Open Educational Resources for Spanish as a Heritage Language: An Interview with Founders and Directors of the Texas Coalition for Heritage Spanish, Flavia Belpoliti and Jocelly Meiners

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Abstract: Open educational resources serve to create a reservoir of knowledge that is openly accessible to the public without cost. In recent years, language educators have sought to utilize OER to find and share materials within the instructor community. Specifically, within the heritage language community, OER offer a method to share and use materials that benefit heritage language learners. Because of the heterogeneity of the heritage language learner population, sharing materials eases the burden of instructor preparation of unique materials for each class. Flavia Belpoliti and Jocelly Meiners created the Texas Coalition for Heritage Spanish as a free, accessible reservoir for materials for Spanish as a heritage language instruction as well as a hub to foster community connection and professional development among all Spanish as a heritage language instructor. This interview reveals how the Texas Coalition for Heritage Spanish began, gaps in the heritage language instructional field, and where OER for heritage language education is headed.

Keywords: Open educational resources, heritage language pedagogy, Spanish as a heritage language.

Introduction

Open Educational Resources (OER) in the context of this interview refer to learning materials that are openly accessible and used in education. Research on OER categorization and implementation has drastically increased as widespread technological advances made viewing, sharing, and accessing information feasible (Wiley et al., 2014, p. 781; Wiley & Green, 2012, p. 82). Though many iterations of the terms 'open', 'educational', and 'resources' have existed over time, resources typically defined as OER are available to study, use, distribute, improve, and alter as the user desires (Wiley et al., 2014, p. 782; Wiley and Green, 2012, p. 81).

OER are unique in the idea that material is created with the intention to distribute those resources without cost. There are central issues in OER development and dissemination that have slowed the process of instructional implementation (Wiley et al., 2014, p. 785) such as funding a resource that users do not pay to use or finding an online space to host the information even though students show interest in using OER (Reinken and Kalinovich, 2022, p. 28). OER implementation in the higher education context positively affects student learning (Colvard et al., 2018, p. 272) and allows students to actively engage with their learning materials (Zapata and Ribota, 2021: 41), making

implementation a worthwhile endeavor for many researchers and instructors (Blyth and Thomas, 2021: 6).

Specifically in the context of language courses, utilizing OER affords students the opportunity to engage with authentic language use (Zapata and Ribota, 2021, p. 41). There are still challenges present, especially with regional varieties of languages, specifically indigenous languages that may lack prestige or linguistic information to include in OER (Romero, 2021, p. 78). As resources have been produced and shared, an Open Pedagogies Framework developed to empower students to not only produce knowledge during their courses but be curators of OER as well (DeRosa and Robinson, 2017, p. 115).

Speakers of a heritage language (SHLs) are individuals who speak a language other than the majority language. In the context of this interview the heritage speakers discussed are speakers of Spanish as a heritage language (SHLs) living in the United States. In the Spanish language learning context, SHLs are Spanish heritage language learners (SHLLs) and may be enrolled in a course designed specifically for SHLLs, a course designed for second language learners (L2s), or in a course designed for both SHLLs and L2s in the same language course.

The Texas Coalition for Heritage Speakers (TeCHS) hosted by the Center for Open Educational Resources and Language Learning (COERLL) at the University of Texas at Austin "seeks to provide a cooperative platform to support the success of Spanish heritage language speakers and their communities in Texas, assisting and promoting bicultural and bilingual development in the state" (Belpoliti and Meiners). The Texas Coalition for Heritage Speakers is a hub to contribute and access resources for language instruction for speakers of Spanish as a Heritage Language (SHLs), with the co-founders and directors encouraging instructors to involve their SHL students in creating resources.

In this interview, I had the opportunity to discuss the foundations of TeCHS as well as future directions with both the co-founders and directors of TeCHS, Dr. Flavia Belpoliti and Dr. Jocelly Meiners. Dr. Belpoliti is an Associate Professor and Director of Spanish Graduate Studies at Texas A&M University-Commerce in Commerce, Texas. She specializes in furthering research of SHL pedagogy and SHL learning outcomes as well as contributing to the growing number of SHL research about instructional practices. Dr. Meiners is an Associate Professor of Instruction in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Texas at Austin. She specializes in teaching and developing courses for Heritage Spanish learners, Spanish for Healthcare Professionals, and courses with an Experiential Learning and Open Pedagogies component.

Interview

Teresa Blumenthal: How and when did you decide to start the Texas Coalition for Heritage Speakers?

