

in "Extasis de la sustancia destruida" as he writes: "Paraíso (éxtasis de participación en lo homogéneo, intemporalidad)" (189).

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Creating a Syllabus for French/Francophone Culture: A Re-examination of its Role in the Curriculum

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1. INTRODUCTION: LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Although discussions of foreign language pedagogy used to focus almost exclusively on language skills, we are increasingly aware of the impossibility of teaching a language in isolation from the culture it expresses. In the ACTFL proficiency guidelines, for example, an understanding of cultural references is required to attain both *superior* and *distinguished* levels of proficiency for the language skills "reading" and "listening." The AATF's "Syllabus of Competence", which outlines the knowledge and proficiency expected of teachers of French in five areas,¹ devotes one chapter exclusively to "culture."

The awareness that language and culture are inseparable is, of course, far from new. Indeed, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis,² quite popular earlier in this century, went so far as to state that our language *determines* the way we think and view the world; that our "cultural outlook" is determined by the language we speak and think in. Although the hypothesis in its strongest form later fell into disfavor,³ it is evident that a language does not exist in isolation but in cultural community. Today's beginning and intermediate-level textbooks reflect the inextricable role of "culture acquisition" in language learning, for they are dotted with cultural notes to explain French society and worldview to American students.

Since any language expresses a culture, we can begin to glimpse the soul of a community by examining its vocabulary, as shown by Lakoff's linguistic analysis of "love" in American culture. He notes that it is "conventionally understood in terms of physical force (there is *attraction, electricity, magnetism*, etc.) or terms of health (is the relationship *healthy, sick, on the mend, dying, on its last legs?*)" and so forth (306).⁴ Although it is probable that most Americans would not consciously categorize love under "health" or "physical force," surely our use of these terms subconsciously affects our understanding of the concept.

Indeed, concepts shared by different cultures are not always expressed in identical forms. For instance, the concept "romance," val-

ued in both American and French culture, cannot be expressed by a substantive in French. Thus, the statement "French is the language of romance" is difficult to translate.⁵

Connotative differences between "equivalent terms" also abound across cultures; e.g. "bread"/"pain" bring to a speaker's mind different images, as do "house"/"maison"; "dinner"/"diner"; "friendship"/"amitié". If we examine the cultural value "friendship" more closely, for instance, we realize that the American term "friend" connotes less intimacy than the French term "ami." Moreover, different culturally based presuppositions come into play, as illustrated by Raymonde Carroll. In discussing French/American miscommunication between friends, she notes that, although both would say "friends help each other," a French person would say to herself roughly "X is my friend; he is therefore going to offer to help me," whereas an American would think "X is my friend; he will therefore ask me to help him if he needs me" (78). In other words, an American would hesitate to offer help or advice unless asked, for fear of invading another's private life or suggesting incapability of arranging his own affairs (76), whereas the French expect a friend to take control, suggest and implement a solution, a plan of action. Thus, in addition to the differing semantic fields covered by the terms "friend" and "ami," our expectations of how a "friend"/"ami" responds to us is also culturally determined and a potential minefield for intercultural miscommunication.

Recognizing, then, the symbiosis of language and culture, we make curricular decisions in our university language departments. Some undergraduate programs choose to incorporate culture units into their language "skills" and/or literature courses; others require additional classes specifically on "culture."

2. CURRENT APPROACHES

My introduction to the teaching of French/Francophone culture—this problematic, ill-defined subject area—came in the fall of 1991, when I was asked to prepare a 3rd-year course entitled "Contemporary Francophone Culture" with the understanding that the "Francophone" component would also include contemporary "French" culture. A search of published instructional materials revealed a wealth of topics under the heading "culture" as well as numerous different approaches to teaching it, a reflection of the lack of consensus in defining both the term and its role in a foreign language curriculum.

2.1. FRENCH CULTURE

The instructional materials available for teaching French culture fall into five general categories:

1. Topics Approach
2. Current Events
3. Culture (capital "C")
4. Faux Pas
5. Values Approach

Most intermediate-level "culture" textbooks seem to prefer category one, the topics approach. Typically, texts are divided into units on sports, fashion, university, family life, transportation, technology, cuisine, women's roles, and so forth. The second method is based on news magazines, written and televised, in both simplified and original text, replete with exercises for classroom application. Its focus is current events and social issues. The third approach, "Culture" (capital "C"), highlights the arts in France, including painting, architecture, classical music, film, and occasionally philosophy and literature.

