Global Language and Cultural Studies, 2026, Volume 1, Issue 1
https://bbwpublisher.com/journal/GLCS
Online ISSN: 3083-3035
Print ISSN: 3083-3043

Bridging with Digitalization, Smartly Connecting Latin America: A Digital Teaching Practice Case Based on the Course "China-Latin America and US-Latin America Relations"

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Abstract: *China's Outline of the Plan for Building a Leading Country in Education (2024–2035)*[1] and the country's National Smart Education Public Service Platform have pushed digitalization to the forefront of higher education reform. This paper describes how I redesigned a Spanish major course, "China-Latin America and US-Latin America Relations," to overcome three long-standing problems in area studies teaching: fragmented knowledge, rapidly changing content that textbooks cannot keep up with, and a lack of genuine cross-cultural practice. The solution was a "three-dimensional integration" model that connects language training, regional knowledge, and cross-cultural competence through smart technologies. The model relies heavily on the National Smart Education Platform, and it runs through the entire learning cycle — before, during, and after class. By pulling together digital resources, mixing virtual and face-to-face activities, and using data to guide evaluation, the model breaks the usual limits of time and space. Each student gets a personalized learning path, and the assessment adapts to their progress. The results have been encouraging: students show stronger cross-cultural understanding, sharper critical thinking, and better skills in using digital tools. This case offers a practical blueprint for digital transformation in foreign language and international relations programs.

Keywords: Digitalization of Education; Three-Dimensional Integrated Teaching Model; Smart Technology Integration; National Smart Education Public Service Platform; Area Studies

Online publication: February 10, 2026

1.Background and Motivations: Why Traditional Teaching Falls Short

China and Latin America are building closer diplomatic and economic ties every year. For students to truly grasp the Belt and Road Initiative, they need to follow current foreign policies and cooperation projects in real time. The course "China-Latin America and US-Latin America Relations" is an elective for Spanish majors. It

covers the messy web of political, economic, and diplomatic interactions among Latin America, China, and the United States. In its old, teacher-centered form, the course ran into three big problems.

First, knowledge came in disconnected pieces, and textbooks were always outdated. The subject draws on history, politics, economics, and culture — all closely linked but seldom taught together. Traditional paper textbooks cannot show how these pieces fit into a dynamic picture; they are limited by page counts and long revision cycles. When class time is spent explaining isolated facts, students end up "seeing the trees but not the forest." They never build a mental map of the region as a whole.

Second, the material quickly became stale and out of touch with reality. The relationship between China and Latin America, and between the US and Latin America, shifts with every new policy and major event. Relying on a fixed textbook — even with a few teacher-updated slides — just does not work. Students get information that is already lagging, and often incomplete.

Third, cross-cultural understanding was taught in a very flat way. Students read descriptions and looked at static pictures. They rarely experienced what it feels like to negotiate across cultures. As a result, their appreciation of cultural differences stayed abstract and shallow.

Around the world, digital transformation is reshaping education. A UNESCO (2022) report found that well-designed digital tools can make learning more accessible and more personalized[2]. China's 14th Five-Year Plan for the Digital Economy explicitly calls for "Internet + Education" to share high-quality resources through platforms like the National Smart Education Public Service Platform. These national policies gave me a strong reason to try something new. International studies also suggest that in interdisciplinary fields like area studies, digital methods can help solve the problems of outdated content and scattered knowledge[3].

At the same time, today's students are digital natives. They are used to short videos, interactive graphics, and instant feedback. A traditional lecture, where the teacher talks and students listen passively, feels foreign to them. It turns learning into memorization without meaning. So I decided to rebuild the course around the National Smart Education Platform, aiming for what I call "smart guidance, deep interaction, and multi-dimensional integration"[4].

2.Case Practice: Building a "Three-Dimensional Integration" Digital Teaching Model

The model I built rests on three pillars: language competence, regional cognition, and cross-cultural literacy. The National Smart Education Platform acts as the central hub, connecting virtual simulation, big data analytics, and other smart tools. The teaching process is a closed loop that runs through pre-class preparation, in-class activities, and post-class projects.

