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## Imágenes de identidad: Student expressions of identity and culture in the college Spanish classroom

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IMÁGENES DE IDENTIDAD:  
STUDENT EXPRESSIONS OF IDENTITY AND CULTURE  
IN THE COLLEGE SPANISH CLASSROOM

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors

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This Study by: Elizabeth Bair

Entitled: *Imágenes de Identidad: Student Expressions of Identity and Culture in the College Spanish Classroom*

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation  
University Honors

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Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

When one seeks to learn another language, they have the opportunity to not only acquire a new form of communication but also invest and participate in a rich culture. Unfortunately, in many of today's world language classrooms, learning about target cultures, or the cultures of the peoples who speak the language to be acquired, is treated as being of lesser importance than acquiring new structures and vocabulary. What is more, it is especially rare that students are invited to bring their own cultures and identities into the classroom conversation. In today's climate, it is vital that students have a safe space in schools and universities where they can express and examine their identities while also learning to be open and receptive to identities that are different from their own. The world language classroom can, and perhaps should, serve as one platform for these types of personal inquiry.

### **Purpose**

While many world language classrooms do an exceptional job of celebrating the target culture, there is often a lesser (or nonexistent) focus on encouraging students to reflect on their own culture in the target language, or the language to be acquired. This study seeks to urge world language teachers to fill that gap in their instruction; they must continue elevating the target culture while also empowering their students to explore their own identities, cultures, and beliefs in the target language. According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language's (ACTFL) World Readiness Standards,<sup>1</sup> "Learners [should] use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied *and their own*" ("World Readiness Standards," emphasis added). With these issues in mind, the focus of this study became, *How can world language teachers create curricula that brings students' native cultures and identities into the classroom as a topic of study?*

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<sup>1</sup> As many states do not have core standards for language learning, teachers in those states use the national World Readiness Standards created by ACTFL.

Art has been chosen as a focus of this research for the following reasons: first, art is often already present in world language classrooms as part of instruction on target cultures; second, it lends itself well to discussions about abstract themes such as identity; and third, it allows language learners to visually express complex ideas, even if students are not yet at an advanced proficiency level. Artistic mediums of all kinds permit students to share sophisticated, intangible constructs in concrete ways. Similarly, these expressions can help one's audience to understand and interact with a specific identity more fully.

While this research aims to further insights into these topics of study at all levels of language learning, the investigation is particularly focused on the university world language classroom. A small body of research exists in this area (see Berhó and Defferding, Bergstrom, "Children learn Spanish," Knapp, Shier), but there is little research available about student interactions with these concepts in a university language-learning setting, and even less has been published about students' expressions of their identities and cultures through creative works in that context. The studies that have been found do not allow students to provide their own identifications of their identity and culture; instead, they usually provide set categories from which students then choose (i.e., racial/ethnic identity), or focus on the second language learner (L2) identity, without letting students choose to express their first language learner identity (L1) or other possible identities and cultures. As this study finds, promoting open introspection in the classroom is very beneficial because it encourages students to identify who they are with expressions of culture and identity from target cultures, gives them a platform to communicate their individuality, and stimulates the development of empathy.

The concepts of identity and culture have been thoroughly investigated in academia across a variety of disciplines, and many theories have been offered as to what each term means and how people apply these ideas to their lives. In the following literature review, the

academic theories of culture and identity that have been selected are those that best mirror the complexity of meaning under analysis in this research. Evidence is provided for the link that should exist between these themes and artistic expression in the world language classroom.

### **Literature Review**

Previous studies have looked at the connections between identity and art or culture and art, but to this researcher's knowledge, no studies have been done exploring these links in the university world language classroom. This thesis will differentiate itself from other research due to its less restrictive approach towards what constitutes "identity" and "culture." Previous studies either asked participants to focus on one predetermined aspect of their identity or gave participants a list of several options to choose from, potentially limiting the scope of the study by not allowing participants to decide on their own what to express.

### Culture

It is important to study culture in the world language classroom for a myriad of reasons. According to ACTFL, "[L]anguage is the primary vehicle for expressing cultural perspectives and participating in social practices . . . In reality, then, the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and vocabulary of the language, but the cultures expressed through that language" (qtd. in Cutshall 32). As one of its five World Readiness Standards for Language Learners, the Council recommends that students in the world language classroom interact with the concept of culture so they can understand how the perspectives of people in that culture are represented through their customs and artifacts ("Standards Summary").

However, the term "culture" can take on many different meanings, which tend to depend on one's field of study. For instance, according to Kroeber (qtd. in Jaeger and Selznick 654), those in the social sciences see culture as the "entire social heritage." From Kroeber's perspective, culture involves everything that separates humans from other beings, from rules

and customs to technology and speech. The author goes on to say that the practice of those in the humanities is often to “[separate] out a segment of man's [human]<sup>2</sup> activities, interests, and products and [designate] them as cultural.”

Both of these definitions of culture are problematic in their own ways. For instance, the former perspective (that of the sociologist or anthropologist) can be ambiguous and vague: if culture is the sum of all products of a society, it is difficult to nail down what one's specific culture is. In seeking to understand an entire group's reality, some of the parts of the whole may be lost. The latter view (that of the humanist) is at least somewhat subjective, assigning more value to some practices by distinguishing them as cultured, while potentially withholding that status from others.

Those definitions would prove especially difficult for this research. In asking students to select one part of their identity, it is implied that identities are multifaceted and unique to the individual, which neither theory explicitly supports. Kluckhohn offers a more suitable definition: "Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values" (86).

There are many definitions for culture in academia; informed by them, this research will utilize the following definition: "Culture can be pragmatically defined by the contents and boundaries of the interests of the scholars who study it. . . . [It is] what is in the *focus* of their interests" (Minkov 11). This definition has been chosen because of the openness it provides, as well as its simplicity, with the intention of making it easy for every student to grasp. However, as the same author goes on to say, "Defining the contents and boundaries of culture may also be

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<sup>2</sup> In order to provide a more inclusive view, "human" is suggested here in place of "man's."

necessary for the purposes of clarity and avoidance of confusing statements” (Minkov 11).

