

## Enhancing Creativity in a Spanish Language Classroom

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### Abstract

*This project reflects how digital technology can do more than simply enhance traditional foreign language learning. Digital technology can encourage deep and creative language learning among adolescent boys, especially when it is combined with such powerful foreign language instruction methods as **TPRS**, or Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (Ray & Seely, 2008).*

*By combining the digital program 'Go!Animate' with the potent story-telling circles of **TPRS**, a mixed-level group of Grade 10 boys experimented with the Spanish language to produce an animated dialogue. These students were given the opportunity to reflect on how they learn and make positive steps forward as independent and collaborative language learners.*

*In the end, success in this digital project cannot be measured by how adept my students became in manipulating the software we were using, just as success in this foreign language project could not be defined solely through any noted change and improvement in the target language learned. Perhaps the most important element of success was the development of a positive group dynamic. Improved group dynamics and increased collaboration was the proof that my students had benefited from this exercise, and that they left this project with the very real, and much needed creative collaborative and risk-taking skills that they could use in other aspects of their lives.*

*Action research encouraged all participants in this study to reflect honestly on changing levels of inter-student collaboration, and true levels of daily language use. Daily observation and reflection, and the willingness to be honest about such successes and shortcomings helped this researcher postulate new directions that we can take as language students and as a language teacher.*

## **Introduction**

Learning a foreign language is an incredible gift that we can give our students to better navigate through our increasingly global world. Gone are the days when our students could expect to have a successful and fulfilling career with just one language, as knowing two, or even three, languages is just as important as being a confident user of the latest digital technologies (Wallis & Steptoe, 2006). As language teachers, we champion continual, lifelong independent language learning for our students and ourselves. We are always on the hunt for ways of facilitating authentic and creative language instruction, and as such recognize the potential of digital technologies to open new worlds for us.

Action research is a vital tool for teachers. We want to know that the skills we are teaching our students will continue to have value outside the four walls of the classroom. We ask ourselves whether the pushing of buttons on a computer might help our students better navigate the real world. With authentic material easily available to our students, we want to do more than rush forward, trying every new option as it is presented to us. We need to stand back and reflect on how effective these new digital tools are in encouraging true language acquisition. We need to ask ourselves whether these new technologies are in fact helping our students develop the creative skills of collaboration and risk-taking is required to become real independent language users, or whether they are simply

introducing another barrier between students and the skills they need to develop. As a research method that encourages constant reflection at all stages, action research is perfectly suited to help us answer these questions. My research question was, “How does the use of *Go!Animate* to create a digital audio story foster collaboration and risk-taking in a Spanish language class?”

This action research project allowed me to track whether my students were developing the collaborative and risk-taking skills they needed to develop fluent oral expression in Spanish. Besides observing the level of engagement and collaboration of my students in this project, I was able to observe whether my students asked more questions, sought out new vocabulary and grammar structures, and took more risks in using the language that we were studying.

## **Literature Review**

As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century fades into memory, the methods of teaching and learning associated with it fade as well. Rather than sitting passively waiting for knowledge to be imparted to them, our students are active learners and require curriculum and teachers to help them develop the creative collaborative and risk-taking skills that they need to become the nimble workers and leaders that our fast-changing world demands. However, much as educators acknowledge how vital it is to develop these skills in our students, we are often at a loss when it comes to define what they are. In her seminal work, *Now You See It* (2011), Cathy Davidson offers many clear directions that we can take as she extols the virtues of our new collaborative age. One of her most interesting ideas, and most salient to this group-animated Spanish language project, is her exploration of the idea of crowdsourcing. This is the single most common principle behind the creation of the

open- source Web, which, when used with group work, can frame a question or solve a problem, and encourage peer leadership (Davidson, 2011, p.192). Crowdsourcing is a collective responsibility, and by definition makes everyone in the group necessary for the group to achieve success. As we examine Davidson's thesis, we are left with questions around the changing roles of both the teacher and the students. Does the teacher become the "Lego Person" (Davidson, 2011, p. 225)–the one who makes all the pieces fit together–or could class projects be designed so that students direct the project themselves? Do student collaborative groups empower their own modest leaders who encourage others to take responsibility and to shine?