2.1. Pre-class Stage: Curating Digital Resources and Giving Personalized Tasks

2.1.1. Structured Pre-learning and Resource Push

I used the class space on the National Smart Education Platform to upload a thematic module called "China-Latin America and the Caribbean Relations." Along with it, I posted a clear pre-class task sheet. The goal was to help students build a basic timeline of Sino-Latin American relations before they ever stepped into the classroom [5].



Figure 1. Thematic course “China-Latin America and the Caribbean Relations” (source: platform screenshot).

2.1.2. Data-Driven Inquiry Tasks

I also designed an inquiry task called “Dynamic Retrieval of China-Latin America Relations” in the platform’s assignment module. Students picked a sub-topic — for example, “How US-Latin American rivalry affects China-Latin America cooperation.” They used the platform’s academic databases to search for Spanish-language articles and then wrote a short research abstract (at least 200 words) with keywords. The platform automatically analyzed their submissions and produced two things: a “group knowledge mastery heatmap” and a “report on common difficulties.” For instance, the report showed that most students confused MERCOSUR with the Pacific Alliance. That gave me hard evidence on where to focus my in-class explanations[6].

Translation practice: To strengthen core Spanish skills, I picked authentic texts such as Argentina’s annual foreign policy report and excerpts from China-Latin America energy cooperation agreements. Students translated these fragments, posted their work on the platform’s discussion area, and then received peer and teacher feedback. Over several rounds, they improved the accuracy, naturalness, and context-sensitivity of their professional translations[7].

2.2. In-class Stage: Blending Virtual and Real for Higher-Order Thinking

2.2.1. Flipped Classroom and Academic Debate

Based on the problems the platform had identified, I organized small-group debates entirely in Spanish. One topic was “Opportunities and challenges of the Belt and Road Initiative in China-Latin America cooperation.” Students had to use the Spanish materials they had collected before class — for example, World Bank data on China’s contribution to Latin American GDP growth from 2019 to 2021. They presented arguments, responded to counter-arguments, and mapped their reasoning on an interactive whiteboard. This pushed them to organize their thoughts better, think critically, and back up claims with evidence[6].

2.2.2. Virtual Simulation and Cross-Cultural Communication Training

The course includes a national-level virtual simulation project: “Virtual Simulation Experiment of Chinese Traditional Culture in a Multilingual Context.” It creates a high-fidelity scene of a diplomatic dialogue in the

Hall of Supreme Harmony (Taihe Dian). Students take on the roles of "Chinese monarch" and "Spanish envoy." The system evaluates their speech, gives real-time pragmatic feedback, and assesses three things: diplomatic etiquette, accuracy in conveying cultural images, and appropriateness of pragmatic strategies. This lets students practice cross-cultural communication in a safe but realistic environment[8].

Research backs up the value of such simulations. Makransky and Petersen (2021) found that good virtual reality environments can raise knowledge retention by about 30%, especially for cross-cultural training[9]. In my case, the built-in speech evaluator does more than check grammar — it also alerts students when their phrasing sounds culturally off. That goes far beyond what traditional role-playing can offer.



Figure 2. Illustration of the national-level first-class virtual simulation experiment (source: project interface).

2.2.3. Data Literacy and Academic Presentation Skills

I guided students to use simple AI text analysis tools (Python's NLTK library) to process China-Latin America trade bulletins and Spanish-language social media posts from mainstream Latin American outlets. They produced trend charts of trade volume and sentiment polarity maps. Each group then gave a short academic defense in Spanish on a topic like "The resilience of China-Latin America trade relations through data." This built their skills in data-driven research and professional presentation[7].

