

9-1-1996

# Articulating Literature: Concerns and Considerations

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## Recommended Citation

Anne Fountain. "Articulating Literature: Concerns and Considerations" *Hispania* (1996): 539-541. doi:10.2307/345556

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## Perspectives

### Articulating Literature: Concerns and Considerations

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When language professionals think of articulation they often envision a sequence of grammar, vocabulary, and structural models and give consideration to communicative strategies, cultural benchmarks and community traditions. All too often, relatively little attention is paid to a progression of information relative to literature even though literary works are at the heart of the humanities and are a vital part of Hispanic heritage. This pattern, and the absence of literary works as a focal point in articulation, is particularly conspicuous in the K–12 sequence. This is true in part because early start, sequenced programs of foreign language study are not widespread, in part because proficiency in literature is not usually a primary goal in the teacher preparation programs which train teachers for K–12 instruction, and in part because it may be difficult to construct a consensus about which literary works or traditions should be emphasized. A number of worthy efforts have sought to address the issue of literary sequencing beginning in the elementary grades. There have been courses on children’s literature in the Spanish speaking world, National Endowment for the Humanities-sponsored institutes on authentic literature and culture for FLES\* teachers, programs offered by the Education Office of the Embassy of Spain and conference sessions on the topic. Yet much remains to be done. Many practitioners in the elementary school programs in Spanish keenly feel a need for more basic subject knowledge about appropriate literature for children and many 6–12 teachers would like to know if there is a literary base from the K–5 programs on which they might build.

As a director of numerous immersion and culture and conversation workshops in North Carolina—a state with many elemen-

tary school programs in Spanish, a K–12 certification process, and a long tradition of interest in articulation—I can attest to the very real and continuing need for instruction and information about literature. Teachers in the workshops in Spanish have seemed particularly eager to have teachable units of songs, poetry, folktales, and children’s stories from Spanish-speaking countries, and have expressed interest in knowing how such material can be articulated so that the K–5 instruction in Spanish prepares students for middle school study and the courses offered in high school and college. The experience of these North Carolina teachers suggests a challenge for the profession at large: how to make literature a meaningful part of an articulated study of Spanish from the elementary grades onward.

The sequencing of literature as a part of the study of Spanish raises many questions. What literary elements would be introduced in FLES\* programs? What components are important for middle school teaching? What pieces of literature are typically part of the high school curriculum and in college courses and what specific background should students bring to each level? It is not the intent of this article to answer these questions but rather to emphasize their importance and to highlight the need for carefully crafted articulation.

A look at two examples in literature, one from Spain and one from Spanish America will provide departure points for a discussion of the larger concerns and will illustrate some of the issues and problematics for articulation in Spanish. These examples are meant to suggest consideration about works which are often read at various levels but whose sequential study may leave something to be desired. The first example is *Don Quijote*, a work often introduced to students at an early stage of their study but whose imaginative impact may be hard to grasp in a truncated and/or highly simplified excerpt. The second example is the selection of verses from José Martí’s *Versos*

*sencillos*, another popular piece of literature which is frequently misunderstood.

One of the most difficult teaching tasks for instructors of today's visually-oriented students is to require reading which demands a careful consideration of concepts rather than instant imaging. Such a contrast presents special problems for readers of the *Quijote*. A great temptation is to introduce the work through simplified episodes and/or through a class viewing of *Man of La Mancha*. Both of these approaches can work as long as students are aware of the limitations and simplifications involved, but too often they are not. It is common for students reading Cervantes in an "unedited" version to be shocked by the challenges of the text and to express surprise that what the student had read earlier was so easy. Another surprise for students discovering the realities of the *Quijote* is to find that Dulcinea is not an innkeeper's daughter or even in reality a peasant girl from a local town but instead an imagined lady whose fictional presence in a work of fiction makes her all the more interesting as a character. A consciously-articulated approach to *Don Quijote* could perhaps prevent some of the misconceptions at any and all levels of sequence—from beginning language courses to advanced classes in literature—and can make the experience of this master work more rewarding for all.

It is important to emphasize here that articulation does not imply a progression from simplistic study in pre-college work to sophisticated literary analysis in college; indeed students may have a more rigorous study of literature in high school than they do in college and university classes, and college faculty members and K-12 teachers can learn much about literature from each other. As the parent of a high-schooler who is taking the Advanced Placement Spanish literature course in a public secondary school, I am aware of both the depth and discipline which can be demanded in such a course.

