

Remarks upon receiving the Roger A. Fortin Award for Outstanding Teaching and Scholarship in the Humanities

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I would like to begin my remarks by recognizing Dr. Roger A. Fortin and his family for establishing this significant honor for humanities professors at Xavier University. I would like to thank my incredible husband and my children for their constant love and support. I remember with gratitude the significant educators in my life: my undergraduate Spanish professor who encouraged me to pursue graduate studies and traveled to deliver my recommendation letter for my application in person, and my thesis advisor and mentor at the University of Pittsburgh who urged me to persist, and to complete my dissertation while caring for two very small children. Many thanks to my research collaborators, particularly Dr. Leah Dunn-you deserve special recognition for our continued, long-standing research collaboration, and to Dr. Jen Gibson with whom I have had the honor of working, along with Leah, on the migration project, 'Fleeing, Waiting and Hoping'. I would like to take this moment to recognize my collaborators in Latin America: Oscar Mora, Carolina Marturet de Paris, Óscar Nájera, and to numerous colleagues at Jesuit Universities in the U.S. and Latin America who have worked with me and supported virtual exchange research projects. Many thanks also to Dr. Francisco Urrutia de la Torre, Secretario Ejecutivo de AUSJAL, and to Susana DiTrolio, his predecessor, for their unwaivering support of virtual exchange projects.

Thank you to colleagues and administrators at Xavier University for the opportunities to develop increasingly more complex interdisciplinary scholarly projects and for the flexibility that permitted me to connect the research projects to the creation of new courses. Thank you for the Wheeler Awards, a Women of Excellence grant and for supporting the Fulbright Hayes grant project.

I would like to express gratitude to my colleagues in the Department of Classics and Modern Languages, John Sniegocki and the Department of Theology and the Department of Occupational Therapy for collaborating on immersion programs for our students, to Jenny Tighe in the Department of Communications and Katie Robiak in the Department of Political Science for their flexibility and willingness to incorporate virtual exchange into their courses, and to colleagues who have worked with me during my years in the Center for Teaching excellence and on community engaged learning courses.

Many thanks to Xavier alumni, my former students and current language educators for your high interest and engagement in the classroom, during experiences abroad and on research

projects. Thank you, Maria and Kendall, for welcoming our current students into your classrooms to assist in the training of future world language teachers.

Finally, and most importantly, thank you to my students for accompanying me on this learning adventure, this journey to discover together the significance of human connections which have led us to examine global issues and perspectives through distinct and varied lenses.

My field is Spanish applied linguistics and methodology of teaching languages. I have worked on a variety of research projects related to the most efficient and effective manner to facilitate second language acquisition in the classroom. Some of my investigations have centered on the strategies students utilize to produce a second language spontaneously and the complexities of the student language learning experience.

I discovered virtual exchange in 2012 through a community of practice comprised of educators at Jesuit universities in the U.S. and Latin America and began incorporating virtual exchange sessions into my courses. Audience members may be asking, "What is virtual exchange?" Virtual exchange is a broad term representing academic online collaborations among learners located in different countries to meet specific course learning outcomes. The collaborations take place synchronously in real time using Zoom, Teams, or in the early years Skype, or other technology applications, and asynchronously, involving interactions on collaborative documents, and an exchange of messages, posts, or recordings. The main distinction that I want to emphasize is that these collaborations can take place utilizing two languages or just one, typically English, as is the case for most COIL collaborations. (COIL is just one type of virtual exchange.) Clearly, given my area of expertise, my emphasis is on the importance of placing languages at the heart of intercultural competence, global citizenship and civic discourse.

Very recently I presented results of my latest collaborative project focused on virtual exchange and global citizenship development at a conference held at the University of Arizona sponsored by the Center for Educational Resources in Culture, Language and Literacy. That Center was a Title VI Language Resource Center that supported research related to language teaching and learning and provided educators with quality resources for teaching as well as professional development for the meaningful integration of culture, literacy, and world language study. The manuscript related to this project has just been accepted for publication. This investigation involved virtual exchanges that were divided into two parts: an immersion in Spanish followed by an immersion in English. Students practiced active listening and strategies to support their peers learning their own language as they shared the cultural realities of their own context. A question posed to me at the end of my presentation by a conference attendee was the following:

Given the multitude of technological applications that can now assist us with translation quickly and easily, would the growth evidenced in your investigation have been the same if the interactions had taken place solely in English?