Following that suggestion, a list of potential cultures was provided for research participants to consider, but they were strongly encouraged to identify a culture that is influential in their lives.

### Identity

Similarly, the concept of identity is also abstract and often obscure. Many in academia disagree with the idea that the individual has one fixed, stable identity; instead, theorists propose that each person possesses multiple identities that are “changing” and “a site of struggle” (Norton and Toohey 414; see also Britzman, Gee, Holland et al.). An individual’s multiple identities are dependent upon their context in a culture or cultures and in history. Context can make it difficult for one to express the identities to which they are already connected, but may also create conflict in the individual as they “struggle to assume identities that they wish to claim.” Thus, identities that are currently being lived out by an individual are “unfinished and in process” (Holland et al. vii). One’s identity is constantly evolving as they live it out day by day.

A simpler definition is offered by Gee (100), who breaks identity down into four types. The nature identity, or N-identity, is seen as something “natural or acquired through birth”; for instance, having Italian heritage. Next, institutional identity, or I-identity, is a role or position that an individual can give to themselves, or that they can be given by an institution (such as the expectations that a child feels she needs to fulfill because she identifies as a girl). Discourse identity, or D-identity, is a trait that the individual has, according to themselves (achieved identity) or others (ascribed identity). For instance, an achieved Christian is someone who feels satisfaction in their identity as a Christian; an ascribed Christian is someone whom others see as being Christian. Finally, affinity identity, or A-identity, is being part of a group that shares



common practices (being a non-native English speaker in a group of other non-native speakers of English).

In order to promote clarity about the meaning of identity, a less complex definition was utilized in this study, based on Gee's work, as explained by Andrews (105): An identity can be: 1) "natural or acquired by birth"; 2) a role or position that is given to an individual by an institution or by themselves; 3) a trait that they see in themselves or that others see them as having; or 4) "groups of people with shared practices." Again, students were provided examples of possible identities on which they could focus their projects on but were empowered to select whatever identity is most salient in their life.

#### Art in the World Language Classroom

Artistic and creative expression should be a logical application of the ideas of identity and culture in world language classrooms. As students acquire language, they gain not only a new context in which to understand the world but also another identity (Lemke qtd. in Andrews 100). The "transformative nature of the language learning experience" (Coffey and Street 454) becomes part of the ever-changing identities of the individual and can also provide multiple new cultures in which one can partake (i.e., the community of language learners and the many cultures of the peoples who speak that language).

As students reflect on artifacts (music, literature, paintings, architecture, etc.) from the target language's cultures, making their own artistic works informed by these interactions can be a powerful way for them to connect with these new cultures and identities (Berhó and Defferding 276). What is more, as students are encouraged to tell their own stories, the consciousness of the issues that are shared between the storyteller and the audience is heightened, which can foster a sense of empathy and spur the listener (and sometimes even the speaker) into social action (Fernández qtd. in Andrews 102).

Finally, the first-person narrative is an authentic and credible way of unveiling the wide variety of unique experiences that each language learner has. While the student constructs their story (whether through the process of writing, sketching, dancing, etc.), the viewer gains insight into how the student is weaving together their own identity in that moment (Coffey and Street 455). Furthermore, as educational institutions at all levels continue to embrace multicultural and culturally responsive curricula and seek out a better application of multiculturalism across their entire campuses, the world language classroom can be a compelling tool for sharing the experiences and realities of people of all identities and cultures. A practical way of accomplishing this is creating tasks that take into account students' beliefs, opinions, understandings, competencies, and backgrounds, allowing for diversity in all areas. According to Fritzlan, "Teaching goes beyond the moment and beyond the classroom when it is attached to people and to story" (3). Encouraging students to explore their own identities and cultures causes students to connect with instruction on a more profound and personal level while also promoting understanding and acceptance among peers.

#### In Conclusion

To restate the connections between the three foci of this literature review, there is little research available about the incorporation of culture and identity in the world language classroom, especially in relation to artistic expression. Specifically, this researcher was unable to find any studies about these topics in world language courses at the university level. This investigation is unique because it asks college language learners to reflect on their own cultures and identities through creative mediums.

#### **Central Themes to Be Addressed**

The concepts that were most central to this research are identity, culture, and the interaction between the two. Based on research conducted by Andrews and Gee, identity is

defined in this project as “1) natural or acquired by birth; 2) a role or position that is given to an individual by an institution or by themselves; 3) a trait that they see in themselves or that others see them as having; or 4) a group of people with a shared practice” (Andrews 105). Culture is defined as “the contents and boundaries of the interests of the scholars who study it. . . . the *focus* of their interests” (Minkov 11). Another focus of this study was artistic expressions; identity and culture were articulated in various ways through the arts, such as painting and music. Overall, the goal of this study was to create a project that would meaningfully integrate students’ own identities and cultures into the world language classroom, allowing them to deeply investigate these concepts and express them through artistic mediums.

### **Methodology**

The first component of this research was designing a project that would be part of the curriculum for a Spring 2018 Spanish class at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI). Because human participants would be involved in the study, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before the research began. After receiving IRB approval, the researcher introduced the project to the Spanish class and recruited participants. Study participants were 19 undergraduates who voluntarily consented to have their projects analyzed for this research.<sup>3</sup> While working on the project, students read and discussed several pieces of Hispanic literature that focused on the topics of identity and culture and completed other coursework focused on the same themes. The goal for this project was that it would allow students to extend and build upon what they were learning in class, giving them an opportunity to apply their newly gained knowledge about identity and culture to their own lives in a very personal way.

When they were first introduced to the project, students were given a guidelines sheet that provided an overview of the different stages into which the project was divided (see

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<sup>3</sup> All students in the class had to complete the project as a course requirement but were under no obligation to participate in the study.

