STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE:
Spanish & Portuguese

Weaving Words & CULTURES

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Roughly 5,000 miles southeast of BYU and 200 years ago, Maria Firmina dos Reis was born to a White father and a Black, formerly enslaved mother in São Luís, Brazil. Sadly, this young girl would witness discrimination throughout her life and lived alongside Brazilian slavery until it was abolished in 1888. Despite the challenges Reis faced, she became a writer promoting civil liberties and worked as a schoolteacher in the small town of Guimarães, located up the coast from São Luís. She had contact with a number of other abolitionist writers and had a profound impact on her community.

Fast forward to 2020: a monument was erected in Luís Domingues Square, in the center of Guimarães, to memorialize her life as a symbol for racial liberty as well as her work starting the first mixed-gender school in the region. Reis' legacy reaches beyond her nation, inspiring Assistant Professor Jordan Jones (Luso-Brazilian Literature and Culture) to visit the village where she lived and to study her life's work.

Jones was drawn to Reis' life during his graduate research on 19th-century antislavery writings when his professor gave him some of Reis' writings to study. "I really thought it was a powerful text," he says, "and I just started researching her more and more. She was in my dissertation and she continues to be one of my research focuses to this day."

The passion Jones feels for his research is emblematic of the faculty throughout the Department of Spanish & Portuguese who come from a diverse collection of emphases and interests. Jeff Turley (former department chair, Hispanic Linguistics) says, "Foreign language departments are interesting because you have three to four very different disciplines that are held together by the glue of the foreign language. We have linguists, literature professors, pedagogy people, translation people, and we are all very different from each other. So, it is a challenge when we have to decide what our core requirements are when everyone who does it, does it differently."

Within that diversity, the faculty foster understanding of different approaches, and that enriches both the individual and the department. Assistant Professor Will Carr (Translation Studies) says, "As we navigate these different cultures, there is one way to look at it and say 'that's different and that's OK.' But there is another way, saying 'I can learn something. These people have different experiences than me, and they are just as much children of Heavenly Father with a divine nature and destiny. There is truth that they have that I don't have.' We should be curious, teachable, and humble so we can be exposed to a little bit more of the omniscience of God."

We continue our series on the State of the Discipline by covering the Department of Spanish & Portuguese with a similar sense of curiosity. The department has become a hub of intellectual exploration, weaving together distinct academic threads. It has grown from its humble roots in the late 1800s into a vibrant language study community.

THE HISTORY OF THE DEPARTMENT

The first Spanish classes were taught at BYU in 1883 when the university was still an academy. Ferdinand (Fernando) A. Lara, a Mexican convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, served as the first teacher. Over the next few decades, Spanish flourished on campus and more classes were added, including new curriculum. In 1942 Portuguese classes were added, the first being taught by Gerrit de Jong, Jr. As popularity in the languages and strength of faculty grew, College leadership separated the two languages from the large Department of Languages in 1967 to form the new Department of Spanish & Portuguese. Today it is one of the largest departments in the College—both

in terms of faculty and number of students taught, including those majors, minors, and other interested students, such as returned missionaries.

SHIFTS IN THE PEDAGOGY

In recent years, faculty in the department have been reevaluating their approach to pedagogy. Turley says, "Part of this is reflected in our focus in our introductory classes, such as Spanish 321, which for many years was just grammar. Now we're realizing that as our students come in from their missions or other experiences that bring them here, we want to educate them on everything that we have to offer. We're not just a grammar machine, we also do literature and we talk about culture." This wide-eyed approach is critically important because nearly 75% of students taking classes in the department major in a different field—creating an even wider diversity of student experience and expectation.

This shift arose from a careful observation of the vast differences in proficiency and fluency of students taking their classes, which consists of majors, minors, generally interested students, native speakers, and returned missionaries from Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking missions.

COMPETENCIES AND CURRICULUM

Assistant Teaching Professor Lauren Truman (Curriculum Development and Pedagogy) explains that the department has revamped the Spanish 321 class by updating the textbooks to include experiential learning, an approach that involves practical, hands-on learning where students complete assignments that will "increase student engagement better for their upper-level classes, and also life outside of college."

