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The Spanish Lady: Begun on a dare, Professor Barbara Nelson's language Web site has attracted a worldwide following

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The Spanish Lady
Every week Barbara Kuczun Nelson ’68, associate professor of Spanish, receives thank-you notes from her students.

Lots of thank-you notes.

Over the past 10 years, thousands of e-mails have arrived from grateful students in more than 285 countries and territories—even the Vatican.

These aren’t Colby’s international students, though Nelson has taught many of them over the years. These are the students she reaches through her popular Spanish language-instruction Web site, *spanish.language & culture with Barbara Kuczun Nelson*.

Just how popular is it? Consider *los numeros*.

• Of the 18.5 million pages viewed on Colby’s server in the fall semester of 2008, 4.9 million were views of Nelson’s site.
• Of the 26 percent of Colby’s Web traffic generated by Nelson’s site, less than 1 percent comes from within the Colby network.
• Of the 28 countries and territories that haven’t yet discovered Nelson’s site, eight don’t have access to the Internet. Give them time.

The wizard behind the curtain is fair-skinned, with short bobbed hair, glasses, and a wide smile. But don’t let her unassuming demeanor fool you. Nelson is hard-working and dedicated enough to serve both her Colby students and her global audience. And she does so from the place where she first discovered her passion for Spanish and without trying to make a penny from the site.

When Nelson decided to teach at Colby, in 1978, it was a return to her old stomping grounds, where she majored in Spanish as a member of the Class of 1968. In her junior year she studied in Madrid to become fluent. As a senior she started a Spanish program at Lawrence High School in Fairfield, next to Waterville.

After earning a master’s degree in Spanish literature at Middlebury in 1971, Nelson returned to Maine and taught Spanish at Lawrence High School for several years, leading school trips to Mexico and Spain. “Wonderful kids,” she remembers. But when she learned of an opening at Colby, Nelson immediately applied. Henry Holland, then chair of the Spanish Department, offered her the position without an interview.

Almost 20 years into Nelson’s teaching career, the opportunity to apply for an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant for developing technologies presented itself. Knowing Nelson’s teaching style, and thinking that Nelson could benefit from creating a Web site, Jackie Tanner, a friend and Colby colleague (now retired), dared Nelson to apply. When Nelson expressed reluctance, Tanner applied for her.

To her surprise, Nelson won the grant. “It was serendipitous,” Nelson said. “I had absolutely no interest in making a Web site. None. But I got hooked, and I loved doing it.”

When Nelson began designing her site, she had no knowledge of HTML (the markup language that is the foundation of most Web pages) or the principles of Web design. Embarrassed as she recalled her pilot version of the site, Nelson admitted, “It was a slow learning curve.”
Keith McGlaflin, Colby’s Web technology specialist who monitors Web statistics, praised Nelson’s adaptability and willingness to learn new technologies as a means of advancing the sophistication of her Web site. “That she has taken on learning HTML, Javascript, audio and video, and now Web application technologies like PHP [a scripting language] shows her passion not only for technology but also for teaching,” McGlaflin said. “Her dedication to keeping the site fresh and interactive by learning new technologies is what makes her site so popular.”

McGlaflin’s got that right.

Since her early days struggling with HTML, Nelson has become a do-it-yourself Web guru. “I went to classes that were offered here, but there weren’t many of them then. I was a manual freak—I read everything I could get my hands on. And I experimented,” Nelson explained. She also credits McGlaflin for his encouragement as a Web design teacher.

Originally Nelson’s site was a private project supplementing the workbook in her class curriculum. Eventually, though, her friends and colleagues who knew about the site wanted to check it out. Word trickled out and the trickle soon turned to a torrent. Seven years and 285 countries later, it’s safe to say that Spanish language and culture has “gone public.”

In its current state, the site is exactly what Nelson sought to create—an accessible, interactive gateway into the world of the Spanish language and of Spanish-speaking cultures. Unlike most other Spanish grammar Web sites, Nelson’s offers grammar lessons within the context of a larger cultural lesson. Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies Gary Aitken, at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, said in an e-mail, “Barbara has designed her material in a way that encourages students to engage in enjoyable and meaningful activities that expose them to not only the words and structures of Spanish but also the sights and sounds that bring the language to life.”

What inspired Nelson’s commitment to cultural exchange?

Ecuador.

Having traveled to Spain as an undergrad, Nelson admits she had never been especially drawn to Latin America. But upon her first visit to Ecuador, in 2002, she became fascinated by the culture and the people.

Every Jan Plan since 2004, Nelson has taught Colby students Intermediate Spanish I at the Andean Center for Latin American Studies in Quito. The course promises “a continued emphasis on interactive communication and cultural awareness,” she said.

Nelson created her Jan Plan class after she was struck by the lack of cultural exchange embedded in her curriculum. “My passion is that I want to give my students authentic experiences. To do that you need materials, and you need to actually go there and bring Third World culture back to them,” she said.

All nine of Nelson’s study modules except the basic grammar exercises (see sidebar) begin with audio or visual clips that introduce a cultural lesson. For example, her lesson about the festival of San Fermin in Pamplona, Spain, is told in story form, and it allows students to practice the preterite and imperfect tenses. The module also begins with a song.