Appendix A)<sup>4</sup>. The first step was the plan, in which students selected a specific identity that they would make the focus of their projects (i.e, gender, religion, or race). As the idea of identity is unique to the individual, students were encouraged to focus their project around whatever part of their identity they felt was important to them and that they were most comfortable sharing with others. They also chose a cultural or geographical context which would serve as the background for their identities (i.e., the LGBTQ+ community, a student's family, or the UNI campus). Students then wrote about some potential artistic formats they could use to express their identities. Potential art forms included but were not limited to poetry, drawings, essays, paintings, etc. Again, students were encouraged to choose whatever format was most expressive of who they are. Finally, they shared at least three specific artistic choices they could make when creating their final products that would give depth to their expressions of identity (i.e, what paint colors to use or what literary allusions to include). These artistic choices gave them another opportunity to express their experiences of identity as they went through the processes of planning and creating. Students brought three copies of their plans to class; one copy was turned in for feedback through email from the professor and this researcher, and the other two were shared with peers during class so that each student could get advice from other students.

The next component of the project was the rough draft. For this element, students were asked to think more deeply about why the identity they had chosen is an important part of who they are and how their cultural context affects their identity, among other prompts (see Appendix A). They also provided a draft of their final product, such as a sketch or some of the lines of

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<sup>4</sup> Credit and many thanks are due to Dr. Elizabeth Sutton, Associate Professor of Art History, University of Northern Iowa, for creating this project framework for one of her courses and allowing it to be used for this study.

poetry they had written. Again, students turned in one copy of their rough draft for feedback and also participated in peer reviews in class.

The projects culminated in a presentation of the final product. Each student shared their artistic work in Spanish, explaining the identity and cultural context that they had chosen and why (see Appendix A for presentation criteria). The professor also provided feedback to all students through email. To avoid revealing the identities of students who chose not to participate in the study, all presentations were recorded, and all final products were photographed. Only the presentations and products of students who had consented to participate in the study were analyzed. The presentations and products were examined to find overarching themes and any pertinent outliers. All names used in the analysis of students' projects and presentations have been changed. As students gave their presentations in Spanish, all quotes have been translated to English by this researcher.

The final part of this study was an online, in-class survey that students could choose to fill out, if they desired. Students were invited to participate regardless of whether they had consented to have their presentations and projects analyzed for the first portion of the research. Twenty-one students (out of the 23 in the class) took the survey. Students answered questions about the difficulty of the project, the amount of time it took, if and how the project changed how they thought about their identities, etc. (see Appendix B for all survey questions). All survey results were anonymous.

### **Project Results**

The themes and stories that were shared in the final products and presentations of the nineteen students who chose to participate in this part of the research are thematically analyzed below. The participants come from a variety of backgrounds, which were self-described. Some students are native speakers of Spanish, some have had intensive linguistic and/or cultural

experiences in other countries, and all are studying Spanish language and culture (which implies some innate interest in studying Spanish, as this study was conducted in an upper-level Spanish course that is only taken by students with a Spanish or Spanish Education major or minor).

Out of all of the identities which students shared about in their projects and presentations, two primary themes emerged. Family/heritage and cultural experiences were explored in many ways by students who connected these concepts to their identity, cultural/geographical context, or who mentioned the influence that one of these had on the development of their identity.

#### Family/Heritage

The first theme that appeared in an overwhelming number of participants' projects and presentations was family and family heritage. Many students mentioned how their family as a whole or a particular family member was instrumental in helping them develop the identity they have. Others placed their identity in the context of their family. Additionally, several students expressed that their heritage plays a key part in who they are.

One student, Kayla, focused her project around her identity as an individual with Sicilian heritage in the cultural and geographical context of Iowa. "Although I was born here in Iowa, I noticed as a child that my family was different from my friends' families. My friends asked me why my family always yelled and I explained to them, 'We don't yell, we just talk really loudly and passionately.'" To show her identity, Kayla created a series of mixed media art pieces on three canvases (see Appendix C1). When separated, the canvases seemed to be abstract representations of her family and Sicilian heritage, but when placed next to each other, the image of a lion emerged because, "Sicilians are very proud." She concluded, "I feel very close to my Sicilian roots and I'm very proud of having Sicilian blood."

A different student, Amy, chose to concentrate on her identity as a Mexican-American in the context of her family. She painted a map of the United States and Mexico, “because they have made me who I am today,” and filled it with words and phrases of encouragement that her family always tells her or that have meaning to her, such as, “Te quiero” (“I love you”), “Sí se puede” (“Yes you can”), and “Humble” (see Appendix C2). She used different colors when writing each phrase to symbolize each family member that tells her those things. Amy painted the background gray to represent herself; “I’m part of both [countries]. . . I’m not just one,” she said.

Another student, Marcos, also chose to focus on Mexican-American heritage. He placed his identity in the context of Mexican culture. While both of his parents are from Mexico, Marcos was born in the US and did not speak much Spanish growing up but is now learning it because of his father and family in Mexico. He drew several images that portray his bicultural identity, such as a half-American and half-Mexican flag, the mascot from his high school, and a cactus (see Appendix C3). He also drew a fist to represent “activism and my passion and pride. . .” Marcos went on to say, “I’m American, I speak English, but also, I have brown skin and I’m Mexican too. Always choosing, but neither from here nor from there.”

Another member of the class, Kristin, placed a heavy emphasis on the role that her family and her Latino heritage have played in her life. Kristin chose to center her project around her identity as a student in the context of being Latina, which is important to her because every member of her family has worked hard to earn their education. Kristin’s parents, who moved to the US from Mexico, had high school diplomas when they arrived; Kristin’s mother went back to school twice, first for her GED (her diploma was not valid here) and then later for a university degree. Kristin and her sisters have also fought hard for their educations, as they have had to support themselves financially all throughout college. Kristin chose to depict her identity as a

student by creating a poster that shows all of the steps she has taken on her educational journey (see Appendix C4). “Being Latina, to me, means that you have to work hard to get what you need; it’s achieving your goals,” she said.

