

Redesigned University of Florida Online Spanish Receives Outstanding Student Reviews



Dr. Crystal Marull

Program UF Online Spanish Program Coordinator: Dr. Crystal Marull

Course Sequence: SPAN 1130, SPAN 1131

Total Sections Taught Annually: 6 (Large Multi-Sectioned Format)

Estimated Annual Enrollment: 500 students

First implementation: Fall 2019

A recipient of the 2020 Distance Education Best Practice Award (First Place) (AECT) and the 2019 ACTFL SIG and CALICO Award for Excellence in Online Language Teaching, Dr. Crystal Marull is a frequent presenter at regional and national conferences. At University of Florida, she is credited for transforming and growing the UF Online Spanish Program, which consistently receives outstanding student reviews.

The Challenge

- Study of a “foreign” language is required by many of the 25 major and 14 minor programs at UF Online. The challenge is always to transform “required” to “desired” and to inspire lifelong learners of Spanish—or, at the very least—to instill in students a curiosity and respect for cultures other than their own.
- Offer a curated, personal experience to every student in a large-enrollment single section format.
- Utilize technology to deliver memorable, spontaneous activities rather than mindless mechanical drills.
- Grow interest to justify expansion of UF Online to intermediate and specialized language courses.

The Solution

A Relation-Based Approach to Online Instruction

Dr. Marull created a “Three Pillar Model for Online Teaching, which is designed to prepare students to interact with native speakers of Spanish from the first week of the course.

[Marull, C. & Kumar, S. (2020). Authentic Language Learning through Telecollaboration in Online Courses. TechTrends, 1-8.]

Pillar 1 Independent Learning Modules with Asynchronous Practice

Students are introduced to relevant themes and topics through a mix of texts and text types. They progress through content modules that consist of short easy-to-understand video lessons and carefully scaffolded activity sets.

Pillar 2 Asynchronous Semi-Structured Conversational Practice

Students play with the language in somewhat structured but open-ended situations and contexts. Instructors personalize their comments and include video, audio, and text feedback. Stumbling is

celebrated!



Pillar 3 Real Time Spontaneous Conversations with Native Speakers of Spanish

Each week, students participate in small groups in real time, spontaneous conversations with native speakers of Spanish. These conversations provide “safe spaces” for students to form organic cultural connections and engage authentically in a supportive environment.

A mix of services and tools

Students in large-enrollment sections are divided into smaller working groups of 10-12 students each to build community and facilitate interaction with the language and culture.

The asynchronous learning modules in Contraseña are carefully scaffolded and vital to achieving course outcomes. Many of the program’s communicative activities (Conversar) are adapted and delivered via VoiceThreads, which provides a bridge to real time spontaneous conversations with native speakers of Spanish from around the world. The relationships students form with their LinguaMeeting coaches enrich the experience and are integral to their success.

- Instructor prep and grading are focused entirely on participation in meaningful activities that inspire students to take risks and excel. Each of the three pillars contribute to 30% of the course grade.
- All program and course set up is delivered via Canvas in partnership with the instructor, Campus IT, and Lingro.
- Easy to digest, short video lessons provide students with foundational skills that they apply to carefully scaffolded practice that precedes more spontaneous interactions.
- Students see purpose in everything they do. Gone are references to busy work.
- *Conversar* activities can be used “as is,” but are easily adaptable to other tools, such as VoiceThreads, PlayPosit, and Flip.
- Instructor feedback focuses on reducing language anxiety and motivating students to celebrate successes as they form friendships with native speakers.
- Small group, real time, spontaneous conversations with native-speaking language coaches personalize the course experience and build interest and confidence.

The Results

- Enrollments in both levels of introductory Spanish have increased by 50%.
- Improved students’ language skills, cultural awareness, and overall mental health by reducing feelings of isolation. [Marull, C., Risner, M. “Explore the World from Home: LinguaMeeting “Experiences,” American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), Virtual, Nov. 19-21, 2021.]
- Students report a reduction in language anxiety and see the relevance of language study to their fields of concentration and future pursuits. [Marull, C., Reese, J., “Decreasing Foreign Language Anxiety Through Virtual Exchange,” Hispanic Linguistic Symposium (HLS), Virtual, Nov. 3-5, 2022.]
- Encouraging course evaluations.