2.2.4. Integration of Values Education (Curriculum-based Political and Ideological Education)

I deliberately wove ideological and political elements into the course content. For example, using a case comparing Chinese and Western anti-epidemic models, students discussed the idea of "a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" as reflected in China's vaccine donations to Latin America. They then made bilingual briefing notes on the principle of "extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits," explaining in Spanish the ethical basis and concrete achievements of the Chinese approach. In this way, professional knowledge, cross-cultural competence, patriotism, and a global outlook all came together[10,11].



Figure 3. Schematic diagram of values education content (source: platform screenshot).

2.3. Post-class Stage: Project-Based Digital Work and Smart Evaluation

2.3.1. Multimodal Digital Projects

Students worked in groups on one of three types of digital projects, each requiring them to integrate the three dimensions of competence.

Special topic website on China-Latin America cooperation: They wrote Spanish content for a "China-Latin America Cooperation Project Map" and a "Latin American Culture Column." One group explained the technology and sustainability significance of the China-Brazil satellite cooperation project[6].

Social media public opinion report in Spanish: Groups collected Spanish tweets and Instagram posts about "China-Latin America cooperation," visualized the sentiment distribution, and proposed communication strategies[6].

Short documentary in Spanish: Some groups filmed short documentaries on "Sino-Latin American cultural integration in local life" — for example, how a local Latin American restaurant adapted to Chinese tastes. They added Spanish narration and subtitles, along with a short academic journal explaining the historical and social forces behind cultural borrowing.

2.3.2. Intelligent Multi-Source Evaluation System

(1) Collecting multi-dimensional process data: I built a full record of learning behaviors (login frequency, time spent on resources, interaction counts), process performance (quiz scores, simulation results, class participation), and competence development (text-mining reports from their papers).

(2) Competence profiles and personalized feedback: Using the platform's analysis tools and SPSS, I generated radar charts for each student or group. The charts covered knowledge mastery, critical thinking, cross-cultural sensitivity, and other dimensions. Students then received customized resource packages and extra exercises. Learning analytics helped me move beyond final exams to dynamic, real-time interventions. Studies show that dashboard-based feedback can raise self-regulated learning by about 25%[12]. In my class, the heatmap on common difficulties let me spot the "MERCOSUR vs. Pacific Alliance" confusion right away and design targeted practice for the next session.

(3) Human-machine collaborative peer review: The system randomly and anonymously distributed

assignments, performed sentiment analysis, and did an initial quality check of peer reviews. It then generated a report for me to verify. Final grades came 70% from my evaluation and 30% from system-validated peer reviews. This improved objectivity and efficiency[4]. Still, I kept the right to adjust final grades for creative or subtle answers that an algorithm might miss. Blending machine processing with human judgment kept the assessment both scalable and fair[13].

(4) Diversified final assessment: Instead of a single final exam, I used a composite structure: process evaluation (30%, covering pre-class and in-class work), staged competence tests (20%, based on simulation cases and Spanish Major Level 8 questions), and final outcome evaluation (50%, including research papers and digital projects). This gave a much fuller picture of each student's growth.

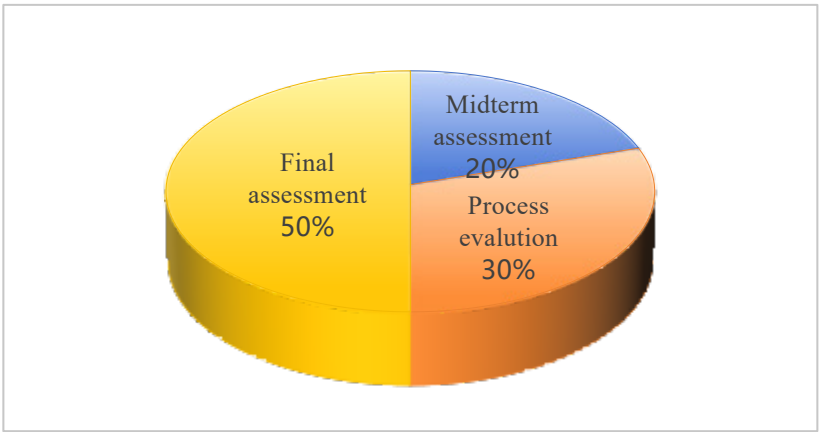


Figure 5. Schematic diagram of the comprehensive evaluation system (source: author's design).