The fourth possibility I have called the "faux pas" approach, for it is designed to sensitize students to French manners and habits in order to prevent "gauche-ness" or "ugly American-ness" when the students later study or travel abroad. Among subjects studied in this approach are table manners, greetings, the use of *tu* and *vous*, and gift-giving customs. The fifth path to "culture" I have categorized as the "values" approach. This last is by far the trickiest pedagogically, for it attempts to define and analyze French values without stereotyping, in order to foster better intercultural communication. French values covered in this approach typically include friendship/love, intellectualism, individualism, French reserve and moderation, organization of space, and social implications of the *tu/vous* distinction.

2.2. FRANCOPHONE CULTURE

To this we must add the ingredient *Francophone* culture. The amorphous term "culture" of the previous five approaches must be expanded in order to incorporate the many non-French native cultures upon which French was superimposed, as in Africa, as well as the necessary adaptations to new environments that French culture underwent in regions such as Quebec and Louisiana. Despite the paucity of "cultural" texts about Francophone societies, the available materials revealed the following approaches:

1. Factual Approach
2. Life Portraits
3. Literature

The first category approaches each country or region from the perspective of the social sciences, and provides primarily facts—geographic, historical, political, and economic. Maps display each country's location and capital; other data include population, ethnic groups, languages spoken, currency used, principal crops and exports. Major historical events are outlined, and an attempt is made to describe the "current" political and economic situation.

The second method, perhaps a more characteristically American approach,⁶ presents a snapshot of daily life of a "typical" inhabitant of the region, by either an interview, diary entries, or a journalistic "story." This portrait personalizes a "foreign" culture and serves as a springboard for classroom discussion. I have categorized "literature" as a third approach, although available instructional materials do not use literature exclusively to teach culture. Rather, an occasional poem or short story is included in a "factual" or "portrait" unit on a Francophone country.

3. "CULTURE" DEFINED

3.1. ETYMOLOGY

The vast array of definitions makes the organization of a "culture class" or "culture unit" extremely challenging. The term "culture," derived from Latin, originally referred to the cultivation of fields⁷ and later extended to the "cultivated condition". Today's definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary* begin with "the artificial development of microscopic organisms," range through "the training, development and refinement of mind, tastes, and manners" and "the intellectual side of Civilization," and conclude with "the civilization, customs, artistic achievements, etc., of a people". The semantic range covered in the latter definitions illustrates the difficulty in creating a syllabus for teaching "culture."

3.2. IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

In their classic 1963 work *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, Kroeber and Kluckhohn collected 160 published defini-

tions of "culture." In the ensuing three decades, it would be surprising if this figure had not multiplied exponentially. The complexity of the term "culture" can be seen in the broadness of Kluckhohn's definition: "Culture... is the manmade part of the human environment" (558). Kroeber provides more detail. He distinguishes four categories: social culture (how a nation or people or group behave toward each other); value culture (morals, religion, belief systems); reality culture (scientific discovery, also culturally influenced); and language culture (a mechanism serving the other cultural components).

As perplexing as these definitions may be to French instructors, a hierarchy of cultural categories would be of interest. Although the criteria by which one determines this hierarchy are obscure, in the determination of what to include in (and exclude from) a syllabus of French/Francophone culture, the notion of hierarchy has a certain helpful appeal.

3.3. IN THE FRENCH CURRICULUM

From the perspective of foreign language pedagogy, the concept of a "national" culture is also of considerable interest. Louis Porcher describes it as "un ensemble de pratiques culturelles diversifiées, qui entretient un certain nombre de relations distinctives avec d'autres cultures nationales. Telle est sans doute une définition pédagogiquement utile: une culture est faite de diversités inscrites dans (et constituées d') une cohérence d'ensemble" (12).

Even if we accept his definition of national culture, we are left with the question of *which* practices are distinctively French and should therefore be included in our syllabus. In his advocacy of "cultural literacy," E.D. Hirsch points out that effective communication between people is dependent upon "a reliable sense of what they do and do not know" (16), and proposes a minimum common ground for the culturally literate. Clearly, such a common ground is also necessary for effective communication between author and reader. Yet what are the essential ingredients for cultural literacy in French?

