Transcript - "Re-centre pedagogies, de-centre curricula"

00:00:00 Mazal

Hello and welcome to another episode of EDI Dialogues at UCL. My name is Mazal Oaknín and I am an Associate Professor Teaching and a Language Coordinator in SPLAS, the department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies.

In today's episode, I am thrilled to be joined by Macarena Jimenez Naranjo and Nadia Hussain and we will be discussing how to create alternative assessments that are diversified and engaging for students.

Macarena, my colleague, is also a member of SPLAS as I just said where she is currently teaching Spanish Language to second-year undergraduate students. Additionally, she is teaching Cultural Responses to the Mexican Revolution, a multidisciplinary module that explores post-Revolution Mexican narrative, muralism, and filmography to first-year students. She also has a keen interest in decolonising Spanish language teaching.

Nadia Hussain is an undergraduate student at UCL, pursuing a BA in French and Spanish. Last year, she took Macarena's content module and had a great experience with the new assessment methods that Macarena introduced.

Now, let's discuss Macarena's efforts to introduce innovative assessment forms in her content module. These new methods challenge the traditional power dynamics and shift the focus away from grades.

So, Macarena, could you please tell us about the content module you are teaching and the modifications that you have made to it?

00:01:41 Macarena

Yes, hello Mazal, and thank you so much for having me today.

So, it’s a module that examines how different art forms responded to the Mexican Revolution. I took it over from Dr Deborah Martin and the module was already well-planned and covered important issues such as gender, race, and class.

However, I have introduced information on women muralists and a short novel written by a woman early in the conflict. The most significant change I made was to how the module is assessed.

00:02:18 Mazal

**Hmm**, here you are touching on a very pressing subject that, for many of us, is still an unchartered territory that we are only beginning to explore. Recent studies have highlighted the importance of readdressing the traditional focus on grades and I was wondering which assessment changes you actually implemented?

00:02:42 Macarena

Well, in the past the module was assessed by a single essay and an exam, and I realised this approach needed more variety to cater to preferred learning styles. Given our diverse range of students, it’s essential to diversify our assessment methods. I also believed that introducing a flipped classroom approach would give students more autonomy and control over their learning process. Besides, teamwork, Mazal, became crucial. Why just answer questions when you can create, discuss, and learn together? That's where essential skills truly blossom I think.

00:03:24 Mazal

**Yes,** I fully agree. How have you designed more accessible and diversified assessments?

00:03:31 Macarena

Well, I made a few modifications. Firstly, I decided to remove the exam since it was not essential for students to memorise all the information. Instead, it was more important to focus on developing the skills required to work with the available information and analyse it critically. Secondly, I introduced two coursework assessment pieces, a group presentation, and a reflective writing piece.

So let me explain, for the group presentation, students will select a particular aspect of Esquivel's novel *Como agua para chocolate*, such as characters, style, or feminism in the novel. They will then read an academic article and present their findings to their peers in class using an academic poster or other visual aids. In the reflective writing piece, students will reflect on their experience of working in a team and how it would change how they work in teams in the future.

I think that a crucial element of decolonising, critical, or inclusive pedagogies is paying attention to the diverse experiences our students have. By doing so, we allow students to create relevant and meaningful knowledge for their own lives.

00:04:43 Mazal

That’s really important and Nadia, as a student, did you welcome these innovative pieces of assessment?

 00:04:51 Nadia

Hi, thank you for having me here today. In terms of these innovative pieces of assessment, yes, I did welcome them.

Given that the module was split up into three mediums of assessment, that being a group presentation, a reflective piece of writing and an essay, it was a refreshing structure with regards to being evaluated. I felt that the shift away from the traditional and typical weight that falls onto a final essay or exam was extremely positive. As Macarena has just said, we as students, are home to a diverse range of experiences, which do not always cater to the pressures and time management of one final piece of assessment.

