

ON THE TEACHING OF FRANCOPHONE CULTURES TO ANGLOPHONE STUDENTS

Samia Spencer ended her essay "On the Teaching of French Culture Through the Press," published in the April 2000 issue of the *National Bulletin*, with a call to French educators to "react creatively" to the enrollment crisis currently affecting French programs across the country and proposes interdisciplinary collaborations along with the creation of "new courses and curricular models" as a means of regenerating interest in French Studies in our schools (Spencer, 2000). Being the sole full-time French professor at a small college that has no undergraduate foreign language requirement, I have recently confronted the challenges Spencer outlined in her essay. One of my solutions to the problem of recruiting French language students and of reviving interest in French studies was indeed to create an interdisciplinary core course in English on the topic of non-Western Francophone cultures that would fulfill the institutional "World Perspectives" diversity requirement. I hoped that such a course would attract students from a wide variety of disciplines and if not interest them in pursuing French language studies, at least pique their curiosity for better understanding how their areas of specialization could intersect with cultures in French-speaking parts of the globe.

Course Design

The course that resulted is divided into five units: (1) French Polynesia, (2) French-speaking Caribbean, (3) Southeast Asia, (4) West Africa and (5) North Africa. Within each geographic area, I focus on specific representative cultures such as Tahiti, Haiti, Martinique, Vietnam, Senegal and Algeria. The main goals of the course are to engage students in discussing the global impact of French colonization, to introduce them to Francophone writers, and to have them use critical thinking skills to analyze literature, film and other cultural texts including news articles, paintings, music and websites. As this is an interdisciplinary course, students are encouraged to pursue research topics in their major (i.e., art, political science, business, sociology, etc.) as this field intersects with one of the cultures studied in class.

The course requirements include reading, in English translation, Patrick Chamoiseau's *School Days*, Miriama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Assia Djebar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, along with a coursepack including folktales, short stories, poems and essays. I also require the viewing of films such as *Sugar Cane Alley* (Euzhan Palcy), *The Scent of Green Papaya* (Tran Anh Hung), *Hyenas* (Djibril Diop Mambety)

and *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo). The mixture of genres of writing and films offers a variety of authentic venues for understanding the complex histories and cultures of peoples living in the DOM-TOM and in former French colonies.

Students are also required to use Web resources in order to learn about the current status of particular focus cultures. General information about location, population, government, literacy rates, ethnic groups, languages spoken, economies and current issues are found in the CIA Factbook [<http://www.cia.gov>] and on the Human Rights Watch page [<http://www.hrw.org>]. Further, at the end of each unit, we discuss current news stories from each country that can be found in English by searching under the country name on the World News website [<http://www.worldnews.com>] or the Africa News Web site [<http://www.africanews.org>]. Usually, on the final day of each unit, I print out news stories from the previous week or so and distribute articles to small groups in class. Each group reads an article, discusses it, and presents it to the class to show how it relates to the cultural history or to the texts studied in class. Although I often worry that there will be "nothing going on" in a particular area at the moment we are studying it, I invariably find that there are always articles the students will be interested in analyzing. Thus far, we have been "lucky" enough to study West Africa during a coup d'état in the Côte d'Ivoire, Haiti during Aristide's election to the presidency, and Vietnam on the day of the 25th anniversary of the end of the American Vietnam War. Even the less momentous news articles, however, allow students to see these foreign cultures as an active and dynamic part of our 21st-century global community.

Interdisciplinary Projects

The interdisciplinary group presentations and final projects are the most exciting part of the student assessment, which also includes five short quizzes and a final. The exams are designed to test for cultural competence and to challenge students to think critically about themes that are found in all of the cultures—such as the importance of oral tradition and the community, the problem of language, issues of ethnic/racial/religious diversity, the role of women, education systems, postcolonialism and globalization. The group presentations and final projects encourage the students to expand their knowledge of their major field by exploring it in the context of Francophone cultures. I group students as much as possible by majors and assign them a geographical area and a date. Often, I

suggest a topic, but encourage students to change or nuance it according to their interests and to the research sources they are able to locate. Nutrition Science majors, for example, are given the topic of "Caribbean Food;" Business majors "Economic Development in Vietnam;" Art Majors, "West African Art."

The group projects have been by far the most successful tactic for sparking the curiosity of Anglophone (sometimes Francophobe) students in studying Francophone cultures. Students are always surprised at the wealth of information they are able to find on their topic through a combination of traditional library sources and internet sources (I give an extensive web bibliography as a starting point). One group of Nutrition Science majors, for example, offered a presentation on Caribbean food. Each member of the group looked at the contributions of a particular ethnicity to culinary traditions in the French-speaking Caribbean islands, ranging from the evidence of native Amerindian ingredients to the influence of African food preparation techniques to the more recent influx of Middle Eastern and Chinese traditions. The group prepared a homemade fresh salsa of tomatoes, mangoes, cilantro, green onions and lime juice, accompanied by plantain chips, for the class to try. Their final papers, expanding from their presentation, discussed food as an example of the multiethnic nature of Creole society, analyzed the importance of hunger as a theme in the Caribbean folktales we read, and related their research to current data concerning poverty and malnutrition in Haiti. While not every group project has been exceptional, for success does depend heavily on the level of student initiative, I have been impressed with the majority of the group projects in the three terms I have taught this course. Many of these projects have far surpassed my expectations.