The department provides a variety of experiential learning opportunities. For example, in the future, one unit in the 321 class will focus on identity by taking

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students through a variety of different "texts," including literature, film, or art, that explore the idea of identity. They then will take what they learn and create Spanish LinkedIn pages that portray elements of their identity. Assistant Professor Patrícia Baialuna de Andrade (Luso-Brazilian Literature) says that in the 493 capstone class, students "present a portfolio as a capstone class requirement illustrating what their experience was like in the program, and exemplifying how the assignments proposed by several professors helped them achieve better cultural competence, critical thinking, language proficiency, etc. This digital portfolio is presented to faculty and other students and can also be something the student wants to show to a potential employer as evidence of the many skills their college education helped them develop."

Another change involves updating assignments that have real-life application to utilize more current skills. Ten years ago, students would progress from learning grammar and vocabulary, to writing essays and research papers, to creating a business proposal in Portuguese where students would have to decide what kind of business they would create in Brazil, where they would start it, and why. While the assignments provided excellent preparation for life after college, they ended when the student submitted the proposal to the professor for a grade. Now assignments like these have more of an online emphasis and focus on engaging a wider audience that includes potential employers, opening up actual business opportunities.

Like all departments in the College, the Department of Spanish & Portuguese also integrates core competencies that teach students how to navigate other cultures. These include the ability to write and communicate clearly, evaluate information effectively, and understand, appreciate, and engage positively with other cultures. Andrade says, "It's important to look at things critically instead of just accepting what is in front of you." In other words, the faculty place a premium on teaching critical thinking skills far beyond learning a foreign language so that students better appreciate perspectives that differ from their own.

One class about Brazilian culture does this by asking the students how Brazilians differ from Americans. Students engage in questions such as "how does this other culture view time, music, film, and family?" The answers lead to understanding, respect, and a more effective level of engagement.

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

The department also offers a certificate program to students who complete three language classes and pass tests that evaluate proficiency levels by national standards. The certificates, recognized nationally, validate student achievement. Most students who

strive to acquire the certificates pursue majors in other fields (arts, education, sciences, etc.).

Professor Rex Nielson (Luso-Brazilian Literary & Cultural Studies), director of the Humanities Center, says that the real value in the certificate comes from helping "students develop an awareness of their own skill level and learn how to communicate their skills in speaking and understanding cultural differences to a future employer or someone outside the university."

LEARNING WITH INITIATIVE

The Department of Spanish & Portuguese has been exemplary in creating programs that let students take initiative and apply practical skills. Truman says, "In an upcoming semester we will pilot some service learning as students' final projects in Spanish 321. Instead of giving a final presentation they'll be going out into the community and volunteering 15 hours with the Spanish-speaking population in some capacity and reflecting on that. We are hoping to give them a chance to apply their skills." Students will volunteer in a number of capacities. For example, medical interpretation students will interpret in health clinics across Utah County. The service learning projects will give both practical application of language skills to students and provide community service across Spanish-speaking communities in Utah.

The Spanish translation program holds the distinction of being one of the department's oldest undergraduate programs. This major equips students with cultural competencies that enhance their understanding and collaboration with people from all over the world. Students have the chance to translate BYU speeches and run the translation project themselves. Undergrads can earn a Spanish translation degree providing them with technology and networking advantages with industry professionals. They can also complement that degree with a minor in translation and localization from the Center for Language Studies. Graduates from these programs often outcompete graduate degree-holding applicants for project management jobs. With the rise of Google Translate and other AI, some may wonder if such translation needs will become obsolete. Not according to faculty in the department. Even AI needs a human eye that understands nuance, idioms, culture, and current linguistic trends. Carr says, "The more globalized things become the more valuable those students become and prove that they will never be replaced by AI."

The 40-year-old program continues to impact the department's landscape today. Several current faculty members graduated from BYU in this major, including Carr, who says, "We have students doing amazing things while they are here as students, and when they go out with that degree . . . it gives them all of those advantages using technology and networking with industry professionals."

One of those students is recent Honored Alumnus Barry Olsen ('95), who has taken his skills into the world of diplomacy, interpreting languages on Air Force One. Other majors have worked in translation in public broadcasting and for the Church.

STUDY ABROAD AND INTERNSHIP INITIATIVES

The department's study abroad programs provide concrete learning experiences, extending students' education beyond traditional classrooms. Nielson explains, "We have a long running program in Madrid that continues to be a jewel of the department. We have an additional study abroad program in Santiago. We have our program in Mérida, Mexico. We also have rich internship programs in Spain, Spanish America, Portugal, and Brazil, which definitely did not exist 10 years ago. We have now had hundreds of students go on those programs." These internships approach a variety of fields such as governmental sectors, STEM fields, business, accounting, investment banking, nonprofit sectors, and archival research.