### Cultural Experiences

Another theme that emerged in many students’ projects was the impact of experiences in other cultures. A few students shared that living and/or traveling in other countries was fundamental in forming their identity. Others mentioned that their encounters with cultures other than their native ones were formative to them in a minor, but still significant, way.

This was most evident in the project of a student named Ariana. To visually express her identity as a traveler, she filled a miniature suitcase with souvenirs, photos, and mementos from her travels abroad (see Appendix C5). She explained how her family’s Christian faith serves as the cultural context which has shaped her identity; although now she does not consider herself a Christian, but rather a spiritual person, the values that were instilled in her—“being kind and polite” and “traveling to other places to meet people”—have made her into the person she is today. “When I traveled outside of the United States for the first time, and when I experienced diversity at college and in the world, I developed a new aspect of my identity,” she shared. Ariana also talked about how the topics she has learned about at UNI (bilingual education, culture, literature, ec.) have reminded her of her identity as a traveler and inspired her.

One student, Jennifer, shared how the context of the Brazilian culture formed her identity as a musical person (Jennifer lived in Brazil for two years when she was in high school). To demonstrate how music and Brazilian culture intertwine in her life, she created a binder full of Brazilian songs that are meaningful to her (see Appendix C6). “Music can be important in the history and politics of a country,” she said. Pointing to a song that she had included in her anthology, she added, “Like this one, which was very important in demanding freedom of



expression in Brazil in the past, fifty years ago.” Jennifer went on to say, “When cultures mix, the influences that music [has]. . . I think it’s very interesting.”

Finally, another member of the class, Isabela, talked about how her identity as a native English speaker had been shaped by the cultural and geographical contexts of Iowa and the United States. To represent how knowing English in a dominantly English-speaking culture has been significant in her life, she created a word cloud in the shape of a woman (see Appendix C7); every word, such as “English,” “hablador” (“speaker”), or “familia” (“family”), expresses something that “makes my life very easy, or special in another way.” She explained, “My culture affects my identity because [it changes] the way I see the world.” Isabela then talked about her high school Spanish teacher, who was very influential in her life. “During this time [high school], I was really unmotivated and I didn’t like school. . . . She [the teacher] asked me, ‘If you like to talk a lot, why don’t you like to speak Spanish?’” Because she has learned Spanish, Isabela shared, “I understand others’ lives and I know that, [for] immigrants and other people who come to the United States, it’s very difficult, and I understand that my life, my entire life, has been easier for me and others in my community [than it is for immigrants and refugees].”

Other themes that students explored through their projects included faith, future careers, music, and personal attributes (such as “survivor” and “charitable”). These motifs are not explored here because they were less common but still provide an interesting perspective into the lives of students in this world language class, who they are, and what they value.

### **Survey Results**

To understand the experiences that students had while completing this project, students were invited to participate in an online survey that focused on determining the instructional effectiveness of the project and each of its components, as well as any personal impact it may have had on students. The results received from the survey would also provide qualitative data

on how effective the project was at addressing the research question, which was, *How can world language teachers create curricula that brings students' native cultures and identities into the classroom as a topic of study?* Students' presentations and their feedback through the survey allowed the researcher to analyze themes displayed in the presentations and gain insight into how participants found meaning throughout the course of the project.

In the survey, students answered nine open-ended questions (instead of rating items on a scale of one to five, for instance) in an attempt to elicit feedback from participants that would be more "three-dimensional" and true to their experience, while also allowing them to share critiques and comments about what was effective and ineffective. The responses that are included here are those that are most representative of all the evaluations received.

The first question students were asked was, "Describe the difficulty of this project. Were the plan and rough draft helpful in preparing you for creating your final piece and presentation?" Seven out of the 21 students surveyed described the project as difficult, while four said it was somewhat difficult or confusing. Three students shared that they did not feel the project was challenging; seven did not comment on the difficulty of the project.

The reasons that students provided for why they felt the project was difficult varied. Several participants commented that it was hard to select an identity that would be publicly expressed in front of the class. "It was difficult to decide on an identity that I felt comfortable talking about with peers," wrote one student. "It was difficult to do the presentation itself. ...it was a little awkward in front of the whole class," shared another. Other students expressed that the project was difficult because they were unclear on how to think about identity. "The most difficult part for me was to decide what part of my identity I wanted to focus on to start my project," said one participant. Another mentioned, "...I thought the project was a little difficult in the fact that describing identity is a *[sic]* very abstract." Finally, two individuals commented that

the way the project was set up made it challenging: “I thought this project was very difficult due to the level of specificity required”; “I think it was difficult figuring out what type of project to do since it was such a broad subject with not many examples of options of what could be done.” One person shared that the project was not difficult “because of the rough draft and the timing we had to complete it.”

All survey participants responded that the creation of the plan and rough draft was helpful. Many wrote that the plan and draft helped them figure out if they were on the right track and organize their thoughts. “I thought that the rough draft and plan were very helpful... I was able to have more of a thought process of what I wanted as a final result and it helped it be more detailed,” noted one student. Another student mentioned that “[t]he rough draft helped me dig deeper into my identity.” One individual conveyed that, while the plan and draft were useful, the project as a whole was still challenging: “The plan and rough draft were helpful, but the whole process was very daunting and I was just happy to get it over with.”

Next, students were asked, “Was the feedback you received on your plan and rough draft from Dra. Jerónimo useful, applicable, and easy to understand? How could it have been improved?” All students communicated that they found the professor’s comments to be helpful. “I was able to fix the errors that I had before it even was graded,” wrote one individual. “It helped me clarify different aspects of my project and it made me more confident,” said another. One student shared that they would have liked for the feedback process to occur in person: “I am more of a personable [*sic*] person, so I would have liked to meet with her in person, so I can ask questions and explain my point more clearly.” Another student commented, “I would say put more emphasis on how creative we need to be with the final project.”

