

**Connections as Catalysts or You Are What You Read:
Teaching and Learning about Literature**

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Redes literarias: antología del texto literario en su contexto sociohistórico (2018) was born at the intersection of social justice, canon disruption, pedagogical shifts, and 21st-century-student needs. Full disclosure: Yes, we are the authors/co-editors/co-compilers of the textbook in question, but no, we have zero promotional intentions. Rather, we refer to *Redes* and the strategies therein to promote student success. Ultimately, *Redes* is a student-driven, student-minded textbook that strives to address student-adjacent issues within and beyond the text itself, including readership and engagement: we were intentional about the inclusion of more indigenous authors/themes and voices of women, while connection making within and across time periods is prominent and deliberate.

Research shows that deep learning happens through connection making, which is exemplified in the textbook's title. As Jane E. Meléndez and Robert H. Pritchard assert, "background knowledge readers bring to the reading act is as important as the information residing in the text" (399). After decades of adopting (and adapting) the same textbook, we saw room for and were eager to initiate change when it came to the filling (and retaining) of our

students' knowledge reserves. In a moment, we will talk more specifically about how the readings were chosen with this fundamental idea in mind. We also argue that this strategy pays off not only at the end of each unit (when students demonstrate knowledge of course material), but also at the end of the term in a way that positions students to be better critical thinkers; to be able to transfer knowledge across subject matters more easily (and, as a result, more enjoyably); and to become lifelong learners.

In addition, while we loved what has come to be known as the standard for introduction to literary analysis courses, as well as that standard's primary author, we nevertheless began to question the genre approach. We asked ourselves, "What happens when we sacrifice chronology, history, and, to a degree, culture?" What we found was that while students did understand the difference between a short story and a poem at the end of the semester, and they were able to apply the terminology necessary for literary analysis, by the next course they lacked a solid grasp of literature in motion and how literary movements frequently grappled with each other, often in dynamic and fascinating ways. Why not capitalize on that opportunity? We likewise found ourselves increasingly supplementing that textbook with our own readings, questionnaires, and activities, which was the catalyst for the prospectus. *Redes*, then, in myriad ways, simply formalizes and organizes those materials in a way that pedagogically speaks to us.

Service, broadly speaking, at our respective academic institutions helped us conceptualize *Redes* as an outgrowth of our commitment to student success and enrichment. I, Bonnie Gasior, am a Professor of Spanish at California State University, Long Beach, a large, public, urban university with an enrollment approaching 40,000. It forms part of a 23-campus system, the largest in the country, with nearly a half a million students matriculated in any given year. Designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, (>44% of students are Latinx), it ranks in the top

20% of all schools for diversity.¹ CSULB also consistently ranks as a top regional institution in the West (#12 in 2022 by *U.S News*) and has recently been touted for its upward economic and social mobility index (#3 nationally by CollegeNet). Recent census data reveals the following: 51% are Pell-eligible, and 55% (of freshman) are first-generation, defined here as students who are first in their family to go to and complete college, as well as those whose parents attended but did not graduate.² A few years ago, I recognized that “Hispanic serving” is not the same as “Hispanic enrolling” and *Redes* represents a way to ensure we are, in fact, *servicing* that population through the voices, countries, races and genders the texts represent.

I, Mindy Badía, am a Professor of Spanish and International Studies at Indiana University Southeast (IUS), a small regional campus that is part of the Indiana University system. IUS is a 4-year, comprehensive institution dedicated primarily to undergraduate instruction. It is a teaching and service-intensive, a student-centered campus located in New Albany, Indiana. It serves a mostly rural population, drawing students from surrounding counties in southern Indiana and northern Kentucky. According to recent census data, nearly 31% of IUS students are the first in their families to attend college, 32% are of non-traditional age, approximately 17% are minorities, and roughly 39% are Pell Grant recipients. Service to the student body at an institution like IUS enhanced my sensitivity to the myriad barriers that can undermine student success, contributing to the pedagogical basis for a new Hispanic literature anthology that would reflect changes in the profession and its approach to literary survey courses in terms of both

¹ We recognize and appreciate the debate between the descriptors “Hispanic”, “Latino/a,” and “Latinx.” After much consideration and consultation with experts—many thanks to Dr. Maria Carreira, for her insight—we choose to use both “Latinx” (in the spirit of showing solidarity with non-binary identity politics) as well as “Latino/a,” which recent national surveys show students prefer. We likewise maintain the use of “Hispanic” when referring to literature.