Given our students' reliance on iPhones, iPods and computers, they have become media-saturated and hungry for instruction that reflects the real world they live in. This world, however, is also one of sound-bytes and instant gratification that can pose a challenge to classroom teachers wanting to move from a teacher-centered model of instruction to one that develops active student engagement. As digital programs become the kingpin of project work, and these projects move away from being an add-on at the end of a unit to the primary source of instruction, we face the danger that a tools-first approach to incorporating technology into education could lead to its forced or contrived use in the classroom (Hofer, 2005).

To counter this fear we, as classroom teachers, need to take a content-first approach to technology integration (Hofer, 2005, p.104) and have a firm anchor in our chosen methodology (Ray & Seely, 2008). The suggestion that students using digital technology in classroom projects focus too much on the software and on finding the right image or

adding the perfect piece of music (Hofer, 2005, p.107), rather than on the knowledge, content and processes of the subject area (Herrington, 2007, p.4) is a chilling one.

During this action research project, however, the hope always remained that my students would develop a strong creative collaborative base within their groups and see the value in developing a project where they could both *find* and *solve* problems (Herrington, 2007, p.5), and not simply enjoy the time to play with their computers.

Finding and solving problems was the daily work of this project and proved to be one of its strengths. As MacDonald (2005) notes, boys learn best when they are actively involved in a process of knowledge construction rather than passively swallowing information. The very physical act of manipulating animated characters and having them speak the lines that the boys created helped them to “invent rather than accumulate facts” and helped to “foster independent and motivated learning” (MacDonald, 2005, p. 122).

As my students became immersed in this project with its real-life authentic context, the creative principle of *flow* played its part. Through the notion of flow, (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) contends that, as we immerse ourselves in “goal-directed” activities, “we are transported to a new reality... by a sense of discovery where we are pushed to new levels of performance” (p.74). In short, I wanted to see whether my students could become so immersed in producing their digital project that the building tools of the technology itself would diminish in importance. I wanted to see whether a state of flow would bring out the real voice of the students.

## Research Context

The action research took place at the Senior School of St George's School, Vancouver, Canada where our mission is "*Building fine young men. One boy at a time.*" St. George's Senior School is a relatively small high school of 782 boys who are selected for their academic, athletic and leadership potential.

All our teachers are encouraged to engage their students with methods that recognize that boys are physical learners and thus learn best in an experiential classroom. We have all attended seminars led by Barry MacDonald, a Canadian educator who specializes in helping teachers mentor boys for success in school. His book *Boy Smarts* (2005) has a place on the bookshelves of each of our teachers, and we often meet in departmental collaborative groups to discuss how activities specific to our teaching specialties can be made more boy-friendly by making them inquiry-based and hands-on in structure.

I chose a group of 16-year old boys as the participants in this research project. These boys had all chosen Spanish as a fresh start in foreign language study, and tended to be the students who struggled with language learning. As these boys are all required to study a second language to the end of their Grade 11 year, it was in their best interest that we find the methods and tools of language instruction that would best engage them and allow them to find success in their learning. Most of these boys were exceedingly comfortable with a variety of digital devices and programs, and indeed often preferred using these devices to any other method of classroom instruction. All students and their families signed letters of consent to participate in this research, and agreed to be photographed and have their photos appear as part of the findings.

## **The Action**

Although this project only ran over five short classes, it did represent two weeks of our Spanish course. I decided, therefore, that this project had to be focused not only on the creative elements of collaboration, risk-taking, and flow, but on learning and recycling the Spanish vocabulary and grammar that would normally be taught in this time block. To accomplish this task and scaffold the project, I gave short, five to ten minute introductory lessons covering the vocabulary and grammar that the boys would need to produce their animation. These lessons were then linked to a project webpage so that the boys could refer to them as necessary. Students used the digital program *Go!Animate*, after having practiced it beforehand in class to familiarize themselves with the software. This pre-project practice was essential for a smooth transition to independent work on the animated dialogue.

