

# Speak My Language

Spanish students move out of their comfort zone and into the community



Abbott

Johnny Chiang Photo

College students sometimes have trouble applying the knowledge they learn in the classroom to the “real world.”

To break through this barrier, one University of Illinois professor faced the problem head on by kicking her students out of the classroom and into a new learning environment – the East Central Illinois Refugee Mutual Assistance Center.

Since 2004, Ann Abbott '91 LAS, AM '94 LAS, PHD '98 LAS, has offered a community-based Spanish language program, allowing students to venture away from the confines of the classroom and into community settings to learn firsthand about Spanish culture and interact with native speakers.

“I knew that it could be a really rich learning environment for the students because of [the center’s work] with Latino immigrants, as well as other refugees,” Abbott said. “I thought that [the students] were held back in the classroom.”

Her students agree and admire her efforts to change the way teaching is approached.

“She could have gone the easy route and simply continued with the curriculum

from years past,” said Nancy Parman of her professor. “Instead, she tried to reform it, make it more current and make it more useful for students.”

Perhaps Abbott, 39, is particularly tuned in because she herself has had to learn the Spanish language. Growing up in the small town of Clay City (population 1,000), Abbott had no contact with native Spanish speakers. Because she always knew she wanted to visit other countries, Abbott stretched beyond the city limits of her hometown into a world as yet unknown to her.

Studying abroad in Barcelona, Spain, during her junior year at the U of I helped Abbott tie into the culture and be open to the language. “It was challenging” she said, “and it challenged my idea of myself. But that was when the strongest learning took place.”

Abbott pushed her personal boundaries again in formulating her innovative courses (“Spanish in the Community” and “Spanish and Entrepreneurship”). Because the concept of community-based learning and teaching is new to the language-learning field, she devised her own teaching materials. Those materials include the

required biweekly “digital diaries,” in which students sit in front of a Web camera, speaking only Spanish, to document their community experiences.

In those diaries, Abbott hears about her students’ triumphs as well as their frustrations and discomfort as they find themselves in real-world situations, such as helping people translate government documents or deal with taxes. Pre-med students work on site with refugees in the obstetrics and gynecology department at a local clinic; others work in area schools with bilingual programs or a Boy Scout troop comprising Latino boys. Parman’s experiences have included helping someone write a résumé in English, assisting another with filling out child support papers and arranging for doctor appointments.

Abbott’s efforts have made an impact and drawn attention, both on and off campus. She sits on the board at the refugee center and was honored with the inaugural social entrepreneurship award at the 2006 Innovation Celebration, sponsored by the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and the Academy for Entrepreneurial Research at the U of I and the Champaign County Development Corp. In addition, a textbook contract is in the works so her materials can assist similar programs at other universities.

“[My new approach] has kept me very busy,” she said, “but it has also reinvigorated my work because these are things that I feel very passionate about.”

It’s a passion her students appreciate – and wish to emulate. One semester, in addition to their typical digital diary assignment, Abbott’s students made a set with messages directly for her. One of them said, “We want to be like you.”

– Crystal Ligon

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