Jocelly Meiners: To start with some background, COERLL, the Center for Open Educational Resources and Language Learning was a federally funded center that has the mission of creating and disseminating OER for language learning and they have projects in many different languages. From the beginning the director Carl Blyth and his team were working on having a space for Heritage Languages. They began working with Yanina and José Esteban Hernández from UT RGV [University of Texas Rio Grande Valley] who are creating OER activities for teaching heritage Spanish. Then they decided to create a workshop during the summer to have professional development and help with Spanish Heritage instruction and did their first workshop nine years ago. At the time there wasn't one person in charge, COERLL was organizing it. The second workshop, eight years ago, was the first one that I attended. Flavia, was that your first workshop as well?

Flavia Belpoliti: No, I went to the first workshop nine years ago.

JM: That's where Flavia and I met, and we had the same idea that this needed to be bigger and keep going forward. It was great that COERLL was doing the workshop, but we realized that the directors were planning to invite the same speakers for the next year, and I talked to them and said that if you want people to keep coming back, they would need to have different speakers every year. So, then I got more involved, and they asked me to help organize the workshop, and Flavia was involved with other projects and talking with Carl Blyth. He made the connection and told the two of us "you two are both really involved in this, and you are invested and care about it, why don't you work together?" and we got together. We officially created TeCHS.

FB: We officially created TeCHS eight years ago. We started working after the workshop and deciding on the mission and what we wanted to do. We always had the idea that we need more connection with our peer institutions. The feeling at the first workshop that we attended was that there were many people from different institutions in Texas, and even if we knew each other, we never collaborated on anything. Something that we've really been working on is creating relationships and helping people work together.

TB: It's helpful to know that TeCHS isn't just a project that you started, but that this project came from you both addressing needs that you saw in the field. I'd like to know more about the challenges that you faced at the beginning.

JM: First, I'll talk about the lack of resources for teaching heritage Spanish. That's a need that we identified from the beginning. The field of Heritage Spanish instruction isn't that new anymore, but it started growing a lot in the past decade or maybe twenty years. But we realized there weren't really good

materials for teaching heritage Spanish or resources created specifically for the heritage Spanish student population. If you tried to use a textbook, it wasn't really what you needed, it wasn't the kind of materials, pedagogy, or content that heritage Spanish students need. So, there is a gap in the materials out there and instructors are feeling and seeing it, then instructors are creating their own materials everywhere and scrambling to find something that will work for their particular students. In addition, we know the heritage Spanish population in the country is very diverse and their needs are quite different based on the students' instructors have in their courses. For example, if an instructor is teaching heritage Spanish in a city like Miami, think about where the communities and immigration are from, versus an instructor in El Paso, Texas, for example where the students are from a very different community. It also varies a lot depending on how strong students' language skills are, what generation the student is, if the student is receptive, etc. Instructors are having to come up with their own materials. We realized that if everyone is already creating materials for their own students, OER is a great solution because if someone shares materials, another person can take those materials and adjust them for their own needs. Someone can take a specific activity or an entire unit and add in readings or exercises that are more relevant for the population or helpful for their students, etc. That was one of the main things we noticed, which is why we fit in so well with COERLL because that's what they're promoting: OER for language learning, and we found this particular gap for heritage Spanish.

FB: Another need was teacher preparation. Even after twenty or thirty years of Spanish as a heritage language being a field; having theory and teaching and learning and being a part of the wider field of applied linguistics, it seems like it' still starting in certain ways because many people aren't aware and many teachers start their careers in the second language (L2) model. They have a lot of information and training in that. Even checking ACTFL or AATSP, the majority of people are being trained and prepared to be teachers of L2 learners and find themselves in charge of mixed classes or the principal of their school wants to start a new program for heritage learners, but some people have no idea today in 2023 where to start. Even after 45 years, if you count the first publications of materials and information related to heritage speakers, for them, it's truly new. That's what we had in mind when we started TeCHS and continue to build on it by creating a space for teacher preparation and trying to bring teachers from different levels from elementary school through university level. The goal is to put everyone together and see what is working for everyone and to collaborate in creating and preparing materials while providing a reservoir of OER. That is what brings everyone together. The goal is to expand the field of heritage language education, not on the side of research, but in the area of preparing new teachers as well.

TB: You mentioned you're seeing that teacher training is an area to be addressed. What are other gaps that still remain? As the number of resources contributed increase, are there gaps that still remain among the materials for heritage language education? What are the current needs in the community?