A critical reason the College and the department invest so many resources in these programs is to equip students with the skills to work effectively in international settings. Some of these programs include the Spain, Spain OléSAY, Portugal SiPN, and Brazil IEB Internship Program. Offered throughout the year, these programs present students with opportunities to expand their learning and understanding of the world. As with other study abroad programs sponsored by the College, Spanish and Portuguese programs expose students to foreign cultures through practical activities, encouraging them to understand and appreciate diverse values and traditions. Students engage with local communities to foster relationships and broaden their global perspectives.

Any student on campus with language skills can participate in the programs, regardless of major. Most students in the department participate in these programs for their minors, the certificate program, or second-majors.

The study abroad offerings have always provided quality experiences, but there have been changes. One exceptional program gave students the chance to live in Mexican villages, spending their days finding adults to teach literacy. Turley says, "Students would live in Mexico, sometimes one student per village, and spend their days finding people to teach how to read. They were living in primitive conditions—dirt floors and no running water—and absolutely loving it! It was a completely integrating experience in rural Mexico that was truly life changing." Unfortunately, the world's social and political changes that affect the

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programs are not always for the better. The Mexican village program had to be discontinued recently due to security concerns.

BYU student Jenny Charters (Spanish and Economics '25) represents the many whose education has benefitted from her study abroad experience—which for her was much more than a lovely travel opportunity. She says, "Studying abroad in Spain for eight weeks was exactly what I needed. I loved learning all the history while traveling the country; it made the stories come to life and stick with me. But, most of all I'm grateful for what studying abroad taught me about myself. It helped me discover a passion for traveling and taught me how to love others from different corners of the world."

CURRENT RESEARCH

In addition to their efforts in enhancing pedagogy, faculty in the department have also made new developments in their fields of study. Professors often take a multidisciplinary approach, but all have areas of specialty, and some study very narrow or specific areas. As an example of the latter, Andrade has been studying how violence and oppression in contemporary society are depicted in Brazilian literature over the past several years.

Nielson's field of study covers environmental humanities, which examines how culture and attitudes on natural environment are intertwined with the environmental crisis. "I think the issues related to the climate crisis are ever more acute," says Nielson, "so I think that is why we are seeing an explosion of academic inquiry in environmental issues on interdisciplinary perspectives." Professor Nielson feels that taking an academic inquiry in modern problems is critically important to the College. Some of his research projects include publishing an anthology of nature writing in Brazilian culture and studying how droughts in Brazil are represented in the arts.

Likewise, Professor (and new department chair) Scott Alvord (Linguistics), studies the linguistic structure of Spanish in the United States, a country growing increasingly bilingual. In fact, the United States is the now the fifth largest Spanish speaking country in the world, even though English is the most widely spoken language and language of government. Alvord's research reveals that many US Spanish speakers, even those raised speaking Spanish in the US, have been told by other native speakers that their language has been "contaminated" by English and is therefore invalid. Alvord "explores what it means to speak a language. We talk about Spanish in the United States as a variety of Spanish that is just as valid as any other variety of Spanish." He hopes this focus on inclusion will help tear down barriers.

Women writers have been a particular interest in the department, with many professors leading unique research programs. Professor Valerie Hegstrom (Early Modern Spanish Literature) and Associate Professor Anna-Lisa Halling (Iberian Women Writers) have been collaborating with students to identify unknown or less well-known female writers from the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries in Spain and Portugal and document them on their website, "More than Muses." These writers were mostly nuns who wrote plays on religious topics.

Faculty in the department utilize a number of tools to strengthen the department's international reputation. One quite successful method they have used is the minicourses. This initiative started 25 years ago. Minicourses provide a forum where the faculty members invite the best literary professors, pedagogy scholars, linguists, and translators from all over the world to spend a week teaching graduate and undergraduate students at BYU. During these minicourses, guest instructors work with BYU professors on their research and strengthen professional and social connections. The minicourse program has become nationally recognized as a mark of prestige for participants, with many prestigious scholars asking to contribute their time to the program every year.

CONCLUSION

Even as the faculty continue to engage in world-class research on their own, one thing continues to be abundantly clear: a focus on improving linguistic proficiency among students is enhanced as they improve their critical thinking, reading, and writing skills. Jones says this focus has caused "more engagement with a wider audience while students are in school." This is a familiar refrain around the College, where personal goals to improve, learn, and discover go hand-in-hand with evaluating and elevating the quality of the student experience. ■