The boys worked in groups of three to prepare the two distinct elements of their project. First, they developed a Spanish language dialogue for a house-hunting couple as they searched for the perfect home. Next, they used *Go!Animate* to create a short animation of this scene and upload their Spanish dialogue. The brilliant aspect of *Go!Animate* was the feature that allowed its users either to upload their own voices to the animated creations, or to upload the written dialogue and, by the simple click of a key, have a Spanish-speaking actor read out the lines.

During the five classes in which students designed and recorded the Spanish dialogue on Mac computers, they also commented on each other's work on the animation website. Finally, the boys completed a daily blog post in which they commented on how well they believed the group had worked that day, and then they noted what, if any, Spanish

vocabulary or grammar they had used. These blogs were created through our school's *Sharepoint* site to ensure students' on-line privacy.

A final movie day took place at the end of the project where boys showcased their short animated movies, and acted as critics, giving both positive and constructive comments on their work and the work of their fellow classmates.

## **Data Collection**

As Creswell (2009) notes, a mixed method of data collection that uses the explanatory sequential approach often works well in short research projects, and this was the method I chose for this project. To triangulate the results of this project and to observe whether any change in group work collaborative and risk-taking skills had occurred, I collected both qualitative and quantitative data. To begin, students completed a short quantitative Likert-style survey to establish their comfort levels with risk-taking and group collaboration to set a baseline to which I could compare results collected both during and after the project. These short surveys, with both closed and open-ended questions, allowed me to collect information on the students' perspectives, rather than their actual behaviors, towards collaboration, risk-taking and language learning. At the project's end, students completed a rubric assessment where I was able to gauge through the students' own comments whether any gains or losses had been made in their ability to collaborate with one another, take risks with their approaches to the task, or be caught up in the flow of the project. Although this questionnaire was qualitative in nature, it contained the same themes found in the student pre-survey and thus triangulated effectively with it.

Also triangulating well with the data on student attitudes collected during the pre-survey, were the qualitative personal blog posts that the students made each day. Here, students were able to refer back to questions included in the pre-survey and then go on to explore their own thoughts on how well they were progressing in their use of Spanish, and how well they were collaborating with their group mates. The data collected from the open-ended questions and the student blogs ensured that the authentic voice of the boys was preserved as the action went forward.

Further qualitative data included comments from three colleagues who observed the students throughout the project, my own field journal, photos that I took of the groups in action, and data collected from the students' comments posted on each other's animation sites. These last data proved important to the students' own final projects as many students decided to incorporate these ideas into their animation. In our own way we were able to practice crowdsourcing (Davidson, 2011, pp. 64-65) by collaboratively adding to and editing each other's stories.

Finally, as a Spanish language teacher with a keen interest in data that could quantify any positive move forward in the Spanish my students had internalized throughout this project, a short pen and paper vocabulary and grammar test was administered to these students after the project had been completed.

## **Data Analysis**

“The ultimate outcome of data analysis is to enable participants to understand the nature of events that are the focus of the research process” (Stringer, 2008, p. 88). Perhaps the most interesting and critical part of this action research was the time spent analyzing the

collected data and reflecting carefully on what had transpired in my classroom. Specifically, I wanted to see whether working together in small groups on this animation project would produce the flow that allowed these boys to forget that they were struggling language students and enjoy losing themselves in the creation of an original Spanish language animation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Did working in small groups on this digital project promote the deep collaboration necessary to help the boys work through the inevitable technical issues that were bound to develop? The required daily blog post helped to answer this question.

I downloaded comments from the boys' blogs, and categorized them into groups of high, mid, and low levels of positive group interaction. I also separated out, and colour-coded, comments that discussed new strategies that students had explored in developing their animations. Finally, I noted how often students mentioned the Spanish language structures they had used that day, and whether students felt that these structures helped move their projects toward fruition.

To better triangulate my results, I collected three quantitative data elements: a pre-project survey developed through the on-line survey developer *Survey Monkey*, an end of project assessment rubric, and a post-project pen and paper test. Twenty-four of the pre-survey questions were closed questions and reflected the themes of group collaboration and risk-taking during group work. Although I asked all students to complete this survey, only 16 of the 18 students did so. As the survey's responses were anonymous to protect student privacy, I was unable to go beyond encouraging all students to complete the survey.

Again, I colour-coded the boys' responses from the pre-survey to reflect the levels of collaboration and risk-taking in which they believed they engaged during group projects.