Challenges

Teaching Francophone cultures to Anglophone students, many with no background or interest in French studies, certainly has had its challenges. The greatest, however, was personal and ideological. Considering the vast diversity of cultures to be included in the course and the fact that former colonies like Vietnam and Algeria are not populated today by a majority of speakers of French, could I justify calling the course "Francophone Cultures?" Further, the administration insisted that I call it "French-Speaking Third World Cultures" to specify that it would deal exclusively with non-Western societies. I decided, despite

my concerns for political correctness, to offer the course under that title in order to try to reach out to a larger student population and regenerate interest in the French program.

I consoled myself with the realization that, even if it is not a central defining component of their cultures in the 21st century, countries such as Vietnam and Algeria share a common colonial past and remain linked with France or with other former French colonies through economic exchanges and sociocultural ties. I also promised myself to use the awkward course title as a way to teach the students about the ideological difficulties of labeling these cultures as “Francophone” or as “Third World” in today’s society. I also decided to offer the students a significant number of course readings and films that were originally created in languages other than French—such as those in Haitian Kréyol, Vietnamese, Wolof or Arabic. For this reason, I purposely chose to show the students *The Scent of Green Papaya* (in Vietnamese) rather than Régis Wargnier’s *Indochine* and *Hyenas* (in Wolof) rather than Claire Denis’ *Chocolat*, hoping that these non-Western films would offer a more authentic vision of the cultures than their French-made counterparts.

Subsequent hurdles were more challenging. From the outset, I worried about getting enough students to enroll in this new course. To solve that problem, I set about my own little public relations campaign on campus. I made up snazzy flyers which I posted around campus and mailed to department chairs. I stressed the interdisciplinary projects that the students would do, and I talked about the course to every professor I met in the faculty dining room or at a committee meeting. I encouraged my French language students to tell their roommates and friends about the class and fielded dozens of phone calls from students asking for more information. These initiatives led to a healthy enrollment of 27 students the first term I offered the course (although almost half were French majors or minors) and an overloaded 37 and 36 the next two terms (with only a handful of French majors or minors in each course). Be careful what you wish for!

By far the most difficult aspect of offering the course has been the actual day-to-day teaching of it. One of the main problems, in my view, is that of avoiding over-generalizations when it comes to understanding complex cultures. Students tend to read one author’s story of a fictional character and to want to generalize this to be the case for all the people in the entire culture. As the authors of *Acquiring Cross-Cultural Competence* note, we must teach students three different levels of generalization: “about the needs and aspirations

common to all humanity, about cultures, and about individuals” (Singerman, 1996). It has been a constant challenge to steer classroom discussions from the general to the particular and back.

Also, I quickly discovered that students at my institution sometimes found it difficult to discuss politically-charged subjects in the classroom, such as race or religion. Although this always requires some special attention to tone, I have actually found that in many ways it has been easier for students to talk about things like the effects of colonization, language prejudices, racism, and independence movements in Martinique, rather than to talk about these topics in relation to Puerto Rico, which hits closer to home. I usually wait until the end of the course to draw parallels between French colonization (in Polynesia, Martinique and Guadeloupe, Haiti, Vietnam, etc.) and U.S. expansion (in Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, Haiti, Vietnam, etc.).

There are also a small number of students each term who seem to be somewhat resistant to learning about foreign cultures. One student complained that he could not take notes in class because I “kept speaking French” during my lecture. Knowing that the only French terms I used were those I defined, such as the “DOM-TOM” or *négritude*, I understood this to be an expression of the student’s own xenophobic anxiety. Another student seemed more open to discussing the texts and films but had difficulty talking about characters whose names he found hard to pronounce and at times used inappropriate racial descriptors instead. When discussing a scene from Mambety’s *Hyenas*, for example, this student kept referring to the main character of the all-black African cast as “the black guy.” However, for every student who seemed to feel threatened by encountering non-Western cultures, there were others who told me they felt excited and inspired by this course to continue to study these cultures in other courses or, in the case of one student, to join the Peace Corps in West Africa.

Conclusion

Although it remains to be proven whether or not the addition of “French-Speaking Third World Cultures” as a core course in English will in any way contribute to increased enrollments in French language and literature courses on my campus, I am certain that it has increased the visibility of the French Program campus-wide among both students and faculty advisors in other departments and enrollments have risen slightly in the past year since the course was first offered. Further, regardless of whether or not it incites more students to study French, it will have the effect of making more

students on campus aware of the issues facing Francophone cultures in today’s global community. In the end, I will have achieved several of my main goals as a professor of French, including: promoting sensitivity to cultural diversity, developing critical thinking skills, and introducing Anglophone students to the rich literary traditions of the Francophone world.

Elizabeth A. Blood
Mercyhurst College