FB: For me, being a practitioner and researcher for almost twenty years, the field has been debating for a very long time about the difference between having goals, such as the goals that Guadalupe Valdés proposed at the end of the 90s. And there was a revision of those goals that was ongoing, then last year there were a few publications with a new set of goals that included much more than language learning such as participation, agency, engagement, community service, and critical approaches to understanding language. So, our goals as a field have grown so much. What I noticed is that there's not a clear transposition from goals to standards. If we are going to be teaching all of these topics, what would be the best way to measure that our learners are growing and increasing all the competencies regarding these goals? So that's what they would call standards, and we don't have standards at the national level as ACTFL does and we don't have standards here in Texas, at the state level either. Some states like New Mexico and Arizona have some models that can help the creation of materials, curriculum, syllabi, and activities, but that's a big hole that the profession is still debating. For example, if someone is creating new classes, and this person realizes they will need to start teaching heritage learners, they think, will the course be for beginners, intermediate, advanced level students? Are all levels together? How will they measure student performance, studying culture, and what about critical analysis and revision of language awareness and service to the community? How will all this be measured? What are the goals for the course versus the standards? There are certain areas that we need to continue building, if not standards, then a way to measure student performance and learning. That's an area that I personally feel that we still need to agree on.

JM: If you look at our goals on our website, for example, there is still a lot of room to grow. One of them is advocating for bilingual education programs across the state. For that we need more connections with stakeholders at different levels. We currently have about 14 universities that are endorsers for TeCHS, but we would like to expand and have more endorsers at the community college level and high schools and school districts, and really, people who would want to collaborate and continue working towards the same goals that we all have. That would be one thing, and then another is for everyone to buy in to this idea of open education, and one of the things we presented at that conference [28th Conference on Spanish in the U.S.] was the concept of open pedagogy, and how to involve our students in being part of the educational experience; not just being passive, but being active and creating materials. It could become a cycle where we can be creating and producing, reusing, adapting, sharing. As more people

buy into the system and methodology, then the richer it becomes and the more materials and instructor resources, training, and collaboration we can have.

FB: Adding to what Jocelly said, ideally, we will have a really good inter-connection with the communities. So, parents, family, neighbors, and people in different communities that work with the Hispanic population can also be part of this project. That would be the ideal and it would take a lot of time and effort. But ideally, everybody will have a voice in this conversation. That for us, is how the framework of Open Pedagogies and Education works. That's what we are hoping for.

TB: That's a good word. There are a lot of moving parts, as you have clearly illuminated, especially with trying to create a sustainable loop. I'd like you to talk a little bit about your annual workshop. You discussed how the workshop was important in your meeting and the importance of creating a workshop that can be attended each year. It would be great to know the goal of the workshop, who it's for, and anything else you would like to share.

JM: So, the annual workshop is usually in the summer, and it's a day and a half event, and we have guest speakers, but it's more focused towards the community of instructors in Texas at all levels, starting with elementary. We've had teachers from elementary, middle, and high school all the way through the college level, and it is professional development. But it's more than just professional development. It's also collaborating and creating a time for people to come together and share ideas, which is one of the most valuable aspects. And we've focused on Texas because it's TeCHS, but it's also more accessible for people to come and attend it if they're in the state. However, I do have to say that in previous years we've had people from all over the country, people from the northeast, the Pacific Coast, from everywhere.

FB: When we had the workshop versions during the pandemic, they were online via Zoom. We had many participants, more than a hundred, including people from Italy, from Spain, Mexico. It became international because of the modality.

JM: That was great because we reached so many people when we were online. But now that we are back in person, we debated on whether we wanted to have a hybrid model, but then we've always talked about it being a workshop. It's not just a lecture where you go and sit and learn about something. It's really a hands-on workshop where we have time, where we learn, but then there's time to apply what we learned. In-person is a much better environment to do that. One idea we've always had is to be able to move the workshop to different locations, so that we can access different populations, and also to have a model that other colleagues in other parts of the state can reproduce and use some of the same materials, but to help teacher training or professional development in different parts of the state. This year we're excited that we are going to have it [the workshop] for the first time in a different location, because UTSA

[University of Texas San Antonio] is hosting it. We'll be reaching more of the teacher population in San Antonio and the surrounding areas, and we hope in the future to have other of our colleagues host it in different parts of the state.