The third question in the survey was, “Was the feedback you received on your plan and rough draft from your peers in class useful, applicable, and easy to understand? How could this

in-class process have been improved?” Seventeen respondents expressed that the peer review process was beneficial to them, three shared that it was somewhat helpful but could have been improved, and one did not answer the question. “Talking to peers was good practice to build up the confidence to speak in front of everyone,” one person wrote. “The feedback from classmates was pretty helpful when they would describe to me what they thought I was trying to say. When they did this, it was easier to see what I was communicating well and what I was not communicating well,” said one individual. Some students talked about how the process was not as useful as it could have been: “The feedback from my peers wasn’t as helpful because nobody made any suggestions. I would just say was *[sic]* I was thinking about doing and everybody said it was good.” “I only got a couple of ideas because we didn’t have much time to discuss it. We didn’t all get a turn to talk about our ideas of the others’ projects because we ran out of time.”

When commenting on how the peer reviews could have been improved, one participant wished that the class could have had more time. “...[M]aybe we could have even spent more time showing more people our rough drafts,” they said. Others wanted more structure: “...I think different prompts would have worked out a little better.” Another student agreed, saying, “We basically explained each of our projects, and that was it. I would have liked a form or rubric for each of us to complete based on the other’s project because I do not think people were as willing to share their true thoughts in person.”

Next, question four asked, “Do you feel this project was worth the time spent in and out of class? If not, how could the project be modified to make the time spent on it more worthwhile?” Seventeen students felt that the project was worth the time investment, one did not, and three did not answer the question. Several students wrote about how the project prompted them to think in a new way. “It was interesting to reflect on what makes you you

because its *[sic]* not something you think about every day.” One commented, “It makes you think who *[sic]* we are and how we see ourselves. I'd say it was worth it.” A different student responded, “It was very enjoyable and I liked hearing about all of my classmates and their identity/cultural stories.” Another person mentioned that the timeframe of the project was important: “...[T]hey *[sic]* way it was schedule *[sic]* gave plenty of time to get prepared.” One student appreciated the opportunity to be artistic: “It was nice to have creative freedom, even if I struggled with deciding what to do at first.” Two students who expressed frustrations both said that the confusion they felt while completing the project made the time spent on it less worthwhile. “I think this project was not worth the time in that the explanations *[sic]* and directions for it were very broad and not very specific for what was wanted to *[sic]* for me I wasted a lot of time just trying to come up with ideas or figuring out what I even should write about,” said one. The other commented that the project was worth it but that “it was confusing have two projects at the same time” (referring to another project that was going on at the same time in the course).

A few of the students shared that the time that the project required in class would have been more profitable if they had more time to work with peers. “...I think we could spend more time preparing with our classmates in class, such as incorporating the rubric or doing a speed dating format, so we could get as many different perspectives as possible,” wrote one individual, referring to the peer review process. “We could have spent more time on a reflection that was more group/peer based. I think that would help everyone process the project a bit more,” recommended one student, who went on to say, “Maybe have more time dedicated to working on it in class rather than outside of class. Between this and all the readings it was a lot of time.” Another person felt that the requirements for the project were too strict: “It may have been more worthwhile and less stressful if there was more wiggle room and less specifics to follow.”

The following question was, “Has your definition of the word ‘identity’ changed after completing the project? Please explain why or why not.” Fourteen students shared that their definition had changed, five said it had not, and two did not answer the question directly. “Now I understand that there are many things that could be considered an identity, rather than only one correct definition,” mentioned one person. Several respondents talked about how their perspective on their own identity and others’ identities had changed. “...[I]t made me think about the various aspects of not just my identity but other people's identity,” one student wrote. “I think my definition the word identity has always been pretty broad and it was cool to see many different perspectives of where people find their personal identity and what is most important to them,” another individual responded. One student shared that their new understanding of identity changed how they interact with others: “I notice myself being more conscious about how my identity affects my behavior as well as how it may affect the behavior of those around me. I try to look at others *[sic]* actions with more understanding.”

The students who responded that their definition of identity had not changed shared that they already had a good understanding of the concept. “[T]he definition of the word identity I would have thought of before the project is what I used for the project,” wrote one student. “My definition didn't necessarily change, but I found it interesting to see how different we all are from each other and how we can embrace our differences as we learn a new language together,” said another respondent.

For question six, students wrote about the following prompt: “Did this project help you better understand or think differently about any aspects of your identity?” Every respondent but one wrote that their understanding of their own identity had changed as a result of the project. Many students talked about how the project prompted them to think about how their identity has developed over time. “It made me think more about what makes up how *[sic]* I am today and the

decisions I have made leading up to now,” said one person. “[M]y identity has shifted recently and it was surprising to me when I thought about all my cultural influences and how my identity has been shaped through my experiences,” wrote another student. One individual expressed that the project had caused them to ponder in new ways what their identity is: “It made me think more about my identity and it made me help me *[sic]* find what my identity is.”

Question seven was, “Did this unit (including this project, class readings, and class discussions on culture and identity) influence your understanding of these topics in some way? If so, how?” Although some of the course components mentioned in the prompt were not part of the project, they influenced how students thought about identity while completing their projects. Additionally, the professor of the course wanted to know how all of these components contributed toward student understanding of the unit theme of identity. All students except one (who did not directly answer the question) said that the unit affected their comprehension and perception of identity and culture. A few students mentioned that the project and unit changed how they see others: “. . . I was able to understand and see my classmates differently with their stories.” One individual talked about how the project helped them become more empathetic: “. . . [I]t has given me more understanding and made me think longer and harder abot *[sic]* my encounters with others.” On the same note, another said, “. . . I am passionate about the information I have learned as it will help me become a more respectful person as I learn more about other cultures and how they help shape and represent people's identities.” Other students appreciated how their understandings of identity have grown throughout the unit. “This project enhanced my learning greatly by allowing me the time to think deeply in *[sic]* what identity truly means,” wrote one individual. “[T]he class discussions helped to realize all aspects of identity as it isnt *[sic]* something that is often talked about,” said another.