² We are grateful to Dr. Beth Manke, who graciously ran this report for me on April 7, 2022 on CSULB’s Student Success Dashboard (SSD) 2.0.

content and course delivery, would provide high-quality materials, and would encompass a diverse range of voices that make up the literary production of the Spanish-speaking world.

Indeed, as Hispanists, we both were frustrated by the dearth of anthologies that examine the literary production of the Spanish-speaking world as a dialogue or exchange between Spain and the Americas. Despite recent trends in scholarship that seek a transatlantic understating of Spanish-language letters, and the fact that many of us are employed in positions in which a knowledge of the cultural production from both sides of the Atlantic is essential, most textbooks maintain the rigid distinction between Peninsular (European) and Latin American literature. We chose a chronological organization for *Redes*, with each of the four units corresponding to a different historical period (Medieval/Pre-Columbian, Renaissance and Baroque/Colonial, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, and Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries). This format fosters discussion that is both synchronic (focused on texts from Spain and Latin America that were produced at about the same time) and diachronic (attuned to the evolution of these texts over time).

The literary selections in *Redes* also consider the growing number of heritage speakers of Spanish enrolled in university language, literature, and culture courses. Although some institutions have boasted a sizable Latinx student population for decades, others are experiencing a recent increase in students who identify as such. In both contexts, the selections in *Redes* reflect the fact that Spanish is the most common non-English language spoken in US households, and that many of these Spanish-speakers find their way into our classrooms. While rates of Latino/a/x college attainment have improved in many states over the last twenty years, they remain below those of white students. Representation enhances the likelihood that these improvements in post-secondary education gains continue, as students who see themselves in the materials that they study are more likely to appreciate their relevance. Given that approximately

20% of all undergraduate college students identify as Latinx or Hispanic, reading stories about characters that resonate with them provides role models and encourages goal setting.³

Selections from Juan Felipe Herrera's "187 Reasons Mexicanos Can't Cross the Border" and Edmundo Paz Soldán's "Lazos de familia" ("Family Ties") resonate with most students, but they are particularly poignant for those who see their own experiences reflected in the words of these authors.⁴ In student feedback from the Fall 2020 semester, the first in which one of us used *Redes*, approximately 60% rated Herrera's work as their favorite, and comments highlighted that the immigration issues that the poem raises as among the most thought-provoking topics of the course. In Fall 2022, one student in a California classroom shared her thoughts: "Este poema ayudó a confirmar mis raíces mexicanas y las luchas migratorias de los latinos en general" ("This poem validated my Mexican roots and migratory struggles in general"). Indeed, a complex text like Herrera's presents students with anti-immigration rhetoric that Anglos may have heard espoused within communities to which they belong (family, friends, church, etc.), only to subvert it with cutting irony. Thus, Anglo and Latinx students alike learn to identify and counter the racist subtext of programs like Proposition 187 or, more recently, former president Trump's executive order "Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements."

While students are often drawn to selections by Latino/a/x and Latin American authors because of their proximity—which they often read as relevance—*Redes* encourages them to forge connections that are not so apparent. "Redes analíticas" (Analytical Networks) questions that appear at the end of each unit are designed to facilitate review of previously studied material and to enhance students' critical thinking skills by asking them to make thematic connections

³ See Bauman; Krogstad and Noe-Bustamante; and Rachel Dinkes.

⁴ As we wrote this paragraph, we ruminated on the challenges involved, which we admit had more to do with securing permissions and editorial stalemates than classroom issues (thank you, Juan Felipe and Edmundo, for being two exceptions!). Other than that, we highly recommend the experience but suggest proceeding with someone you know, trust, like, and respect. We're happy to report that nearly four years later, the book as a teaching tool has yet to hit a speed bump.

between texts over time. Consider the following prompt: "Da algunos ejemplos de escritores españoles, latinoamericanos y latinos (hispanos viviendo en EEUU) que emplean la literatura como herramienta sociopolítica. ¿A qué situaciones históricas concretas responden?" (Give examples of Spanish, Latin American, and Latino/a/x authors who use literature as a socio-political tool. To what concrete historical situations do they respond?). This question asks students to reflect on similarities and differences between texts as chronologically and culturally diverse as *El cantar de Mío Cid* (*The song of the Cid*, anonymous, Spain, c. 1195); *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (*Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, Bartolomé de las Casas, 1554); "A Roosevelt" ("To Roosevelt," Rubén Darío, Nicaragua, 1904); *Bodas de sangre* (*Blood Wedding*, Federico García Lorca, Spain, 1933); "Ay, ay, ay de la grifa negra" ("The lamentations of the Kinky-Haired Girl," Julia de Burgos, Puerto Rico, 1938); and, of course, Herrera's contemporary "187 Reasons."