The final six open-ended questions asked the boys about how they felt during group projects to reflect the levels of flow I was interested in pursuing. The themes of these questions were also reflected in the end-of-project assessment rubric, and I categorized these answers to reflect the levels of collaboration and risk-taking that the boys believed developed in their groups over the course of the project. I was then able to compare these levels to the ones I had collected in the survey before the start of this digital animation project.

Finally, the results of the simple pen and paper test were compared to the results that students had received on the previous Spanish language unit of study. I simply tested the level of mastery of the new vocabulary and two new grammar structures that had been introduced in this project and compared these results with those attained in the unit immediately preceding this one. Here, I noted any change, positive or negative, in the level of Spanish mastered during this project.

### **Discussion of Results**

“Research is as much about the answering of questions as it is about the answers themselves” (McNiff, 2002, p. 16). Although both my students and I understood that we were conducting research in our classroom, there was always the sense that this was an extended class project with embedded elements of self-reflection.

Of the 16 responses received regarding the eight survey questions on collaboration, students overwhelming indicated a belief that they produced their best work in groups. For example, 15 of the 16 students answered, “it was beneficial to work with my classmates on class and project assignments.” Responding to a survey question on the importance of sharing ideas and information, all but one of the respondents noted: “I

enjoy pooling or sharing what I know with my group or classmates, and I believe that the needs of my group are more powerful than my needs.” However, 10 of the 16 respondents also recorded that they felt there was “a lot of wasted time in a group project, and not much learning.” The most direct question connected to flow had only 4 of the 16 students recording that they often felt so totally caught up in a project that they lost track of time. These comments led me to believe that students had slightly ambivalent attitudes towards the power and efficacy of group work, and rarely felt so engrossed in any Spanish project that they entered into a state of flow.

For the first two classes of the project, the new software enthralled the students. From my own perspective, if ever there were moments of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), it was evident in those first two project sessions. In a classroom that usually resounded with noise, and a teacher’s plea for more calm and focus, the quiet and intense focus of the students as they worked in their groups was striking. Not only did I notice this change, but our three invited guest observers did so as well.

As I looked more carefully at what was happening with each group, however, and started to read the students’ daily blog posts, I noticed three key issues. Firstly, students noted how carefully they were working with the software itself and commented on how much fun they had figuring out how to make characters laugh, cry, jump, and how they struggled to get entrances and exits working properly. Students were very honest about how much or how little actual Spanish they worked with each day. I started to question whether we had “lost sight of the primary goal of the assignment and were being seduced by the bells and whistles of the technology” (Herrington, 2007).

Secondly, students were particularly honest about how well they were working in their groups. Student G captured what was happening remarkably well: *“Our group definitely struggles with keeping on task 100% of the time; we will need to work on that in order to create a good animation. Today we did not use much Spanish.”* Student F noted in a heartfelt early blog post, *“my group members are definitely stronger than me, and I am going to have to work hard to keep up.”* This student’s ability to swallow his pride and expose his language weakness to help move his group’s project forward impressed me. In fact, many students struggled with technical aspects of the digital program and the Spanish language element, but all made an effort to push through their difficulties and finish their project.

Thirdly, the students surprised me by how quickly they divided up the different tasks needed to complete the project. Most groups had one student use Spanish to work on the script while the other two worked on the animation. I overheard one student speaking quietly on the telephone to a key group member, who was away at a swim meet on that project workday. “J,” he whispered, *“we have the faces and mouths figured out now. Do you have any words that we can put in our character’s mouth?”* Again, although I saw the useful aspect of the division of labor that was crucial to a successful group project in place, students chose to focus exclusively on finding the quickest path to a beautiful final product, and often ignored the core Spanish language skills that I hoped would be used and recycled daily. The vital aspect of the TPRS Method that draws its strength from constant repetition and practice (Ray and Seely 2008) did not develop as part of the students’ projects as I had hoped.

Students did, however, find a positive and productive rhythm in their group work, and even coped well with a major glitch on the *Go!Animate* program's server near the end of the project. Each group did find a group dynamic that worked well, and each group did produce a beautifully animated Spanish language cartoon. On the class movie day, we watched and celebrated each other's work.