Porcher attempted to address this issue in 1986 with a "test d'auto-évaluation" for foreigners, consisting of 100 questions on French culture, entitled *Où en est, votre français?* The questions fell into five categories: history, political and social organization; literature; geography; the arts; and "surprise questions" (e.g. wines, the media, common initials, sports). Unfortunately, no single course on French culture could possibly cover such a broad spectrum of subjects.

In the "Syllabus of Competence" published by the AATF in 1989, we find another attempt to outline the elements of cultural literacy in French for foreigners. The "Syllabus" distinguishes two levels of cultural competence: *basic* and *superior*. Each level is subdivided into two categories, "sociolinguistic ability" and "knowledge," each of which is in turn characterized by a list of requirements.

We find among the requirements for *basic* "sociolinguistic ability," for example, the capacity to make polite requests and to comprehend French gestures. *Basic* "knowledge" ranges from the ability to discuss "prominent personalities and cultural achievements in France since the Middle Ages, and in the French-speaking world since the 18th century"; to the naming of "at least two present French political parties"; to listing and locating on a map ten Francophone countries; to the more subtle ability to "produce a few proverbs or stock phrases which reflect a [French] world view" (15). To attain *superior* "sociolinguistic ability," we find required, for instance, the ability to "find comic some culture-related French humor." *Superior* "knowledge" includes such items as the ability to locate fifteen Francophone countries on a map and name their capitals; to discuss French values such as "l'art de vivre," "l'amitié," "l'intellectualité"; and to "discuss the metaphorical nature and cultural role of myth, à propos of a given text such as an African legend" (16).

The inclusion of both factual knowledge, such as major historical events and figures, and the intangibles "politeness" and "humor" again reveals the complexity of the definitions of "culture," "cultural competence," and "cultural literacy." To demand in addition a knowledge of "the metaphorical nature of myth" is surely to deny the "superior" cultural competence of any native speaker, whether farmer or nuclear physicist.

4. SYLLABUS

4.1. CONTENT

In my class I opted for the "potpourri" approach. Given a fifteen-week time limit, I decided to spend five weeks on contemporary French culture, ten on Francophone culture. In the French segment I chose to concentrate on the "values" and "stereotypes" approach, with an occasional foray into the "topics" and "current events" approaches for good measure. In the Francophone segment, we covered ten countries/regions selected from three continents (roughly one per week). The selec-

tion procedure did not evolve either from research or from a belief that these ten areas were the most important or representative, but simply reflected my "*connaissance*." The Francophone regions we studied included the three major European ones: Belgium, Luxembourg, and Switzerland (with mention of Monaco); four from the African continent: Morocco, Mali, Senegal, Cameroon; and three from the "New World": Quebec, Acadia/Louisiana, and Haiti.

Students were given a questionnaire to complete independently on each of the regions (see Appendix). To fulfill one of the AATF's requirements for *basic* cultural competency, students were asked to locate each country/region and its capital on a map, as well as answer factual questions on geography, history, political organization, religions, and languages, and names of authors, artists, and celebrities of the country. They also answered two short open-ended essay questions on ways in which "French" culture is manifested in the region and the prevailing attitude toward it, and on what they discovered that they found particularly interesting or unique.

Class discussion focussed on themes specific to each country. For example, among the topics we discussed were the different approaches to bilingualism in Belgium, Switzerland, and Canada; voodoo in Haiti and Louisiana; forced emigration from Acadia; "la négritude" in Senegal and Haiti. Each theme was developed through the reading of informational articles, and then illustrated by literary selections and poems.

Students were evaluated on the basis of exams, a questionnaire, a term paper on a topic of their choice, and four film commentaries, for an additional component of the class was a film requirement. Students viewed at least two French and two Francophone films from a short list of those available locally and wrote a "cultural commentary" on each, using as a point of departure our class discussions on French values, stereotypes, and cultural themes.

