

Spanish Journalism Curriculum Taking Root in Los Angeles

by Sylvia Mendoza

When Pablo Baler was asked to join an international geophysical team studying the Himalayas as a journal keeper, he knew the opportunity to travel and document the findings would be a dream job. A University of California (UC)-Berkeley doctoral student then, Baler saw value in the written word to connect communities, educate and enlighten – and open a window to another world. “They took me [along] as a sidekick,” says Baler. “It became the highlight of my life.”

In journal keeping, Baler wrote and stories unfolded. In return, his passion for travel and cultures, education and writing intertwined. “Traveling around is the only way to get a real education.” He has traveled to the Middle East, Latin America, the Far East – but also earned a Ph.D. in Hispanic languages and literature from UC-Berkeley, a master’s in Latin American literature from Stanford and a B.A. in philosophy and Spanish literature from Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

With extensive journalistic experience in his homeland, Argentina, his communication skills came to fruition writing for a variety of publications, including the *Buenos Aires Herald* and the *Clarín*, and included a stint as a news writer for Univision in San Francisco.

Writing became a way of life, and expanded to poetry, novels, screenplays. Always there is a story, he believes, stories that need to be told. When travel is not an option, becoming immersed in a community and listening to and documenting people’s stories is a great option. “Being exposed to other cultures and opening your mind to world views is very enriching for journalists, politicians, everybody.”

The “everybody” now includes Baler’s students. Baler joined the faculty at California State University-Los Angeles in 2006 in the Department of Modern Languages and Literature, teaching Spanish, 20th-century Latin American literature and creative writing. With his journalistic background, however, he homed in on the largely Hispanic community in the heart of L.A., especially young people, who needed a voice.

He looked at his brilliant Spanish students. He knew that they needed to connect. He saw the very real need for quality journalism to reflect the community, providing news cover-

age in print, broadcast, radio and online – all in Spanish.

He brainstormed with Jon Beaupré, associate professor from Cal State’s communications department and news director of *The University Times*, to develop a Spanish journalism curriculum, determined to bring hands-on journalism training to students. Beaupré, who earned an M.F.A. from the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, has extensive experience as a radio producer, reporter and contributor to internationally syndicated programming. Their combined expertise, accomplishments and passion with the media fueled their efforts.

The Spanish journalism program was launched in 2009 with two classes, theory and fundamentals, followed by a hands-on immersion. The response was amazing, and the classes were full, Baler says. The ultimate goal is to offer a B.A. in Spanish journalism at Cal State L.A., the first such program in undergraduate studies, Baler believes. Florida International University offers a Spanish-language master’s degree in journalism and multimedia.

There is no guarantee that a bilingual journalism major can write or produce quality content in Spanish, Baler explains. Many journalism schools offer a perspective of Latinos in the English media. But none, as far as Baler knows, offer journalism courses training students in Spanish, improving the quality and scope of their work. Neither the quality of Spanish journalism nor the quantity of Spanish-speaking journalists in the U.S. has kept up with the staggering growth of Spanish-language media outlets and their audiences, says Baler.

“We are strategically located in the L.A. basin. If there is a place in the United States to do this, it’s Los Angeles. Latinos prefer to hear, read, and see the news in Spanish, but the quality of Spanish-language coverage has to improve.”

Laura Cortez, born and raised in Los Angeles, was a Spanish major when she took the practicum. “It’s imperative that we do this in Spanish in Los Angeles. The population and demographics support this. I don’t understand how we cannot. Even if people who live in the area speak and understand English, if Spanish is their first language, they can relate more to coverage in Spanish.”

Future journalists must be able to adapt to the accelerating pace of a changing competitive media. The demand for a very specific, well-rounded type of journalist is evident: someone who can multitask, such as generating stories, producing, fact checking, writing, reporting, editing and Web designing. A Spanish journalism major will provide the much-needed edge for graduates entering into such a competitive market, especially in Los Angeles, says Baler. “Even though English-based journalism and media in general is dwindling, the Spanish-language media equivalent as the source of news is exploding because of the demographic explosion,” he says.

According to statistics provided by Baler, there were 342 Spanish-language TV stations operating in the U.S. in 2009. Spanish-language dailies have surpassed the two million mark in combined circulation. The U.S. Spanish-language print media boom has been even more remarkable, given the challenges facing English-language print market, which dropped nearly 10 percent to less than 56 million. The Spanish-language market has grown with the population because advertisers like McDonald’s – no longer just mom and pop places – now have an interest in reaching this audience. In addition, radio, for example, is following the American format. Now there’s news talk, sports talk and a variety of music stations featuring a variety of music, from rancheros to hip hop, to reggaeton to oldies. Radio stations account for 11.1 percent of listening, outpacing the overall market in revenue and audience growth. The online Spanish-speaking market is nearly 20 percent of the Internet market today.

In the first class, theoretical fundamentals are taught, such as identifying trends, genres, video and audio content, and also includes learning to write objectively and more concisely. With Baler’s contacts around the world, he brought in accomplished speakers, colleagues and journalists from Spain, Argentina and Mexico to tell of their journalism experience firsthand, sometimes through Skype hookups.

“Students were excited to study a real profession in a language that is core to the community,” Baler explains. “The idea of having an actual profession, of something to do with their language, was very appealing to students.”

The second class put them to work with hands-on training, including providing content, choosing stories, interviewing, writing, editing and uploading to the website, queondas.org. Coolstatala.com and the *University Times* were already established through the communications department. Queondas.org was born as the sister website, translating certain works, but also providing content that was more applicable to the Hispanic population and perspective.

"I'm very hands-on," says Baler. "I want students to go to East L.A. and write a vignette on something they see, edit it and upload it onto queondas.org. They need to see they can have an impact and give a voice to those who don't have one."

