that has most influenced my teaching. Through the reflective process of analyzing the data and writing this paper, I realize that the diarios have played a large role in how I plan the activities that each class does. I believe I have been more deliberate in selecting activities that serve the purpose of increasing student retention through repetition, activating prior knowledge, and increasing student engagement. The opportunities the diarios provided helped me to know and communicate with my students.
While the diario is a good tool, it’s important to remember that its power comes from its activities and the frequency with which it’s used. As with any educational tool, there are always ways to individualize it, not only to accommodate the students’ learning styles, preferences, and personalities, but also to best work with the teacher’s teaching style. In using the diario as a tool these past months, I discovered a few ways I would tweak the strategy in the future.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

I recommend starting to use diarios at the beginning of the year. Even then, students you’ve taught before may question why you’re doing something new. When I started my students making their diarios that first day of school, my Spanish I, and even Spanish II, students willingly obeyed, either trusting I had a purpose or resigned to the fact that, purpose or not, it was something they would have to do. My Spanish III students, on the other hand, who were starting their third year under my leadership, questioned this new strategy. “We’ve never made these before. Why do we have to make them this year?” one student asked. Honestly, I don’t remember how I responded initially, but the next day, after reflecting, I told him to ask again. I knew he was a member of the football and basketball teams and highly respected the teacher who coaches both sports. I said that every year I see his coach at the coaches’ clinic, listening to speakers and visiting with other coaches. I asked this young man if he would refuse to do a new drill simply because they had never done it before. I’m not sure if I convinced my student to trust that what he was doing had a purpose, or if he simply realized he wasn’t going to be able to talk his way out of the work he knew would inevitably accompany the little book he was making, but he never questioned it again.

Regardless of their value, diarios are a time commitment for the teacher. Reading an entry for every student for every day can be a bit overwhelming. I learned never to collect all of the diarios on the same day. After implementing the tool for a while, I learned which entries would especially require my attention and which would serve their purpose just as well without my reading them. I knew to read entries that provided students the opportunity to give me feedback, or when I intended the entry to assess student comprehension of the current objectives. I did not always look at the pages whose entries offered practice, which we would go over together as a class.

Consider carefully the physical make-up of your diario. My students’ very first diarios were the size of half a sheet of paper. I quickly found, asking students to make one entry per page, that size wasted a lot of paper. Therefore, the second quarter, we cut the paper in half and folded those sheets in half to make our books. During the first quarter many students frequently misplaced their diarios. Hoping to solve that problem, and fearing the smaller diarios might contribute to more misplaced books (since the students were responsible for their own diario), I had the students put a brightly colored cover on their books. These covers, color-coded based on each period of the day, also helped me to distinguish to which class each diario belonged.
I found that, by the third quarter, there were students who would lose their diario no matter what color or size it was. One student’s problem was so chronic that I created an oversized diario out of craft paper, bound it with yarn, and hung it on a hook at the back of the room. Now he’s happy because writing in his diario has given him the opportunity to draw the attention to himself that he would otherwise seek through more disruptive methods, and I’m happy because he’s writing in his diario. In the future I might prevent this situation by collecting the students’ diarios daily.

Whether it was because they could never keep track of the little book or realized that the tasks associated with the diarios required effort, some students grumbled every time I said the “s” word (“saquen,” which means “take out”). I found that sharing with them what I was discovering through this very action research project, quieted their grumbling. Nevertheless, when I use diarios next year I’m going to really sell them to my first year students. I will give the students time to decorate the covers, like a few students did on their own this year. Those students’ diarios were more personalized, which I believe correlated to the fact that they belonged to non-grumblers.

My final recommendation is the most important: Don’t lose the purpose behind the diario. When teachers seek to answer such questions as “How can I engage my students?” we must not become so focused on the tools we’ve found that we forget the questions we seek to answer. The key to improving our teaching, and as a result our students’ education, is not the diario, or whatever tool has reached the pinnacle of current educational trends. Teaching tools and strategies will come and go; the questions teachers and schools ask themselves will change their focus—from engagement and motivation to rigor, relevance, and relationships; but the intent behind them all will forever be to give our students the best education possible.

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BIографICAL NOTE:

Teri Messerer graduated from Wayne State College with a bachelor of arts in Spanish and English Education. She has been teaching Spanish at David City High School, Nebraska, for the past three and a half years. In August of 2010 she earned her Masters degree from Wayne in Curriculum and Instruction through an innovative and incredibly relevant process called Learning Community, through which three amazing facilitators and a host of passionate professionals helped her to discover tools to improve her teaching. In her brief time at DCHS, Teri has developed an Elementary Spanish Program and will start a Middle School Spanish Club this coming fall, in an effort to improve student performance and confidence. She enjoys the challenge of finding purposeful activities that increase student engagement and interest.