March of 2020 initiated a period of reflection and reimagining for most academics, as we scrambled to meet student needs amidst a pandemic that disrupted our carefully crafted classroom plans. Although Covid certainly brought about challenges, it also pushed us to explore alternative methods of course delivery and new ways of connecting with our students. The publication of *Redes* shortly before the pandemic, coupled with the urgent need to offer high-quality online instruction due to the cessation of face-to-face classes at many universities, turned out to be a happy coincidence for us since, from its inception, *Redes* was envisioned as a textbook that, in both its print and electronic versions, would appeal to technology-savvy students.

For example, each literary selection includes a section titled "Imágenes en contexto" ("Images in Context"), where students consult a visual image (a painting, video, advertisement, etc.) that relates thematically to the text and then reflect on a series of questions designed to

forge additional connections between artists, time periods, and various forms of media. One of the hurdles we faced when creating these sections was the expense of acquiring permissions to reproduce the images. We solved this problem by simply letting students do what they do anyway (use the internet to find resources to complete coursework) but gave specific instructions to ensure that they found the images we had selected.⁵ As an extension, students could then progress from this highly guided level of internet research to selecting their own images and writing questions to develop student-driven "Imágenes en contexto."

While the previous example highlights the usefulness of technology, such benefits are mediated by the challenges of fostering meaningful connections in an asynchronous online course. Weekly Learning Management System discussion posts in which students respond to a prompt (and to each other's responses) is one method of ensuring regular student-instructor and student-student engagement. This activity allows students to interact informally in the target language without any high-stakes grammar grading; the goal is to contribute meaningfully and thoughtfully to the conversation. A favorite discussion activity was the following, which is based on a selection of stories by Spanish/Catalan author Joan (Juan) de Timoneda (16th century):

"Escribe tu propio cuento corto (microcuento) al estilo de Timoneda. Lo que escribes tiene que demostrar creatividad y una buena comprensión de los cuentos de Timoneda. Para hacer esto, tu cuento necesita tener por lo menos TRES de las mismas características que tienen los de Timoneda (aunque, por supuesto, no puede ser una copia). Además de compartir tu cuento, es necesario indicar explícitamente cuáles son estas tres características. Recuerda que también tienes que leer los cuentos de tus compañero/as de clase y hacer por lo menos tres comentarios."

("Write your own micro-story in the style of Timoneda. What you write must demonstrate creativity and that you have understood Timoneda's stories. To do this, your story must include at

⁵ Joni Larson writes in favor of technology in the classroom, citing that students will continue to exist and operate in a digital world and therefore, we, as instructors, should embrace rather than resist that reality (231).

least three of the characteristics found in Timoneda's work (without copying it, of course). In addition to sharing your story, please indicate explicitly which three characteristics of Timoneda's style it illustrates. Remember to also read your classmates' stories and make at least three comments." Students found this exercise challenging but fun, and it served its primary purpose (engagement): it was the only discussion that had 100% participation (students could drop 2 missing/low discussion post grades), and they requested we do it again for a different literary selection.

In sum, as co-producers of *Redes*, our teaching was impacted by design and by default: we wrote not with a/n (outdated) canon in mind nor by prioritizing the (now less relevant) conventions of literary analysis, but rather with a nod to diversity, inclusion, and student-forwardness. Not only did we think of students every step of the way, but we also put our fifty-ish-year-old selves in their shoes with the inclusion of each text, the creation of each homework assignment, and the design of each weighty assessment. If, as some claim, literature is the mirror of life, we confirm that students are receptive to what they see: the relationships they may have otherwise overlooked when studying literature in a way that spotlights their own personal experiences, identities, and reflections.⁶

⁶ Toward the end of the semester, one student, who was taking another literature class concurrently that term, remained in the Zoom room one day with a confession: that she was resourcing our textbook to avoid being “completamente perdida” (completely lost) in that other class (where they were studying the same literary movement). While I sympathized with her struggles, her comment allowed me to reflect with pride on Mindy’s and my process with *Redes*.

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