José Martí's works provide another example for articulation of literature in Spanish, for Martí may truly be studied from the

earliest grades on. Martí is Cuba's national hero and is important as a patriot as well as a writer. It would certainly be feasible in the elementary grades to introduce his name and to give some idea of his prominence as a hero. A further sequencing of his works could include study in history as a reinforcement of the articulation process as well as presentation of aphorisms in middle school and high school. Because Martí's maxims are brief, they can be introduced as "self-contained" units. They offer a teacher a great deal of flexibility as well as being excellent expressions of Martí's thinking. Selections of poetry and prose are feasible at multiple levels of study.

The study of Martí, like that of Cervantes, suggests the need for a solid articulated structure to establish the base for a full understanding of the rich complexities of these authors and their works. Without such a background, important pieces of literature in Spanish may be subject to misunderstanding or shallow interpretation. An example of this occurs when Martí is called the author of the popular song *Guantanamera* rather than the nineteenth century poet whose verses (from *Versos sencillos*) form the basis for a twentieth century song. While it is true that *Guantanamera* has extended Martí's fame around the globe, it is crucial to emphasize that Martí's significance transcends the popular music.

With a coordinated effort among teachers at all levels, literary lapses such as those mentioned in regard to Cervantes and Martí will be less common and a well-planned progression of literature will seem more viable. Emphasizing proficiency in literature is an important part of articulation and presents both challenge and opportunity for the profession. The appendix which follows offers some tentative suggestions for initiating the process.

## Appendix

Guidelines for achieving articulation in a literature sequence

### 1. Communication among instructors

Probably the best way to foster communication among instructors is through Academic Alliances, the local collaborative groups which bring together K–12 foreign language teachers and college/university foreign language instructors for meetings and programs. Academic Alliances, which exist throughout the country, are an excellent vehicle for both formal and informal discussions of sequencing and currently efforts are underway to revitalize the national network of the Alliances with the assistance of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).

### 2. Consensus about the canon

Particularly in Spanish, the wealth of significant literature from a variety of countries which includes a considerable body of literature for children, makes consensus about literary choices difficult. A logical way to begin would be to look at the selections of authors and literature included in elementary texts from the major Spanish-speaking countries, and to examine these texts with an eye to finding common examples and emphases.

### 3. Development of curriculum guides

Curriculum planners in the K–12 framework have not usually had literature as a primary focus. The development of curriculum guides with an emphasis on literature might prove a good way to involve humanities scholars in an important pedagogical project. The work on such a project might be funded through the National Endowment for the Humanities or perhaps as a special undertaking by an Academic Alliance, a state or regional organization or even by AATSP.

### 4. Choosing themes and functions at each level

The selection of literary themes (or authors) for the various levels can be effected through either a complete curriculum plan or an outline of topics and approaches. The following abbreviated model, which expands upon comments made in

this article, suggests a format which could be used for a single author—José Martí.

### **A Suggested Sequence: José Martí from Grades K to 12**

*K–5:* Introduction to Martí as a hero of Cuba and as a poet of noble ideas.

Presentation of the first stanza of “Cultivo una rosa blanca,” (number XXXIX of *Versos sencillos*) and an explanation of the Cuban tradition in which children place a white rose at the base of a statue of Martí on January 28, the day of Martí’s birth. This elementary introduction teaches about Martí as a hero, projects a noble thought about the value of friendship, presents simple lines from his poetry and helps children to see how Martí is appreciated by Cuban children.

*Middle School:* Introduction to Martí as an author and creator of aphorisms as well as poetry. Here Martí could be studied both through his poetry and through a selection of his aphorisms. A simple teaching technique which can be used at this grade level is to ask students to design and illustrate a bookmark with one of Martí’s aphorisms. Students can also begin to memorize and recite poems and/or to do posters of Martí.

*High School:* Introduction to Martí as a writer of poetry and essays and as a political figure. In secondary schools, students can learn about José Martí in a number of ways. Some of the simple stanzas from *Versos sencillos* (e.g. “Yo vengo de todas partes, Y hacia todas partes voy: Arte soy entre las artes, En los montes, monte soy.”) can be used to reinforce verb forms, and in such an example, students can be engaged in a writing exercise by being asked to fill in blanks (Yo vengo de \_\_\_\_\_, etc.) to produce their own poems. At this level students can also study the poetry as literature and/or memorize verses for class presentations or competitions of poetry recitation. This is also a good time to use a version of