

Creating a Comfortable, Empowered Culture with Middle Schoolers

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My goal as an educator has always been to create a safe, comfortable space for students to learn. Especially in the past few years, it has felt imperative. I teach hormonal, social ranking obsessed, awkward middle school students who don't want to be anywhere. So creating a space where they feel comfortable, heard, and empowered often feels like a daunting task.

I started this fellowship with no prior knowledge of Cultures of Thinking. One of the coaches at my school approached me with a learning opportunity about fostering thinking in classrooms and I said, "The school is going to let me go to Santa Fe once a month during the school week? Sign me up!" What I did not know was that this was going to be one of the most useful professional developments of my career to this point. I have a million meetings a year in which people tell me to implement strategies and I have a hard time connecting them with Spanish. Yes, I love Socratic Seminars and Philosopher's Chairs, but those kinds of strategies are not going to be used in my class in a way that makes sense on the regular. The 8 forces in this Cultures of Thinking philosophy are much easier for me to jive with.

My first semester in this fellowship, I was focusing on the Language of Thinking. Specifically, I was interested in the language of praise. Because I did not have a lot of schema about these elements, I wanted to pick something that I had a lot of control over. I spent a lot of mental energy this year thinking about what language I use to praise children. Often, we hear or say things like "Good job" and "Excellent work". As educators, we love to praise, but these phrases have become hollow to me.

A place in which I am doing a lot of personal learning currently is in the gym and, thus, I am reminded of two coaches at the Crossfit gym that I go to. One is always saying things like "You're doing great" and "Keep pushing" but to no one in particular as they walk around the class. The other gives me specific feedback as I am working out like "You're doing a great job at keeping your elbows in" and "I love that you are pushing yourself to do a box jump instead of step ups." One of these coaches makes me feel like they are invested in me; I attend their classes because they have created a comfortable and empowering place for me to work out. For me, this is a perfect example of the giant effect a small shift by an instructor can have on a learner.

In my classes, I am trying to be very specific about what I say. When a student answers a question right, my goal is to comment on the process of their language learning; for example, "I'm so glad you remembered that we put the adjective after the noun." I want them to know that the process is valued as much as the product. I'm including more "I'm proud of you for..." and

“I love that you...” I don’t know that I have any hard evidence that this is making any difference aside from I like it and it’s what I would want to hear.

When tasked with picking a focus for the second half of the school year, I decided to concentrate on the ninth principle: powerful learning both engages and empowers. I wanted to focus on this principle because I want my kids to want to be in my class. If they feel empowered and engaged, they want to be there and chances are that they will learn.

One step I am taking is that I am rethinking how I structure units. Most of my personal Spanish language learning has involved receiving vocabulary lists, memorizing vocabulary, and taking a test on the definitions of said vocabulary. I am grappling with how to make more meaningful, realistic units than what I was exposed to.

I have started experimenting with, instead of giving students vocabulary lists to memorize, focusing on the grammar piece that they need to learn. I attempted this with a unit on adjective and noun agreement. In order to do this, students compiled their own lists of clothing items that they wanted to learn and colors they wanted to learn. I gave them “Llevo un/una _____ .” for a sentence frame. Students were required to do some real-world digging in WordReference to figure out which words they needed. This dictionary tool has a great deal of information that students have to sift through to find the word they actually want. Do they need the adjective? The noun? Which noun? All questions language learners have to sift through when trying to communicate in real life. For their summative project, they recorded a Outfit of the Day (a popular trend on TikTok.) on Flipgrid. I have been fighting with students for years to get them to understand noun and adjective agreement, and this year I was so pleasantly surprised. Part of the reason I think they understood this concept was because I was not focused on the vocabulary. Most of my instruction and mini-lessons were on the grammar because there was no way to have full class discussion about the vocabulary. But they also learned their vocabulary! They chose their words; they were responsible for proving to me that they learned them. Examples of their OOTD’s can be found [here](#) and [here](#). While they are not perfect, they are certainly way closer to what I was doing at their age.

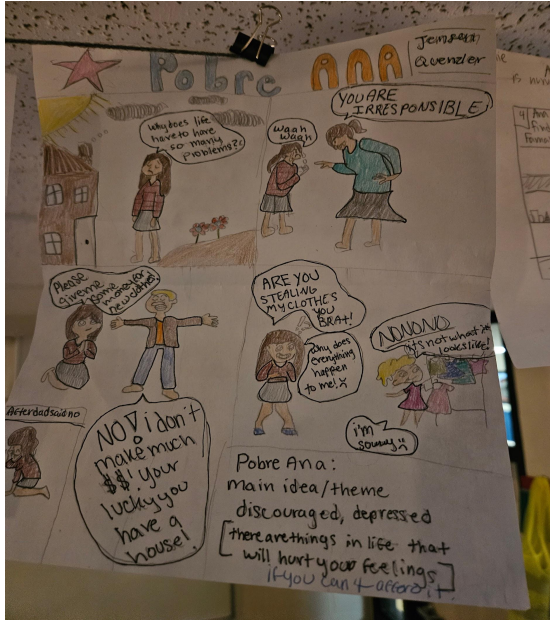
Another piece I have incorporated into our book unit is a grade/project planning element and some more choice options. In this unit, students are reading a book in Spanish and their task is to prove to me that they read and understood what happened in each chapter. At the beginning of the unit, I am now having my students plan for the grade that want to earn and the miniprojects they choose. Examples of projects some student chose to do can be found below.