3. Practical Outcomes, Reflections, and Future Plans

3.1. What Worked Well

Learning engagement and language skills improved noticeably. Attendance and the average number of student–platform interactions were much higher than in previous years. End-term Spanish academic papers showed better citation practices and tighter arguments. In-class Spanish debates sounded more fluent, more persuasive, and better supported by evidence. An anonymous survey after the course found that over 85% of students agreed that "digital resources made learning more interesting," and 78% said "the virtual simulation helped me understand cultural differences in diplomatic etiquette." These comments, together with the numbers, confirmed that the changes were working.

Regional cognition and cross-cultural communication got stronger. Most students could clearly explain the differences among major Latin American integration blocs and identify the key areas of China-Latin America cooperation. Their analysis moved from listing facts to discussing mechanisms. The average score for "cultural appropriateness" in the virtual simulation rose sharply, showing real progress in adapting communication strategies to a cross-cultural setting[14].

Digital literacy and data-driven research skills also grew. Tasks involving social media mining and AI text analysis taught students how to collect, clean, and visualize data. Several groups presented quantitative evidence in their final defenses — something rarely seen in the old course format. This suggests that the digital model prepares students well for the data-heavy research environment of modern area studies.

3.2. Where to Improve

Uneven language proficiency remains a challenge. Some students have a much stronger Spanish foundation than others, which affects how much they gain from advanced content. One solution is for the National Smart Education Platform to offer a "hierarchical micro-course library" for core Spanish skills, or to embed adaptive diagnostic and remedial paths into existing courses. In my own teaching, I also started grouping students so that each group contains a mix of proficiency levels ("homogeneous between groups, heterogeneous within groups"). The platform then records each student's contribution to collaborative work, allowing me to give differentiated scores.

Personalized learning support could be smarter. The platform already does some learning analytics, but it could go further. A more refined learner model would diagnose not only weak knowledge points but also thinking patterns and learning strategy preferences. That would move from simply pushing resources to providing cognitive scaffolding and strategic coaching.

Cross-institutional collaboration should be expanded. If the platform added modules for "virtual teaching and research offices" and "collaborative project spaces," teachers and students from different universities could work together on joint research, online mock negotiations, or collaborative digital creations about China-Latin America relations. That would create a much larger and more vibrant learning community.

The teacher's role is changing, and professional development must catch up. As the teaching process becomes more digital, I find myself spending less time lecturing and more time designing activities, facilitating discussions, and analyzing data. This shift demands new digital skills. International teacher standards now list "using technology to enhance learning" as a core competency[15]. Universities should run regular training programs and encourage experiments through teaching competitions and case-sharing events.

4. Conclusion

This paper has described how I redesigned the course "China-Latin America and US-Latin America Relations" around a "three-dimensional integration" framework, relying on the National Smart Education Public Service Platform. The experience shows that smart resource integration, immersive environments, and data-driven feedback can solve the classic problems of area studies teaching. Foreign language courses can evolve into a new form that is value-oriented, competence-based, and digitally empowered.

Looking ahead, several research directions seem promising. First, a longitudinal study could track whether students who go through this digital model perform better in their early careers. Second, a comparative study could pit the National Smart Education Platform against commercial learning management systems to see which does a better job for this type of course. Third, generative AI tools like ChatGPT might be used to assist with translation tasks and data analysis in area studies — but we must also explore the ethical boundaries of such applications.

I will continue to explore deeper uses of the platform, mine the data it produces, and refine the teaching design. The goal is to offer a practical, replicable model for the digital transformation of higher education, especially in fields where content is constantly changing and cross-cultural skills matter.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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