Instead, the group presentations allowed us to work collaboratively and to make space for critical analysis, which could then be shared to our peers, introducing, and expanding on ideas that we had perhaps never even considered. I would also say that group presentations are a great way to build confidence and shape our speaking skills which are a key asset for the world beyond UCL. The possibility to then reflect on our group projects, through the reflective writing piece, again, allowed us to reflect critically and build up our skill set for inevitable collaborative work in the future.

This diverse range of assessment criteria, in contrast to a final exam or essay, enabled an interactive and an accessible module. The alleviated pressure, usually placed on the weight of an essay or exam, allowed us to enjoy the material, share our ideas, learn from each other, and develop new skills, such as curating visual aids. I believe that other modules at UCL should take similar initiatives.

00:06:34 Mazal

It’s really refreshing and encouraging that you have such positive feedback. And, however, Macarena, if the group presentation is not mandatory, how do you ensure student engagement? There is a general feeling, as you know, that attendance hasn’t been high for the past couple of years, and especially after COVID, many students simply prefer to work individually. And also, Nadia, do you feel like this is the case for you and your peers?

00:07:04 Macarena

Well, here comes the big news Mazal. So, the game-changer behind group presentations was the decision to award the maximum available grade to students as long as they completed the task in class. I noticed that students were often too nervous before the class presentation, and the fear of making mistakes prevented them from enjoying the task and performing to the best of their ability. So, I wanted to move students away from the grades. And, I assured them that they already had 100 points for the assessment and I encouraged them to enjoy reading the novel and putting all the information together to share with their peers.

00:07:47 Nadia

Yes, I agree Macarena. This was something completely new to me. The idea of receiving 100 points for attending the class and giving the presentation was not only an initiative for students to engage, but also a chance to enjoy the novel *Como agua para chocolate*, without the stress or pressure of being grade conscious. I loved this idea, as the focus was on us as students, working collaboratively and engaging with the literature. We also had to create an academic poster or visual aid following our secondary research, which was a great way to digest our research and reproduce it through an informative or creative medium.

With regards to working as a team, I think that the group presentations worked well. It may be true what you mentioned Mazal about the effects that the COVID pandemic have had on us as students. We definitely became habituated to working independently during that time period. However, I would suggest that following the pandemic, the chance to work collaboratively again, and in person, has been a positive proposal. It was really nice to spend time with other students and work together in this group project, especially as it was during the first year of university.

Additionally, Macarena’s decision to award 100 points to everyone who attended and gave a presentation definitely encouraged attendance and engagement. It became less about worrying about our grades, and more about engaging critically with the literature, simply because we wanted to. The group presentations were also not a hugely strenuous project, which maintained a level of focus when approaching the task, as well as enjoyment.

00:09:26 Mazal

Sounds really good. And, Macarena, as the lecturer, what do you feel the outcome has been?

00:09:33 Macarena

Well, I am extremely pleased with the outcome. Even though the students know their grades in advance, they still strive to impress their peers and continue learning from the task. So far, and to be honest Mazal, the group presentations in my Mexican module have been amazing, much better than in my Spanish grammar lectures where grades depend on their performance.

00:09:56 Mazal

**Oh**, what a thought-provoking conversation! I am sure many listeners will re-evaluate their assessment practices and consider the valuable insights from Macarena and Nadia. Thank you so much to the two of you.

The innovative method discussed today exemplifies our commitment at SPLAS to evolving pedagogy for diverse learners and also an ever-changing educational landscape. This is just one example. Our recent filmmaking proposal in Spanish courses further shows our dedication to fostering creative and engaging learning experiences.

Finally, I must say, I am thrilled to share that the language teaching staff in SPLAS were recognised for their outstanding work in 2022 when a commendation at the UCL Inclusion Awards was given to us. This achievement serves as a powerful validation of our commitment to EDI principles and fuels our passion to keep exploring practices that empower all students.

Thank you all for listening. We look forward to sharing more exciting developments from the language teachers at SPLAS in the near future.