Penultimately, students were asked, “Do you feel that this project has influenced you in a positive way emotionally/mentally? Please describe.” Eighteen students responded that it had, two said it had not, and one did not directly answer. There were many reasons why students felt they had benefited personally from the project. A few responded that they appreciated the opportunity to be creative, particularly in lieu of a different kind of assessment. “I loved the process of creating my project, and it’s nice to have something that I actually created instead of just an essay/test,” said one individual. Another respondent replied, “It was nice to do a creative project with meaning instead of another paper or test.” Others felt that the learning that occurred during this part of the course was very valuable on a personal level. “It was a way to take things we were learning in class and apply them to real world examples in our own lives,” one student shared. “[I]t helped me outline what I want to do in my life based on my current identity,” another wrote. “It was interesting to explain my identity in a Spanish context. Likewise, talking about one’s identity always makes a person feel more comfortable in their surroundings, especially if their identity doesn’t match their appearance,” said one respondent. The only student who commented that the project didn’t benefit them emotionally or mentally wrote that “it was hard trying to define identity in my own terms, and I am still not 100% on what I classify my identity to be.”

Finally, survey participants could optionally answer the following question: “Is there anything else you want to tell us?” Those who chose to respond shared that their experience with the project had been very positive. “I enjoyed this project. Took the creative side out in me,” one person wrote. Another said, “This project was amazing. Thank you.” One student commented, “This was a fun project! Presenting made many of us a little nervous I think but it was a good experience overall.” The other student offered a suggestion: “I think for part of the peer review process, it would be good to have a day to practice our presentations with each



other. I was really focused on the actual project and not on the presentation aspect, so I think more practice in that area would have been nice.”

After reviewing the themes presented by students and reading their responses to the online survey, it was clear that students benefited from the opportunity to connect a very personal part of who they are with the language they are learning. Taking the data from this study into account, this researcher believes that the arts and personal reflection/investigation can be powerful tools in the world language classroom for the following two reasons: first, projects such as this one allow students to connect with the target culture and artifacts from it (i.e., poetry, music, paintings) in new ways; and second, and perhaps most importantly, students are enabled to discover, reflect on, and perhaps even confront their own and others' identities as they participate in the project as both presenter and audience member.

Projects such as this one can also be influential in world language classrooms (or any classroom) as a powerful tool for developing compassion and empathy in students. As a few students mentioned in their survey responses, hearing their classmates talk about the most fundamental parts of who they are helped them develop a new perspective toward people who are different from them. This research is evidence that such explorations in the classroom help humanize topics about which students may feel indifference, hostility, or disapproval.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

All the participants in this study are members of a university Spanish class, meaning that they have some sort of preexisting interest or motivation towards learning about other languages, perspectives, cultures, etc. Because students in this class have potentially had other experiences (inside or outside of the classroom) with these topics or thought about such issues beforehand, the results of this research may have been affected; this could be a possible explanation for why “cultural experiences” was such a common theme. Additionally, all

participants self-selected to allow their projects and presentations to be analyzed for this study, which could have introduced some bias. What is more, the sample size of this study was small; if this research was conducted with a larger class of students or multiple classes, one could expect that more themes would emerge, and the most common themes would be different.

Depending on the size and culture of the classroom, students may also feel more or less comfortable sharing about their most vulnerable identities and cultures. Perhaps if the class had been smaller and students had close relationships with one another, they would have chosen to talk about even more sensitive elements of who they are; the opposite could have also been true if the class size was larger and the learning environment was not particularly warm. Interestingly, based on the culture of the university where this research took place and the city, state, and even region, one could argue that the identities that students shared were not particularly “risky.” Students chose to focus on parts of themselves that are already broadly accepted by most in the dominant culture of this area (such as having a Christian upbringing/faith); one might claim that none of the identities presented would subject a student to marginalization or discomfort, based on the culture of the audience. This is not to say these students’ expressions of identity are any less valuable, but future research that is conducted in different educational settings, regions of the country/world, etc., can provide more information about what students feel comfortable sharing in what contexts.

A key limitation of this research centers around the fact that the researcher was not the teacher of the class where the project was utilized. In a normal classroom, a teacher would be able to tailor a project to their students and the current instruction and would be aware of any areas where students needed extra guidance. For example, the project would have been more effective if the researcher was in class to ensure that students really had a grasp on how to figure out their identity, culture, etc. As issues arose, some adjustments were made; for

instance, the professor communicated to the researcher at one point that students needed more time to turn in one part of the project, and the deadline was extended. However, creating part of a curriculum without having the perspective of the teacher implementing it makes it impossible to guide the class to where they need to be in order to maximize a project's potential.

Finally, several weaknesses of the project were brought up by students in the online survey. One student conveyed that they wished that the feedback that was provided after each portion of the project was turned in had been given in person, not over email. This would have allowed for better negotiation of meaning between the professor and students. Another individual mentioned that they wanted a chance to debrief after the project ended. If this project was used in a future class, this could be done in a small or large group setting after presentations were given so that students could reflect on stories and themes that were shared, giving the project positive washback while providing a sense of closure. Finally, a student wrote that they wanted more guidance about how to be creative with their project. Students were required to find a "creative" format for their project - a way to express their identity that was true to who they are that would also, ideally, tie into the identity on which they had chosen to focus. An optimal example of this was Jennifer's project, which was centered around her musical identity in the context of Brazilian culture, for which she created a binder full of her favorite Brazilian songs. If a teacher is seeking creativity from their students, they owe it to them to explain and model what creativity is and how to develop it; should this project be recreated, teachers should ensure that students receive such guidance.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> If you or a teacher you know would be interested in incorporating this project into your classes (world language or otherwise), please contact me at [bairelizabeth123@gmail.com](mailto:bairelizabeth123@gmail.com). I would be happy to share my materials with you.

