



Nancy Blain, PhD.

Assistant Professor of Spanish — McNeese State Univ. & Univ. of S. Florida

Increasing Student Engagement in Introductory and Intermediate Spanish

Nancy Blain has been teaching introductory, intermediate, and advanced Spanish and French courses for over 30 years. She earned her PhD. in Spanish at Florida State University and has been on the faculty at McNeese State University in Louisiana for the past eight years. Nancy also teaches online classes as an adjunct at the University of South Florida. As enrollment in online Spanish courses steadily increases, Nancy's credentials and online experience make her the natural choice for taking on additional sections. Needless to say, she is never idle!

Nancy has been using iLrn and *¿Cómo se dice...?* from Cengage Learning since 2004 in conjunction with her Introductory and Intermediate Spanish courses, starting with campus-based sections. When she started offering online and blended courses in 2008 at USF and McNeese, iLrn helped her create an engaging online environment for her students. She likes the fact that learners can find all of the resources that they need to gain a better understanding of the material — including the audio and video components — all in one place. Since incorporating iLrn into her classes, Nancy has noticed improvements in both grades and confidence. Students are able to find most of the answers, explanations, and assistance that they need within the online iLrn environment. “iLrn fosters independence. It has enabled me to meet the demand for additional online sections, without getting bogged down in email.”

COURSE STRUCTURE AND PARTICIPANTS

Most of Nancy's classes used to be based on campus, but both of her schools started moving the first and second-year Spanish courses to an online format about four years ago, first at USF in 2008 and later at McNeese in 2009. At first, she did not believe that the administrators at her schools would be open to online courses; now it is an initiative that is driven by the very top level of the administrative hierarchy. In fact, the first four semesters of Spanish are now available at McNeese entirely online. For sections that include a classroom component, she uses a blended model, including the literature class for which she posts the entire set of lecture notes online. She has found that the current in-person format is still the best option for upper-level conversation classes, due to the high level of interactivity that is required.

Nancy's student body is fairly diverse in terms of Spanish-language experience and reasons for taking the courses. Learners who studied Spanish in high school may still be required to take all four of the intro and intermediate Spanish courses in order to fulfill their degree requirements. They view the courses as opportunities to review the material and they prefer the relative independence of the online format to that of a classroom. Other students, particularly those at the Center for Adult Learning in Louisiana (CALL) on the

CHALLENGES

- **Students at different levels** in terms of Spanish language skills; need to provide environment for those with Spanish experience to move along quickly.
- **Low confidence in ability to learn new language:** Learners may feel self-conscious about speaking words aloud and initiating conversation in Spanish; they need constant feedback.
- **Adult learners in the Center for Adult Learning in Louisiana (CALL) program need to move ahead quickly** because their courses are condensed and Spanish is a required job skill for many of them.

SOLUTIONS

- Ana C. Jarvis, Raquel Lebrede & Francisco Mena-Ayllón: **¿Cómo se dice...?; iLrn**
- Mary Gill McVey, Brenda Wegmann & Teresa Méndez-Faith: **En contacto: Gramática en acción; iLrn**

RESULTS

- **iLrn provides a self-paced environment**, making it possible for students who have studied Spanish in the past to move through the material quickly and to enable in-depth practice for students taking Spanish for the first time.
- **Participants can utilize the Voiceboard** and other iLrn features to practice and to prepare for oral assessments.
- **The interactive enrichment and assessment** features of iLrn make it possible for learners to obtain feedback and explanations online, so they can complete assignments at any hour of the night or day.

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McNeese University campus, take condensed eight-week classes for enrichment or because it is a job requirement. For example, many dispatchers in Louisiana speak both English and French, but they may need Spanish language skills in order to communicate with the populations that they serve. Nancy has taught as many as seven online sections, with a typical enrollment of 25 students per section.

THE CHALLENGES

One of Nancy’s biggest challenges is in addressing the needs of students who are at various levels in terms of their Spanish language knowledge. Those who studied Spanish in high school want to move through the material as quickly as possible and to review the material on their own. Class members who have never taken Spanish need to spend a lot more time learning the alphabet, vocabulary, and pronunciations. They may also lack the initial confidence to speak in front of their more experienced classmates.

THE RESULTS

The online format of the courses and the wealth of online resources make it possible for Nancy to meet the needs of all of the class participants more easily. Pronunciations of the vocabulary words is available in context within the eBook, the grammar videos provide answers to many typical questions, and the voice recording feature makes it possible for students to practice Spanish conversation in privacy and receive feedback, before doing so in front of their fellow students. In fact, one iLrn user recently told Nancy that the iLrn experience often feels like a personal tutoring session, “as if you are tutoring me.”

Nancy observed that “grades shot right up” when she switched to iLrn, and then again when students started using the enrichment exercises in the Más Práctica section. Today, Nancy spends less time sending documents and answering questions via email than she did in the past. The auto-submit and auto-grading functionality in iLrn saves her time, enabling her to spend more time on the oral components of the course and providing individualized attention to those who need it. “I tell my students that iLrn is an amazing tool with amazing things in it!”

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