4.2. DIFFICULTIES

One of the most difficult tasks, for which I felt least prepared, was steering discussions away from unconscious stereotyping and prejudice. Whereas a frequent reaction I encountered was that "French" meant "chic" and "sophisticated," a resistance arose on the part of some students towards the Canadian French, who were regarded as "chauvinistic troublemakers," or Louisiana 'Cadiens, deemed "ignorant, backward hicks," neither of which groups could speak French

"right." The fascination with the distant and foreign, whether European or African, does not apparently extend to one's own backyard. Instructors of Spanish are undoubtedly more familiar with this reaction, having long taught Latin American as well as Spanish culture, literature, and language, and they have had to deal with unflattering stereotypes of Mexicans and other Hispanics. French instructors are somewhat less prepared in this regard, for to many, "French" and "Culture" are synonyms.

Turning to research in Spanish pedagogy for ideas on how to approach this problem, I borrowed from Vande Berg's work. As she had done with Spanish students, I supplied my class with some exaggerated French stereotypes of Americans, such as that "Americans are rich"; "Americans are fat"; "Americans are loud and indiscreet." The students' outraged reactions led to a lengthy discussion of stereotyping, and most began to get a sense of the stereotypical quality of their own beliefs about Francophone societies in Europe and Africa. However, there was an apparent disassociation on the part of most of my students between stereotypes of American society held by people an ocean away, and their own strongly-held opinions about the Francophone peoples of the Americas. Whether Quebec, Louisiana, or Haiti, these regions were apparently too close by for my students to be able to view them undistorted by the lenses of stereotyping.

Another difficulty I encountered was the inability of some students to perceive the arbitrary nature of culture, for how can we make objective comparisons between our own and another culture if we consider one "right" and another "wrong"? In her article "Cross-Cultural Awareness in the Foreign Language Classroom," Ortuño addresses "cultural myopia" and how it "causes us to equate what is with what we think ought to be" (450). In other words: Our way is right. Theirs is wrong.

Furthermore, my class had great difficulty identifying "our" way, or "the American way." Because the class reflected our diverse, multicultural society, we reached no consensus in our discussions of American values. The AATF "Syllabus," however, includes in a student's *basic* "knowledge" the ability to "identify the truth or untruth implied in the stereotypes of his or her home culture [American culture] and of French culture" (15). Yet how are we to make this identification of truth or falsehood when we cannot identify American culture? Indeed, was not the battle over whose American culture will or should predominate fought in 1992 at the ballot box and on television sitcoms? Are we not continually bombarded with differing definitions of American "family values," "culture," and the "cultural elite"? Just as the diverse manifestations of American culture obscure its easy identification, we

must also realize that there is no global Francophone culture; each country or region has to be treated separately, on its own terms.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As implied by the present participle in the title, "creating" a syllabus for teaching French/Francophone culture is an ongoing process. I hope, however, to have outlined some of the difficulties inherent in the organization of a "culture" class or unit, and to have raised a few issues. What is "culture"? What ingredients constitute *basic* cultural literacy for French students? It appears that the possibilities are endless; even in the most rigorous of undergraduate programs, no student could possibly learn, or acquire, or internalize all that has been proposed. Perhaps a short list of cultural facts with which every French major should be familiar could be drawn up to guide us in our curricular decisions, for a cultural common ground is necessary in comprehension and communication.

Yet what is the underlying purpose of our "culture" classes for foreign language students? We often undergo "culture shock" after experiencing a foreign culture, even vicariously through literature or film, for our perception of our home culture changes. Thus, should we not make the principal goal of our culture syllabus an initiation to the uncomfortable but necessary experience of "coming home crazy"?⁹ --that is, the often discomfiting realization that "our way of life" is merely one choice from among limitless possibilities.

The novelist Bharati Mukherjee, who beautifully illustrates in her writings the necessity of cultural adaptability for immigrants, offers this advice: "If you have to wonder, if you keep looking for signs, if you wait—surrendering little bits of a reluctant self every year, clutching the souvenirs of an ever-retreating past—you'll never belong, anywhere" (xiv).