## **Conclusion**

The benefits to projects of this kind in the classroom are numerous. Students enjoy the opportunity to be creative and apply what they are learning to their own lives. They also appreciate the diversity that this type of assessment provides, as opposed to the exams and essays that are routinely used. However, one of the longest lasting benefits is the personal growth that can occur as students open up to one another, listening to classmates talk about who they are and why their identities and cultures are important to them. This is one small way in which teachers can seek to elevate all voices in the classroom while also building empathy and community among students. In this researcher's experience, an apathetic or hostile individual often needs only to hear the story and experiences of someone who has had no choice but to live the controversial identity before the listener's unfeeling logic and opinions begin changing.

More research is needed to examine the effects of the arts in world language classrooms, particularly in relation to themes of identity, culture, heritage, and related topics. Such research would inform teachers on how to effectively incorporate projects and activities like this one into their curriculum while also providing more data on what information and through what formats students are willing to share about themselves in various classroom environments at all academic levels, from elementary school to university courses and beyond. It would also continue to elevate the importance of learning other languages and the benefits that can be gained from exploring other cultures and identities—and one's own.

## Appendix A

### Project Guidelines

#### **Part 1 - Plan (5 pts) DUE Tuesday, January 16**

Read the following definitions, then think about the questions below.

Identity: One person can have multiple identities that change with the individual and depend on history and that person's culture(s). An identity can be:

- 1) natural or acquired by birth (i.e., Guatemalan, English-speaking),
- 2) a role or position that is given to an individual by an institution or by themselves (i.e., employee, Dance Marathon participant),
- 3) a trait that they see in themselves or that others see them as having (i.e., on the Autism spectrum, having leadership abilities), or
- 4) being part of a group of people with a shared practice (i.e., Jewish, being a member of a family).

Culture: It's difficult to pin down an exact definition of a culture. Here are some potential definitions:

- 1) Culture is what social scientists study (i.e., language, art forms).
- 2) Culture is the heritage of a society (what a society leaves behind - i.e., architecture, politics).
- 3) Culture is what separates humans from other beings (i.e., technology, speech).
- 4) Culture is how people understand and interact with the world (i.e., customs, beliefs).

However, there are more possible definitions out there. How would you define the word "culture"?

What makes up your identity? When you think about who you are as a person, what are the first things that come to mind? What culture is going to be the context for your project? How does your identity interact with this culture?

Based on your answers to those questions, and based on your conversations in class about identity and culture...

1. Identify one specific part of your identity that is a key part of who you are that you will be comfortable sharing with the class when you present your project later. Write out a brief explanation of why that aspect of your identity is important to you and what it represents about you.
2. Identify the cultural context to which you'll relate your identity. Also think about the physical/geographical context in which you picture your chosen aspect of identity. This can be as broad or as specific as it needs to be; examples could include your hometown, your family's heritage, a community of people with your same beliefs, etc. Consider questions like: Do you see others in that culture who share your aspect of identity? How does that culture react to them? Has that identity been a part of your culture's history in the past?

3. Next, decide what form you would like your project to take. You can choose to express your identity in any way you choose (including but not limited to painting, poetry, narrative essay, sculpture, etc!). If possible, choose a form that will enhance the expression of your identity. Provide a well-thought-out explanation of why you chose the format you did. Specify what the length/depth of your project will be. For example, "I plan to take 20 photos" or "I will film a five minute long movie."
4. Finally, think of at least three ways that you could make your expression of identity even more profound through different artistic choices that will appear in the final product. For instance, the colors you plan to use, an allusion that you want to include, etc.

Construct a plan for your project that outlines what you plan to do. ***Make sure to address each of the four criteria above in your plan. Bring three typed copies to class on Tuesday, January 16.***

## **Part 2 - Rough Draft (10 pts) DUE Tuesday, January 23**

As you continue working on the project, work on more deeply developing your explanation of your chosen identity component and how it fits into the context of your culture. Create a rough draft that thoroughly answers the following questions (at minimum):

- What is the culture that you're using as the context for this project?
- How does your culture react to your identity or how you display it?
- Who has been instrumental in helping you develop this part of who you are?
- What events in your life have caused this to become important to you?
- Why is it one of the key parts of who you are?
- How can you explain to others the significance of this aspect of your identity?

Your draft should also give a fuller picture of what you plan to do and how you're doing it. For instance, if you're writing a song, bring some lyrics you've written. If you plan to do a painting, bring a completed sketch of what you will paint. ***Bring three typed copies of your rough draft, with a working explanation of your identity and a draft of your final product, to class on Tuesday, January 23.***

## **Part 3 - Presentation/Final Product (30 pts) DUE Tuesday, February 6/Thursday, February 8**

You will present your final work to the class, giving an explanation for the choices you made in planning, drafting, and creating your piece. Keep in mind that your presentation should clearly explain the connections between your final product and the ideas behind it. Your presentation should answer all of the following questions:

- What culture is the context of your project? How is this culture a part of who you are?
- What part of your identity have you chosen to represent? Why?
- Why did you choose this art form to represent your identity?
- What are the key ideas you're expressing through your piece?
- How does your chosen identity affect how you see yourself and your world?

Closer to the project deadline, you will sign up in class for which day you would like to present (either Tuesday, February 6 or Thursday, February 8). Please turn in your completed project on the day you present. Please note that, because of the number of students in the class, presentations need to be 3-5 minutes long.

