

Learner of the Year, Maria Carolina Orgnero Schiaffino, Reaches Her Goals as an Adult Learner and Teacher

By Bernadette Dubs

Learning is a lifelong process. Many of us began our careers in structured, formal education during early childhood and continued on this path through adulthood. Others find their studies interrupted by years of doing things outside of formal educational spheres such as raising families, starting a career, taking care of an ill loved one or dealing with their own illnesses, or a combination of these or other challenges.

In order to recognize those adults who make their way back to education despite life's interruptions and challenges, CAEL created the Learner of the Year Award. Every year at the CAEL Conference, CAEL presents this award to individuals who have overcome multiple barriers to successfully return to a learning environment. (For information on past recipients, see www.cael.org/conference_highlights.htm .)

On November 9, CAEL will recognize Maria Carolina Orgnero Schiaffino, or as she prefers, Carolina. A native Argentinean, Carolina has gained confidence and persevered through her own set of life challenges to obtain the education she needed to become a teacher of the adult learning population. She made the difficult decision to change the focus of her career, leave Argentina, and come to the United States to attend the University of Connecticut for her master's degree, and adapt to a new culture. Today Carolina is completing a doctoral program and defending her dissertation, "The Nature of Feedback and its Relation to Student Learning in an Undergraduate Online English Composition Course."

Carolina's Learning Path

Even as a little girl in Argentina Carolina knew someday she would answer to the title of teacher.

"Teaching is in my bloodstream. It is my passion. When I was seven years old, my dad built a blackboard for my sisters and me, and my toys became my students. I never imagined any other job or profession in my life," she said.

After Carolina finished secondary school, she attended college and received a bachelor's degree and became a teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Argentina. From 1990 to 1999, she held various positions there teaching English as a Foreign Language first to children and then adults. It was when she began teaching adults while still in Argentina that she found her true passion and niche for teaching and learning.

"When I began teaching adults, I noticed that adults' needs differed from those of children and teenagers. Adults are aware of their strengths and difficulties so they are self-conscious of what they can do and what their limitations are. While I reassured them that they would learn because I truly believed they could, I noticed that many students appreciated my explanations as to why certain activities were useful and how they contributed to the development of a skill. Without formal training

on how adults learned, I was using my intuition to guide my teaching.”

In discovering her passion for teaching the adult population, Carolina realized that she wanted theoretical foundations and research about how adults learn that supported her own theories. Unfortunately, there were no programs in Argentina that explained how or why her own methods for teaching adults worked.

One day, Carolina discovered a poster for the Fulbright-PROFOR scholarship in her university café and applied with the stated goal that she wished to revitalize Argentina’s education system. Much to her surprise, she received the funding and began searching for the best college or university that had both bilingual education and adult learning courses. She found the University of Connecticut.

Her first semester in Connecticut was difficult, as she was far away from her close network of family and friends and had to adapt to a new culture and a different set of social codes. During that semester, Carolina took a course on adult and experiential learning. “A spell was cast on me,” she said. “My curiosity to learn more about this program became an engine to keep going, the faculty I interacted with were very friendly and had a great interest in helping me, and I made new friends.”

Carolina received her master’s degree in education, curriculum, and instruction from UConn in 2002. The University of Connecticut faculty saw her potential, and they encouraged her to enter the doctoral program in adult and experiential learning.

University of Connecticut and CAEL’s Project Learn

Carolina’s doctoral program got its start more than twenty years ago as a result of CAEL’s Project Learn. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation-funded Project Learn initiative was developed as a way to set up a network of adult-learner friendly institutions and services. As part of this initiative, the University of Connecticut received funding to set up a learner-friendly PhD program in adult learning. It was the first program of its kind in the country, and CAEL, seeing its potential, sponsored the initiative. Over the years, the program has grown and changed through the efforts of the University of Connecticut faculty and the partnership between UConn and CAEL.

The program encourages professional development by assisting professionals with the translation of theory into practice by exploring how and why adults learn. The University of Connecticut faculty employ CAEL’s prior learning assessment principles and best practices for adult learning to demonstrate to students how to improve adult learning practices. The faculty emphasizes experiential learning in the classroom itself, utilizes research, and bases the classes’ curriculum on the students’ interests and areas of expertise.

Carolina believes this is what helped guide her toward the future and clarified her vision of what she needs to accomplish. “The Adult Learning Program at the University of Connecticut changed my vision of what teaching and learning is. I can not find enough words to describe how grateful I am for the support that I have received throughout these years from my advisor and all the professors in the program. They believed in me.”

Her Path Ahead

Fall, the season of change, brings both another set of changes and the recognition of the challenges Carolina has overcome and her dedication and vision for the future—she will receive the Learner of the Year award at the CAEL Conference and then will graduate. Afterwards she will use the knowledge, experience, and research she has gained to focus on professional development of educators as well as changing the Argentinean system of education.

Carolina plans to give presentations on her research at national and international conferences, as well as leading longer professional development sessions with educators. “My message is to explain how learning happens and the role that teachers and students play in it. To narrow the scope, I am focusing on feedback and its relationship with writing and how it has an impact on learning.”

After graduation, Carolina also wants to work in the United States for a few years to hone her skills as a professor and to publish as much as she can. In addition, she would like to begin collaborative research projects between Argentina and the United States “to expand the understanding of what adult learning is and how it could benefit both educational systems.”

Carolina believes being the Learner of the Year Award recognizes not only the work from her past but also supports her future goals. It also recognizes the work of all teachers in Argentina.

“It is a great honor to receive this distinction. I also feel that I am receiving it on behalf of other teachers in Argentina that invest plenty of time and effort toward their work, want to receive professional development and help in their careers, juggle many different jobs in addition to teaching, and teach in higher education while making lower salaries. I consider this a group award.”