Cortez agrees. One of her favorite research pieces she wrote was on women who are going back to school and getting educated but have kids at home. "A young woman's voice as a mother is underrepresented," she says. "There are people who want to be heard, so I need to get out there."

What Cortez liked best about the course was the liberty Baler gave students in choosing which topics to cover. "He trusted us in what we believed was important. He would tell us, 'You know what's affecting your community, your culture. Pick your topic and do in-depth investigation.'"

The freedom to discuss all kinds of topics grew them as a family. "These issues are core to all of us," says Cortez. "We could talk about anything."

In addition, she saw their role in the future of journalism. Newspapers that have been around for decades, like *La Opinion*, don't always reflect younger voices, the college student, or the new voices of today, says Cortez. "We need to hear more voices," she says. "We are doing a bigger service in our community in the way we relay information now."

According to careerjet.com, there are numerous job postings for journalists with Spanish/bilingual needs. Speaking or writing Spanish does not guarantee journalistic excellence in covering news. "It's our responsibility to turn this into high-quality journalism from the language perspective," says Baler.

Baler has greater projections for coming decades as the Spanish journalism curriculum unfolds. As an alternative, Cal State can offer a B.A. in Spanish with emphasis in Spanish journalism, he says. Either way, Baler knows that his students, trained to be professional Spanish journalists in the U.S., will start a much-needed trend.

"The media feels that if it covers the Hispanic community, that is enough. But it's not. We don't want Spanglish. We see this effort coming together in both languages. We want to enrich both

languages, not impoverish each of them. There is lots of room for growth here."

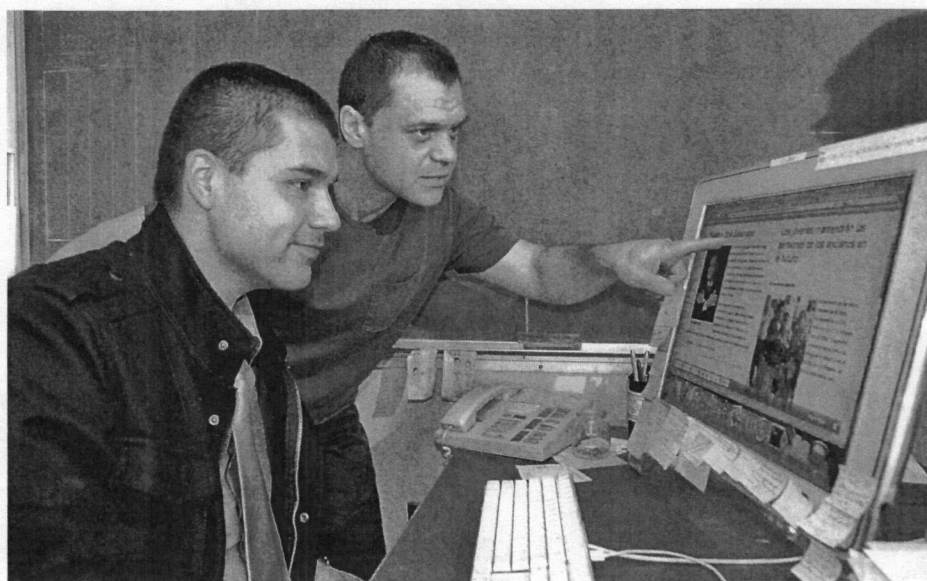
The only negative aspect of a career in journalism is the pay, says Baler. The reality is, top anchors on top Spanish-language television stations make one-third the amount of money as top English-speaking anchors, he says. When Baler left Berkeley, he was offered the position at Cal State L.A. and one at Univision. The difference in salary was sad. Perhaps, he says, by the time his students become professionals, their pay scale will reflect their talent value. "How do you reward their hard work, quality and mission?" he asks. "It has to trickle from producers and writers. We will also train students to get Latinos into these decision-making positions."

In addition, he believes gigs at local stations as interns and becoming tech savvy will also help students. The internship structure is a god-

ology or become a translator; either way, the skills she learned in the Spanish journalism classes built her confidence and made her step out of her comfort zone. She believes all her fellow students have taken away something of value. "We will be more competitive in the work force," says Cortez. "Even if they go into an English-language journalism market, their quality bilingual ability at all levels will make them an asset."

With the budget crisis in California, everything is on hold for implementing the B.A. in Spanish journalism — except for Baler. He moves forward in his ideas and in his mission. "I go back and forth with all the different hats I wear."

As a writer, he is working on a script, a book of short stories, and editing a 21st-century anthology of new trends in the art world. As a professor, he finds his students inspire him. In



Cal State Los Angeles Professor Pablo Baler and student working on their online journalism venture queondas.org showing news and perspectives from Cal State Los Angeles in Spanish

send, he says, but students need to feel that their time investment now will pay off later. There are other hurdles to get over as Spanish journalism takes root.

"I don't like to be a traditionalist, but I have to wrap my mind around changes and make sense of them," says Baler. "I have to rethink how we process news. News is fast, no doubt about it, more immediate. Access to it in 15-second clips is the norm now. The challenge is to make people read to the end of longer pieces and keep their attention in all journalistic endeavors. There is a fine line there, but maybe we can have a historical, transitional place in producing quality journalism that audiences relate to and want to read, see or hear."

Cortez will pursue a master's degree in soci-

five years, he wishes to have a full-fledged Spanish journalism program with media outlet partnerships in L.A. for internship opportunities that can lead to employing his students. When his students reflect the voices in the Latino community, they realize their connection and commitment to that community.

"There is a method to the madness, I suppose," Baler says. "We will prepare students to do business in a diverse, global marketplace in which Hispanics have significant influence. To fill these outlets with quality journalists will be a win-win situation."