***IMPORTANT NOTE: Students who have consented to participate in the study aspect of this project will have their final works photographed. In order to keep the identities of all students anonymous, please DO NOT put your name on the part of your piece that will be photographed (even if you are not part of the study). Instead, please write your name somewhere where it will not be visible in the photo (for instance, on the back of your project). Ask Dra. Jerónimo if you need clarification.***

## Appendix B

### Survey Questions:

1. Describe the difficulty of this project. Were the plan and rough draft helpful in preparing you for creating your final piece and presentation?
2. Was the feedback you received on your plan and rough draft from Dra. Jerónimo useful, applicable, and easy to understand? How could it have been improved?
3. Was the feedback you received on your plan and rough draft from your peers in class useful, applicable, and easy to understand? How could this in-class process have been improved?
4. Do you feel this project was worth the time spent in and out of class? If not, how could the project be modified to make the time spent on it more worthwhile?
5. Has your definition of the word “identity” changed after completing the project? Please explain why or why not.
6. Did this project help you better understand or think differently about any aspects of your identity?
7. Did this unit (including this project, class readings, and class discussions on culture and identity) influence your understanding of these topics in some way? If so, how?
8. Do you feel that this project has influenced you in a positive way emotionally/mentally? Please describe.
9. Is there anything else you want to tell us?



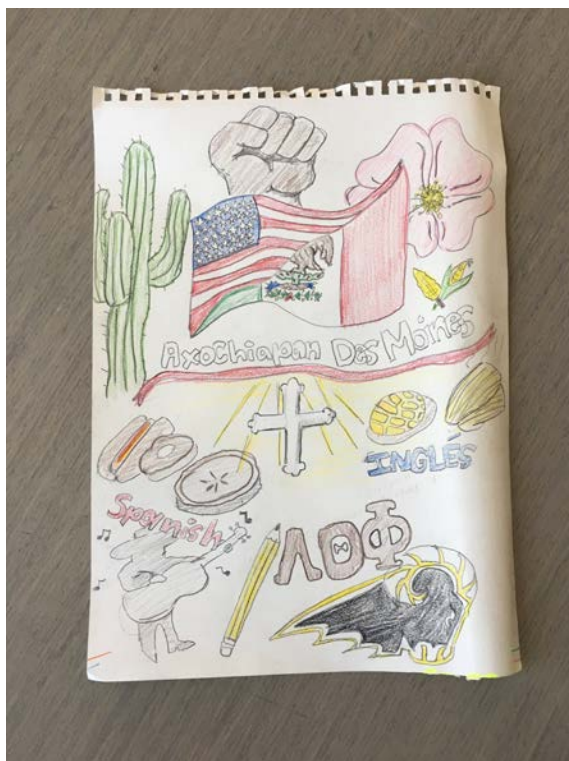
## Appendix C



**C1 - Kayla's Project.** Three-part painting about her Sicilian identity.



**C2 - Amy's Project.** Painting about her Mexican-American identity.



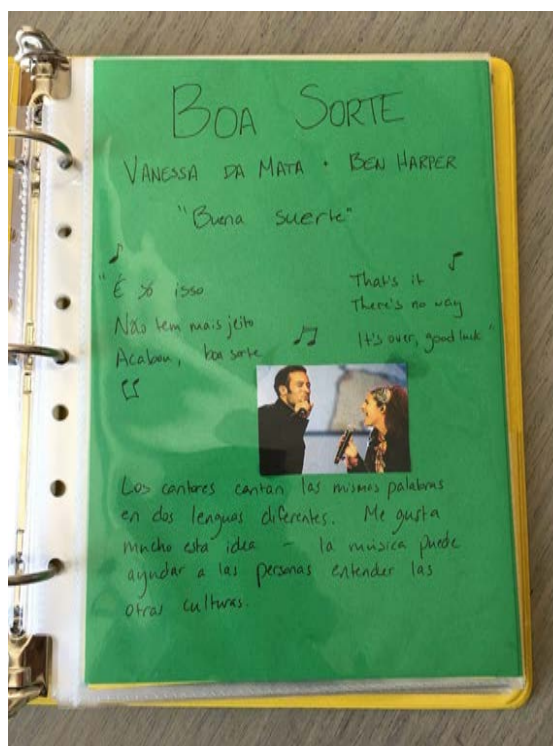
**C3 - Marcos's Project.** Drawings about his Mexican-American identity.



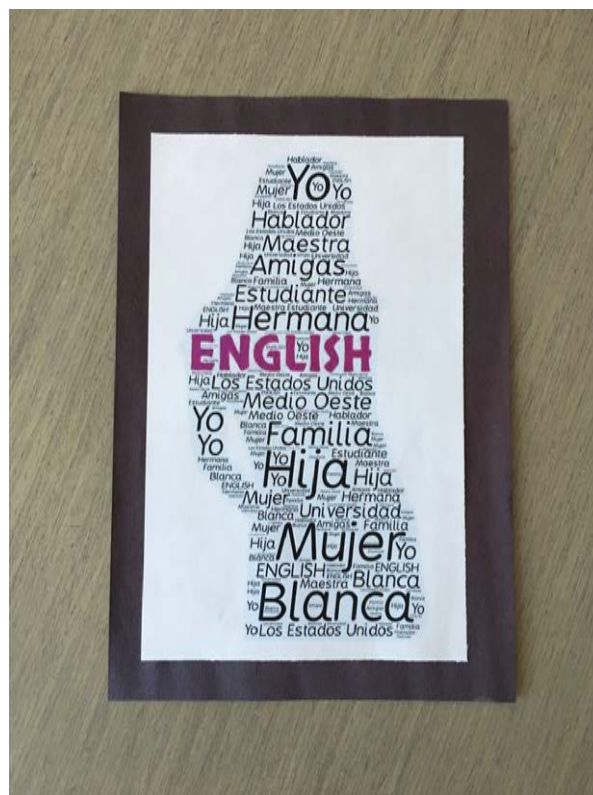
**C4 - Kristin's Project.** Poster about her identity as a student.



**C5 - Ariana's Project.** Suitcase about her identity as a traveler (face blurred to protect identity).



**C6 - Jennifer's Project.** Binder of songs about her identity as a musical person.



**C7 - Isabela's Project.** Word cloud about her identity as a native English speaker.

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