In Ojalá que llueva café (If only it would rain coffee), her study module about the hope for prosperity in the Dominican Republic, the final exercise asks students to practice the present subjunctive as they describe the world’s most pressing problems and their hopes for the future.

Gracias, Barbara Nelson

“I am housebound and have just begun to teach myself Spanish. … Because I am elderly I need loads and loads of practice as I teach myself each new piece of grammar. … You seem to be just about the only person on the planet who can (or can be bothered to) use the great potential of the computer/internet technology for foreign language teaching. The exercises are so clever, imaginative and of a really high presentation quality. It’s great to see such attention to detail without becoming humourless. The project obviously takes a great deal of time as well as skill in order to achieve these kinds of standards.”

Sandy from England

“I am a middle school Spanish teacher, and I must say that I freaked out a little recently when it looked as though your Colby site was to be discontinued. I so love the site, and have used it to drill and challenge my students for several years now, since I discovered it. I am relieved to see that you will continue it—THANK YOU! THANK YOU! I’m sure you hear from only a fraction of the teachers that use your site – I hope to be able to share with you some materials of my own someday.”

Gretchen from Massachusetts, USA

“I love this resource. Thank you for sharing it with so many people. It is a tribute to your work, innovative spirit and generosity. I only wish I were close by so I could take an in-person class from you. I share your site with anyone I meet learning Spanish and they are grateful.”

Toni from the USA

“Thanks for the wonderfully creative study modules you have posted and made available on the web. I am a lecturer at two universities … and in these days where I see more and more ‘territorialism’ and egos abound, at least within some departments, I am hopeful when I stumble upon a site like yours. Kudos.”

Sarah from North Carolina, USA

“… There are days I curse technology and all of its depersonalization of our world. And then there are days when I see all the wonderful things that can be done (and with such artistic taste in your site!), and then I see the great benefits of computers.”

Molly from Minnesota, USA

“... I came across your website while searching for Spanish grammar tests, and among the ones I have visited yours is the best one! As a web designer I think not only the rich content but also the elegant design of your site is worth congratulating.”

Ozan from Turkey

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Professor Barbara Nelson has tapped her experiences in Ecuador, where she teaches Jan Plan each year, to create authentic material for her popular Spanish language-instruction Web site. Above left, Nelson shows Ecuadoran children a video of themselves. At right, she poses for a snapshot with a friend.

The cultural points in Nelson’s study modules aren’t random. They share an underlying focus on humanitarian issues such as street children, the future of the Earth, rural agriculture, and oppression.

By the time students have completed a module, they’ve improved their grammar skills, but they are also more knowledgeable about one issue or concern that affects the everyday lives of fellow Spanish-speakers.

Nelson’s exercises also offer students immediate feedback and unlimited attempts to get the correct answer. “They self-correct, and a lot of them are very creative,” said Nelson. “By the time you get to the end, you’re creating things yourself. It’s not just forms.”

Seven years after the site went public, Nelson still logs about 10 hours per week updating and improving it, on top of teaching classes—and it used to take more time. “In the beginning I was practically living here in my office at Colby. I spent every spare second on my site,” Nelson said. She has poured countless hours into making the site dynamic and interactive, and that’s something she feels she can’t put a price tag on.

Nelson’s newest module, Ofrendas (Offerings), also includes a teacher’s guide, which informs teachers about how to use her material effectively in their classroom.

On a few occasions, others have tried to replicate Nelson’s site and pass it off as their own or to copy the site and charge for the program. Nelson’s students or colleagues report the interlopers, and these copy-cats have always taken their sites down at her request, Nelson said. Her fan base remains loyal.

But the site is not only rewarding for its users. “My own students have been my most enthusiastic fans and also my most valuable critics. Especially in the beginning we experimented together to find the most effective ways to get real interactivity on the site,” Nelson recalled. Inasmuch as Nelson listens to their feedback, her students around the world have had the opportunity to teach their teacher, but often, students—from 18-year-old first-years to retirees—get in touch simply to say, “thanks.”

“I am first year at St. Andrews in the UK and I just wanted to thank you for saving my life,” Chris, one Web site user, wrote to Nelson. “I am pretty sure I would have failed my exam if it weren’t for this site. … Sorry if this email seems to you a bit creepy, I wanted to express my gratitude.”

To see Nelson’s site, visit www.colby.edu/~bknelson/SLC/.

In 2002 the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) awarded Ojalá que llueva café the MERLOT Editors’ Choice Award for “best online teaching in all disciplines.”

Smiling, Nelson admitted that she’s pretty well known at technology-based language learning conventions. Aitken, Nelson’s counterpart at Trent, refers many students to her site. “In my mind, it is the absolute best one that I have seen for individual practice and development,” he said.

And, unlike many other online language programs, it’s absolutely free. With so much potential for profit, why hasn’t she sold the site?

Because it’s her passion.

“I honestly haven’t considered that yet, even though a lot of people think I should,” Nelson said. After reflecting for a moment, she added, “I may. But then I receive all of these letters. Those people are really grateful. They really appreciate having a quality program that they can access for free. That has to touch you somewhere.”

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