

Transcript

Duncan Wheeler, Associate Professor, Spanish Literature

How do you make sure your students can relate to your subject?

I think, again, it's about finding scenarios which they're familiar with. So ok, Spanish people are Spanish, English people are English. But equally in a globalised, multicultural world that's not always that simple anyway. I think it's about finding things like taking a Spanish children's book or a Spanish book designed for teenagers and saying, "This is the Spanish Harry Potter." Now at university level we might begin to say that that's a little bit simplistic, that kind of idea of what the differences are, but I think when people are first becoming familiarised with literature in a foreign language saying those sorts of things is perfectly acceptable. So I think basically, the scenario being relatable, and humour is also a great way of translating across cultures – we laugh at different things but we all laugh, or most of us laugh.



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Duncan Wheeler, Associate Professor, Spanish Literature

What personally excites you about teaching your subject?

Well I think one of my bad habits, and one of the liberties that we have in the university that probably you have less of in schools, is that I keep on changing the syllabus each year and what I teach because I love reading new novels. So what I do, and it's a way of imposing the discipline on myself of reading something: you know when you read a review of something and think, "Oh I want to read that", but you never get round to it? Well I found the best way of forcing yourself to do it is not to join a book club, but to say you're going to teach it the following year, because you're then left with no option but to read it. So I think it's having the opportunity to do something I've always enjoyed—reading – and being paid for it.

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Duncan Wheeler, Associate Professor, Spanish Literature

What is the biggest challenge you encounter when teaching your subject?

I think sometimes there is just this knee-jerk reaction onto the back of students that it's too hard, too difficult. In the second year modules here I coordinate a cinema module and a literature module and I can tell you the cinema module always fills up, and the theatre and literature one doesn't always. So I think it's basically presenting it in a way that it doesn't seem like such an unobtainable task – so you don't want to arrive in class with the two volumes of *Don Quixote* and say, "You've got to read this for next week." What you maybe want to do is start off with some short extracts – I sometimes, for example, before I do this play *Bajarse al moro*, I take a short play by the same author which is funny – a pair of prisoners talking about their experiences – and make two people in class read it out. Because once they laugh and see that they can actually understand it (they're not going to understand all the words in that read-through but they can get the basic humour, the jokes) then that makes them get over that initial reluctance or (maybe reluctance is too strong a word) that initial trepidation.



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Duncan Wheeler, Associate Professor, Spanish Literature

What would be your 'top tip' for those going on to teach your subject at A-level?

What I would say about teaching literature for teenagers is that the more able in the class will definitely respond to it. I think the biggest challenge is to make sure that you have material so that those with lesser concentration or lower language skills don't get lost or bored. The last thing you want is for it to be a self-defeating thing, to have a teacher teach a literary text and for the person to come out thinking, "This is boring," because that's precisely what you're trying to dispel. So I think it's developing tasks or questions for those kinds of students, so that they stay involved. One thing I've done with a play I've mentioned was, it's a popular play for teenagers in Spain to put on amateur productions. So we put on YouTube clips of Spaniards performing it and laughing at other people doing something badly is always popular: looking at these really bad clips and voting on which is the worst one is a way of getting everyone involved and stopping people switching off.



Transcript

Duncan Wheeler, Senior Lecturer, Spanish Literature

What personally excites you about teaching your subject?

Because you've obviously read it yourself, it's a lot to do with how students respond to it. In relation to a text I teach, there's a huge satisfaction when you do teach a 16th-17th century wife murder play and it works (not the wife murder, the teaching of the play) and people actually do come to terms with really difficult language. You feel a sense of achievement. Having said that, it doesn't always work with those more challenging texts, and sometimes the ones I enjoy the most are ones such as a play I teach, *Bajarse al moro* (Going down to Morocco), which is about young people in 1980s Madrid and it's great because every year you get different readings on it. It's one of these perpetual stories that young people always interpret in relation to their own experiences, so you get a different response to it every year and that stops it from getting boring.



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Duncan Wheeler, Associate Professor, Spanish Literature

Why do you think the study of literature is integral to the study of Spanish?

I think it's absolutely fundamental because I think if you don't read Spanish, how are you going to be able to write Spanish? Because the two things go together, don't they? A lot of great writers will actually say they're more proud of the books they've read than the books they've written, because it's input-output, isn't it? I think, especially at university, one of the problems we sometimes have, especially when people first arrive, is that they're not that they're not that well equipped to write not only in Spanish in fact, but also in English. So I think the earlier we can get people reading literary, good-quality Spanish prose, dialogue, journalism (and also in English in fact), then the easier the transition to university is going to be if they come here to study an Arts-based subject, not just Spanish.