By their very nature, popular culture and current events are ever-changing, as are societal values, even governments, economic systems, and nations themselves. Just as we do not typically teach and test a student's knowledge of slang, for it is unstable and ephemeral, perhaps we should focus primarily on fostering flexibility. National culture traits and systems will continually change, metamorphose, or disappear to accommodate changing reality, as do languages themselves, but if we can impart an understanding of the arbitrariness of culture and acceptance of cultural difference, we empower students to "*se débrouiller*" in any circumstance, and to be open to a lifelong adapta-

tion to new information and cultural awareness. As Porcher, who understood this deeper purpose of teaching culture to foreigners, wrote: "Le but [de l'enseignement de la culture] n'est pas seulement que l'élève sache quelque chose *sur*, mais d'abord et surtout qu'il soit capable de s'orienter *dans* (les pratiques culturelles...)" (17). While we continue to re-examine both our approaches to teaching culture and the contents of our syllabi, let us also keep our eye on the goal: fostering intercultural understanding, communication (oral and written), and adaptability.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire sur les pays/régions francophones

PAYS _____

1. Description brève du système de gouvernement:

Qui est le chef du gouvernement aujourd'hui? Quel est son titre?

2. Quelles sont les religions principales?
3. Quelles sont les groupes ethniques principales?
4. Nommez au moins deux personnes célèbres de ce pays. Pourquoi sont-ils célèbres?
5. Quel est l'unité de monnaie/l'argent? _____
6. Décrivez l'influence française dans cette région—comment est-ce qu'elle se manifeste? Quelle est l'attitude des habitants envers la France et la culture française?
7. Décrivez au moins deux faits culturels que vous trouvez intéressants ou uniques.
8. Dessinez une carte du pays/région, où vous indiquez:
- la capitale
 - la partie francophone du pays

● NOTES

¹ The five areas are language, culture, literature, applied linguistics, and methodology.

² Propounded in the collected works of anthropologist/linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf. For a synopsis of their theory, see David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

³ The basis of the counterargument to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was the question: If one's native language *determines* thought and cultural perspective, why can any concept or cultural value be explained, perhaps more awkwardly, perhaps periphrastically, to a speaker of another language? Hence, we see frequently "cultural notes" written in English in beginning French textbooks.

⁴ For more categories of "love," see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁵ Possible translations include "la langue des romantiques," "la langue des amoureux," or "la langue d'amour," none of which expresses precisely the English substantive "romance."

⁶ See, for example, Wylie's "French Value Orientations," in which he contrasts the American and French methods of teaching geography and history, and the different worldviews the methods portray.

⁷ In French, "la culture" retains this original meaning, and in English we still find it in terms such as *agriculture*: the "culture" of fields; or *viticulture*: the cultivation of the vine.

⁸ In this document, "culture" is described as an "organic whole made up of values, a grid through which one sees the world, habits of thought and feeling, and habits of interacting with certain social institutions and customs" (14).

⁹ Holm's phrase for "culture shock" is also the title of an alphabetical collection of essays written upon his return from teaching in China.

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The Recalcitrance of Myth: The Conquest of the Americas in High School History Textbooks

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The European "discovery" and settlement of the Americas—both the acts and their aftershocks—have lately come under intense scrutiny. This is of course not an entirely new phenomenon. Each generation interprets anew the early European explorers of the Western Hemisphere, and Christopher Columbus in particular has proved to be a protean figure, sometimes a symbol of scientific progress and human advancement, sometimes a symbol of benighted superstition (Wilford 247-65). Given the recent quincentennial commemoration, it was natural that Columbus and those who followed in his wake would be examined afresh by the latest generation to tackle the fortunate/unfortunate encounter between Europeans and the peoples who were already resident in this hemisphere. Moreover, it was natural that the reexamination would encompass calls for the reassessment and revision of history curricula and textbooks. As a result of demographic and political changes, the reassessment already had been taking place, with both politicians and educators debating over what, if anything, should determine "cultural literacy" and whether "multiculturalism" and "pluralism" would be the bane or salvation of the nation. Still, the quincentennial has provided a focus for the argument, and its impact can be seen in the plethora of publications and position papers devoted to Columbus and the events that ensued as a result of his encounter with "the Indies." For example, the quincentennial and its aftermath are the subjects of a 1991 position statement by the National Council for the Social Studies, the text of which implies that educators need both to rediscover the facts of contact and settlement as well as to place the "discovery" within a new, more inclusive context. A similar approach is taken by the editors of the journal *Rethinking Schools*, who devote a special issue to *Rethinking Columbus: Teaching about the 500th Anniversary of Columbus's Arrival in America*. In this special issue, educators take a harsh look at what hitherto has been available in textbooks or children's literature about Columbus and other aspects of contact