

O Merdeiro in Galician language, geography, history, music and art classes in Spain

Age of students: 14 to 15 years old

Galicia has very strong agricultural and fishing traditions. Spoken language has played an important role in passing down features of the local culture. In this spirit, teachers and students selected the carnival figure *O Merdeiro* and practices related to fishing, oral poetry and music to discover the significance of their living heritage and study Galician language and literature, geography and history, music and visual arts at school. Students described the overall experience as an emotional journey.

See the film [↗](#)

Learning objectives

Galician language and literature:

- ▶ Discovering and safeguarding the vocabulary, idioms, sayings and popular songs related to the sea, fishing and agriculture;
- ▶ Developing and conducting interviews and surveys, collecting and processing the information collected;
- ▶ Recognizing the characteristic features of Galician popular literature, identifying its main genres and themes and completing a poetic composition following the metre used in popular poetry;
- ▶ Understanding and producing oral and written texts, distinguishing notions of meaning, polysemy, synonymy and homonymy.

Geography and history:

- ▶ Studying the different activities of the primary sector in Galicia: agriculture, livestock, forestry and fishing;
- ▶ Analysing the importance of the tertiary sector compared to the primary and secondary sectors.

Music:

- ▶ Learning and practising the rhythmic patterns of traditional Galician pieces related to the world of the sea and agriculture;
- ▶ Developing self-confidence, critical reasoning and initiative through participation and learning how to learn.

Visual Arts:

- ▶ Developing entrepreneurial and aesthetic sensibilities;
- ▶ Selecting and using production techniques and craft materials to create 3D masks;
- ▶ Reflecting on and discussing the creative process orally and in writing, from the initial idea to the final execution.

Objectives related to the ICH element:

- ▶ Understanding, valuing and respecting the community's intangible cultural heritage;
- ▶ Being able to explain the figure of *O Merdeiro*, its origins and main aesthetic features.

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Preparation

Description of the ICH element and the way it is practised today:

The Galician Carnival is celebrated every February in different parts of Galicia, Spain. People dress up and gather together to celebrate the end of winter. Although the main characteristics of the celebration are consistent throughout the region, each area takes pride in its own particularities in terms of the customs and costumes. In Vigo, a city located on the Galician coast, one of the main figures is known by the name of *O Merdeiro*. The figure of *O Merdeiro* was created centuries ago by fishermen who

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Your students' opinions and ideas will enrich the lessons and the project of teaching and learning with living heritage in a school context.

– María Isabel Brión Caíño, teacher,
Spain

wanted to wear costumes and make fun of farmers. Farmers travelled to the coast to collect seaweed to use as compost for their fields. Fishermen looked down on them and used this figure to express their contempt. *O Merdeiro* is thus a figure that represents the ancient rivalry between peasants and fishermen. The story and symbolism of *O Merdeiro* has been transmitted through oral culture within the community. It reflects the extent to which Galician culture is rooted in agricultural and fishing traditions. It also speaks to the importance of oral heritage in the local communities.

Linkages between the ICH element and the school subject:

The Carnival figure *O Merdeiro* is directly related to the area of arts (masks), language (traditional sayings and *regueifas*, a form of oral poetry) and music (songs). It also provides links to history and geography lessons through its connection to the local environment and traditional fishing and farming economies.

Involvement of learners in the preparation of the activity:

This project was particularly strengthened by a continuous collaboration between teachers and learners in developing and implementing the activities. The project idea was jointly shaped by the

Galician language and literature teacher and one of her students, Sara. Likewise, when introducing the concept of living heritage at school, the teacher invited the same student to explain the concept to her classmates by giving them concrete examples to help them understand what intangible cultural heritage is and is not.

Involvement of bearers and local community in the preparation and/or implementation of the activity:

The project was able to effectively involve family members and professional associations working in the field of living heritage. Students developed short surveys and interviewed their parents and grandparents on the topics related to the carnival festivities and traditional practices of fishing and farming. The school team consulted and hosted the A Merdeira Ethnographic Association, which gave a presentation about *O Merdeiro*. In their geography class, students visited a local fishing boat and a women's net maker association, learning from the members themselves how net-crafting has been passed down through generations for centuries – and the ways it still plays an important role in today's fishing industry. Music students attended a workshop held by a local association called *Peisd' hos*.

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Description of the activity

Activities relating to *O Merdeiro* were integrated into four subjects: Galician language and literature, visual arts, music and geography and history. Each teacher developed his or her own lesson plans, with the overall project coordinated at the school level in order to achieve the general learning objectives of raising awareness of local traditions and their fragility, as well as of the relationship of ICH with the environment and students' families.

In Galician language and literature class, pupils developed and conducted interviews with family members and community elders, in which they gathered sayings, idioms and *regueifas*, a type of oral poetry. The aim was to document and analyse vocabulary related to the sea and agriculture,

such as oral expressions and popular songs. The collected expressions allowed students to examine notions of meaning, polysemy, synonymy and homonymy. Students learned to identify the main genres and themes of popular literature in Galicia and the principles of the metric scheme used in popular poetic composition. In the final activity, students composed their own texts, which included *regueifa* poetry and musical compositions (e.g. rap) using the new vocabulary and traditional sayings. The teachers used the 'one, two, all' method for critical reflection and the 'I used to think..., now I think...' assessment methodology.

For the geography and history teacher, the carnival figure and the oral traditions around traditional

fishing and farming provided a context to introduce students to the Galician economy, which is part of this subject's curriculum. Students learned about the economic activities carried out in Galicia and analysed the relative importance of the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. They also deepened their knowledge of the different activities of primary industries in Galicia such as agriculture and livestock. The teacher organized a field trip to a fishing boat and a women's netmaker association. These women inherited their netmaking techniques from their mothers and grandmothers. The students were thus able to meet with practitioners and interview them about different aspects of their work, skills and know-how.

In music class, 19 students volunteered to document and work with traditional Galician pieces related to

the sea and agriculture. Peisd'hos, a local music association, gave a workshop about traditional musical instruments and Galician rhythms. From a list of identified Galician pieces, students chose *Eu son mariñeiro* to study, learn and perform during the Christmas festival in front of the school community.

In art class, the students and teacher reinterpreted and created original 3D *O Merdeiro* masks. Members of the A Merdeira Ethnographic Association visited the school, helping students observe and analyse an original mask and costume. Students developed their own designs from scrap materials, which they assembled into wearable *O Merdeiro* masks. All works were exhibited during the Christmas school event and prepared for the carnival.

Learning outcomes

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The use of contextualized learning, which connects curriculum subjects to real-life experiences and students' family life, allowed pupils to achieve the learning objectives while motivating them to be more engaged and enjoy the learning process. Living heritage provided the content and the medium for the lessons. Students were able to grasp abstract concepts more easily because they related to the carnival figure *O Merdeiro* and resonated with stories shared at home.

Integrating living heritage into their pedagogy allowed teachers to cultivate a sense of respect and appreciation for living heritage among students, who learned how they can actively contribute to its safeguarding from an early age. Students learned more about local traditions, their meaning and relevance for the people in the region and the importance that intergenerational transmission has played in maintaining these practices within the community throughout the years.



Students learning from their grandparents about their youth and their hard labour at sea or working the land transformed a theoretical geography lesson into an emotional experience.

– María Isabel Brión Caíño, teacher, Spain

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