Finally, as much as I would have loved to see a rise in student scores on the pen and paper test after this project, the results did not bear this out. The students' grades reflected the same levels of achievement as in our previous unit. Good students scored well on the vocabulary and grammar test, and the weaker students struggled as they had earlier. Again, I believe that results here could have been improved if I had embedded safeguards in this project to protect the level of Spanish used in each lesson.

## **Conclusion**

Did my students produce beautifully animated Spanish dialogues using *Go!Animate*? Absolutely. Did the process that produced these final projects reflect any positive change in the ways this group collaborated with one another? Yes, the student blogs definitely indicated that the boys were keenly aware of how their efforts affected their group and they worked very hard to be worthy of the trust their classmates had given them. Although I was surprised that students would divide up the tasks of a Spanish language project and give themselves the job of perfecting the entrances and exits of animated characters rather than recording and recording Spanish dialogue, I understood why they had done so. This division of labour produced a beautiful product. It did not, however, produce the intense language practice that I had hoped for.

On a positive note, I did see many positive developments in the group dynamics during the five classes devoted to this project. Students did try harder than they ever had before to make their groups work well together. Stronger students helped weaker ones. Weaker students worked harder to rise to the level of their group mates. Greater collaboration did occur. Students did risk exposing their weaknesses to the group for the sake of producing a better project, and we even had one or two moments, especially in the early days of the project, where boys were so caught up in the flow of their project that they lost track of time. At the end of each of our animation sessions, I felt like the class monitor reminding everyone to stop working, start blogs, clear up, and move on.

In my opinion, this project was successful as it taught me how groups can work, and gave me insights that I can use to develop better group language projects in the future. With safeguards embedded to ensure the use of Spanish in each and every class, these future projects will, I hope, continue to have the positive group dynamics and high levels of student engagement that I saw here.

This action research journey has come full circle as I am now introducing *Go!Animate* into my other classes and encouraging my department members to do so. I use this program as an adjunct to a lesson, or as a unit final assignment, and am developing projects that are shorter and cover less material so that students do not have to struggle with learning too much new material as they work with the new learning medium of digital technology. Although I know that the value of experiencing a positive group dynamic is vital in a classroom, I also know that I must ensure that these experiences produce true language growth. My students need both.

Finally, I still believe in the power of using digital technology in my foreign language classroom, and I am presently experimenting with a new Spanish language program that promises to act like a virtual language lab. Hopefully I will find the balance between the intense oral practice in Spanish that my students need in each and every class, and the engagement my students feel when they use digital programs in my classroom. Could this be a topic for my next action research project?

## **Reflection**

*As I look back over this intervention, I am struck by the positive memories that continue to linger. Gone are any memories of frustration and anxiety as technical issues surfaced as these moments taught me more than any perfectly executed intervention could ever have done.*

*I started this action research project with very little background in its theory. I have come to see what a powerful tool for change it was in my practice. I was humbled by how open my students were to try new ideas, and how eagerly they embraced the elements of reflection that exposed their weaknesses and vulnerabilities as well as their strengths. As a teacher I see no finer tool than action research to give me the structure that I need to reflect purposely on what I do in classroom, and to make positive and meaningful changes in the practice I share with my students.*

*Here at St. George's School, an independent boys school that prides itself on creating and delivering high quality programs, our administration is extremely interested in new and innovative programs, and is very supportive of new initiatives such as Action Research that encourage life-long learning in both the student and faculty bodies. I acknowledge this support, and am grateful for it. I intend to use the insights I gained*

*from this action research project to inform my practice in the classroom and then more broadly to improve my department.*

*On a more personal level, I wish to thank Bill Collins, our Director of Studies at St. George's School. His kindness, willingness to listen, and sharp mind helped me to focus and push through the difficult moments of this project. I also wish to thank our school librarian, Marc Crompton, for his technical wizardry. He not only steered me towards digital programs worth investigating, but also gave me immediate, practical tips about setting up the program that I eventually used. Finally, I wish to thank my tireless team advisor, Margot Long, for her firm sense of direction, sharp eye, and unfailingly positive encouragement.*

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