My answer to this question was an emphatic 'no.' Results of focus groups following a series of five virtual exchange sessions pertaining to themes of global challenges and human rights highlighted the reciprocity of the learning experience, the solidarity that students developed with their international peers, and the compassion they exercised in these third spaces. One student described this by stating, "We were just very gentle with one another." This would not have been the case if the interaction had taken place solely in English. English-only interactions explicitly create power imbalances within the learning experience that become deeper than simple linguistic elements.

The second example that I shared with the conference audience was the following. During one of the focus groups, a student at a Jesuit university in the U.S. shared a transformative moment while interacting with his peer in Ecuador. As he struggled to find the words in Spanish to express what is commonly referred to in our country as 'school shootings,' his partner tried to help him by saying, *¿Quieres decir masacres?* Do you mean to say massacres? The student described this as an eye-opening experience of hearing someone from another country express the concept in Spanish using the term *masacre*. "To hear it stated in that way, it broke my heart. Kind of just like realizing, kind of fully, how tragic that is, just even objectively."

The Jesuit Superior General Adolfo Nicolás introduced the concept of "globalization of superficiality," referring to a decline of deep, critical thinking, reflection, and meaningful engagement with one another, particularly in an age of increased consumerism and information available at our fingertips (2010). The social lens of language learning provides opportunities for students to develop agency. It empowers them to meaningfully engage with others beyond a superficial level, to discuss global challenges, to imagine their own role while exploring possible solutions, and to participate in global discourses that can be life changing.

Due to virtual exchange experiences, I have come to value the depth of the significance of human connections. The vulnerability with which I show up in the classroom as a first-generation college graduate from West Virginia, a person with a difficult-to-pronounce last name closely tied to my identity; that vulnerability is real and persists. Yet my goal is to acknowledge that students also show up in my classroom with their own vulnerabilities. This has led me to recognize the importance of forming a community as we learn and grow together. The human connections that we create matter as we explore perspectives in the classroom, as well as when we exchange perspectives and realities with peers in Latin America in our virtual 'third space'. Meaningful language interactions that push students beyond their comfort zone, ranging from international virtual interactions and immersion in Latin America to local

community-engaged courses in Cincinnati are transformative components of a Jesuit education. These experiences foster linguistic proficiency while deepening students' commitment to social justice, compassion, and solidarity.

The human connection matters in my scholarship. Co-authors come from various backgrounds and cultures necessitating skills to interact effectively with individuals in distinct contexts. The human story has been shared with me during multiple research projects, and I have learned that working for justice involves sitting in uncomfortable spaces, listening intently and honoring those who have chosen to share their stories with me. Some have told me that voicing stories aloud is a way of processing challenging realities. Families on the move and caregivers in full-time government managed facilities for children with disabilities in Guatemala have told me some of the most challenging and traumatic stories. Students and educators have told stories of resistance, commitment to justice, and unique moments of transformative learning, in the classroom, during an immersion experience and while interacting online.

Placing languages at the heart of the human connection leads to hope. This hope is like the image of the sunsets that the mother of a family on the move told me that she views together with her husband, daughter and son each evening from the rooftop of a borrowed dwelling in Nogales, Mexico. I will never see another sunset again without thinking of them and other families struggling to find a safe place to call home. For me this hope is the support that strangers offer to one another, even in the direst of situations. Hope is also witnessing students support one another with compassion, as they share their visions for a just and more sustainable future. Hope for me is this quote from a student at ITESO, the Jesuit university in Guadalajara, Mexico: "Learning a language is an act of peace."

Thank you very much for selecting me as the 2026 recipient of the Roger A. Fortin Award for Outstanding Teaching and Scholarship in the Humanities. I am humbled and incredibly moved to share this moment with you.

Work Cited

Adolfo Nicolas, SJ. (26 September 2010). *Globalization of Superficiality: The Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today*. Address to Jesuits and their collaborators in Flanders, Heverlee (Belgium).