FB: To talk a little bit about the [workshop] setup: we normally have an open invitation for all TeCHS collaborators, and we ask them to propose different topics. We normally have a survey, and we ask exactly what instructors need and what would be good topics for them and their community. People have very good ideas about what they want to know more about, and we base the main topic of the workshop on the results. We then invite our collaborators to propose particular short workshops to be included and we invite at least one teacher from high school ideally or college to give talks, so we have at least another voice integrated. Another thing that we started doing was including a research section with posters. We have undergraduate students, graduate students, researchers, and teacher researchers. We still need to promote more, but we've had very good presentations in the past two workshops.

JM: Other than the summer workshop, we also have at least two online webinars every semester which in the past we've called "hangouts," because the idea is not that you're just going to sit there and listen to somebody, but we have discussion. We share ideas and talk about what we're working on in each of our institutions. We usually have a 30-minute presentation from somebody who is presenting a new pedagogical activity or something that they want to share with the community. Afterwards, we'll have breakout rooms, discussion, Q&A, etc. and these are very popular because it's easy to log on to Zoom. For example, we had one recently where we had 165 people register for the webinar, showing us there's a lot of interest. And people are craving to learn about the different topics surrounding Spanish instruction, and this one in particular was very interesting, because it was about Afrolatinidad and how we need to make a greater effort to include different peoples in the Spanish speaking community in our courses.

FB: In that webinar, people wanted to keep talking. We normally try to maintain the hour as a time limit, because everybody is busy and also for the sake of being respectful of the workday. In that webinar people were wanting to stay and keep talking, and I can tell you, because I was in one of the break rooms and we were saying, "hurry, time is almost out, let's talk faster." The small interactions, even if for ten or fifteen minutes with other colleagues from somewhere else, it really brings us together and gives us the opportunity to see and say what is happening in different classrooms and that really informs what we later decide for TeCHS. We're very excited about the webinars.

TB: That's really great. And I'm glad that you are doing more than just collecting information and collecting it somewhere. But with the community, you offer conversations and a way to connect and workshop ideas together.

JM: We try to use these materials, and we don't just have these webinars and then it's over. We record everything and we put it on our website. So, people who were not able to attend can go and access that. We've heard from people in other places who are using our materials from previous workshops and webinars to create courses for teaching heritage Spanish. For our summer workshops, we also record those presentations and include them on the website. We also have an additional series of professional development modules that people can go and access from our website if they also can't come to the workshop, but they want some professional development. And there's questions, discussion questions, comprehension questions, etcetera.

TB: That's so helpful for anyone who really wants to learn, or they see a need and aren't sure where to start. They can access the website and find resources that will help them in their instruction.

FB: The idea is to think about how we really enact Open Pedagogies? Well, this is the way, we need to share everything that we're doing and engage in conversations and keep growing. And we have started to provide different services for professors who are publishing materials. We created an entire system to evaluate OER and we have evaluated at least two projects already. So that's something that we're trying to do, because OER hasn't had the relevance as a publisher-based publication. So, we wanted to create good evaluation rubrics and a model to get OER to be equal or even better than something that was published by an editorial group or a publishing company.

TB: To wrap up, would you discuss what you are hoping for future collaborators and TeCHS future?

FB: First of all, we hope to have more connections with Texas universities, there are still many colleges and universities that don't participate, especially those that don't have heritage language courses for Spanish students. That's something that we can help people with, to start those programs. Then we would like to reach out to the community. I think that our newsletter should not just be for people in the field, I think that at some point we have to start getting the newsletter to broader places, so not just, practitioners or researchers, but also parents and principals so they can get some information about what's happening, particularly in Texas, and what's going on. Then, of course, expanding the idea of Open Education and the value of having OER created, produced, and reproduced by practitioners. And we want to grow, and we need more funding, which is another issue for another interview. In the future, we hope to get grants to expand what we already have.

JM: We just need to continue growing. We need to make more connections and have people share more of their work. We will continue with our webinars and our workshop, and hopefully take our workshop on the road, which is something else we've been wanting to do. Reach more people, because that's how we grow.

TB: I hope that having interviews like this and spreading the word that people can know that there are Open Educational Resources available to them because it's such a useful resource. And it's most useful when people know that it's there and available.

Conclusion

TeCHS is an excellent resource for instructors seeking SHL resources and materials for instruction or for professional development. As Flavia Belpoliti and Jocelly Meiners stated in the interview, one of the most important factors of OER is not simply providing material online, but rather creating a sustainable loop to which all community members and key stakeholders can access and contribute.

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