Going forward, I would like to continue creating opportunities to foster thinking in my classroom. I will continue to change my units to engage and empower students. I saw some amazing changes from previous years. I feel like my students are understanding and not just

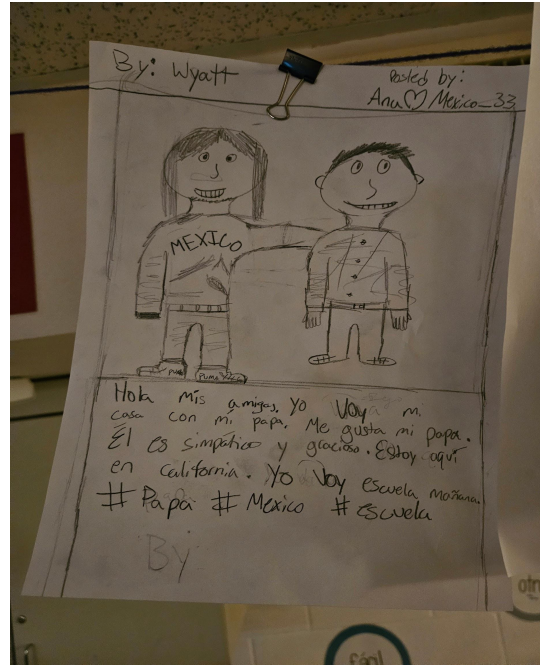
memorizing. I would like to look at a new force for next year so that I can continue working on making my Spanish-Classroom a Thinking-Spanish-Classroom. This year as a Cultures of Thinking Fellow has truly helped me in my ever continuing goal to create a comfortable, and empowering classroom where students feel heard.

Book unit project examples:

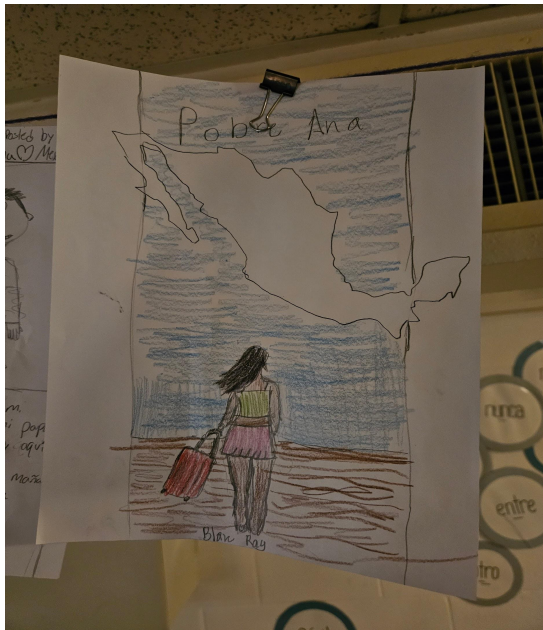
Comic Strip



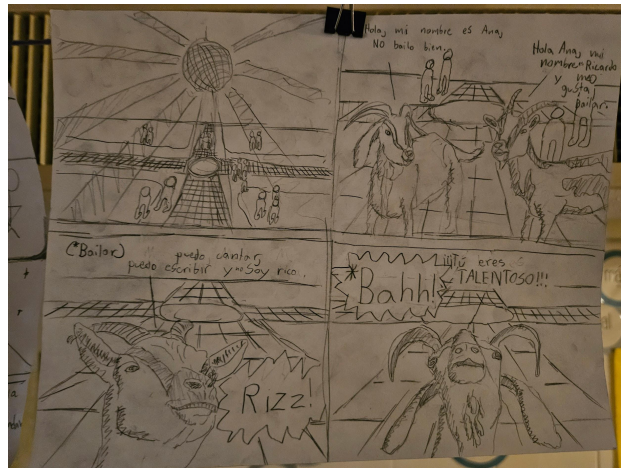
Instagram Post by the main character



Book Cover Reimagining



Comic Strip- but the characters are goats



Click [here](#) for a video of a reenacting of a chapter.
