

Chapter 14

The Literature of the North American Basque Diaspora: A Learning Experience With Older Adults

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ABSTRACT

This chapter profiles an educational project developed for the creative writing workshop at the Third Age College of the University of the Basque Country, in San Sebastian. Projects that highlight the interpretation and creation of literary texts concerned with the specific literature of the Basque immigrant experience in the USA are scarce, and there are none that address students older than 55. Creative writing may become a means to transfer knowledge and experience. The authors conclude that through this course, older Basque students became aware of the motives that led a large number of their country folk to America, and also of the hardships that this community had to endure until they were finally integrated into the mainstream of a distinct multicultural society in the US. By interacting with texts from Basque immigrants in the US, these older students were more willing to share their own experiences and opinions, and to consider the immigrant experience in different contexts.

INTRODUCTION: THIRD AGE COLLEGE AND THE CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the development of a creative writing workshop for older (55+ years of age) students of the Third Age College at the University of the Basque Country, which was carried out in San Sebastian during the 2022-2023 academic year. Its unifying thread was the literature of written accounts of the Basque diaspora in the United States. The selected narrative biographical texts were initially written in Basque by the immigrants and then, after the arriving generation, in English

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(the primary language of the host country). Some of the writings of the second and later American generations were translated into the vernacular Basque language of the country of origin, which was also the language used in the classroom. These texts served as the basis for the students' workshop writings.

The Third Age College at the University of the Basque Country has some peculiarities that need to be explained to understand the idiosyncrasies of the course. Colleges are distributed into the three campuses within the territories that constitute the Basque Autonomous Community. They are placed in the capital cities of each of the territories, and maintain considerably distinct academic programs, funding, and student organization. Nevertheless, they all share the common objective of fostering formative elements, such as the promotion of an active life, the creation of forms of community socialization, and new relationships with the surrounding environment. These are important social goals that go beyond the merely academic formative purpose (Gurrutxaga et al., 2012). We believe that a creative writing workshop, in so far as it may foster debate and transference of diverse experiences, may significantly contribute to the goal of personal and communal growth and well-being. The degrees received at the Third Age College do not have an official value -that is to say, they are not directly useful for professional advancement. In lieu of the academic goals that are perhaps more important in an ordinary creative writing course -developing the technical skills that lead to the artistic writing competence- this class emphasized the specific social issue of immigration.

Another important characteristic of the Third Age College arises from the language of instruction. Courses in all three campuses are mostly taught in Spanish, against the general trend of the studies at the University of the Basque Country. It should be noted that more than half of the students at the University were registered in the Basque language tracks at the beginning of the academic year (UPV/EHU, 2022). The main reason for the almost exclusive use of the majority language is that the students belong to a generation who were unable to study in Basque because of the prohibition on the language imposed by the Francoist dictatorship, which lasted for more than thirty-five years. Four decades have passed since the death of the dictator Francisco Franco, and we may expect that the coming of an older generation who has been able to learn in the vernacular language will soon bring lines of instruction in both languages. The campus of San Sebastian holds two elective subjects taught in Basque, one of them being the Creative Writing Workshop. Students are allowed to take this course in consecutive years, which requires professors to renew the syllabus every academic year. This also gives teachers a great opportunity to experiment with new topics and approaches. We will return below to the question of language and give a more detailed account of its effect on the development of the course.

Older, non-traditional students at the University of the Basque Country, such as the students in this class, are normally in their sixties or early seventies. Most of the students have retired after a long working life, but are energetic, healthy and show a great deal of curiosity about subjects which they could not study before. Some have worked at home all their lives, while others had jobs in industry. There is also a great disparity in educational levels. While some graduated from university in their youth, most often with technical degrees, others started working very early and received only a basic education. In any case, all these students share a strong motivation to learn new subjects.

There is another characteristic of students of the Third Age Colleges that should be considered. In many cases, after a lifetime of work, students feel an existential void when they finish their professional duties and are separated from their colleagues. The Third Age College serves as a catalyst for fellowship, leading to the formation of new groups of friends, thus fulfilling an important social role. Students love to share their rich living experiences with their classmates. Furthermore, they appreciate being

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