

ON THE TEACHING OF FRENCH CULTURE THROUGH THE PRESS

Early in my career as a professor of French, one of my students, an outstanding young woman, made a statement that opened my eyes. Having just completed an M.A. thesis under my direction in which she compared the ideas of two eighteenth-century authors, she was offered a prestigious scholarship by the Government of France. After an exciting year at the University of Dijon, as she was heading to the University of South Carolina for a Master's in International Business, she stopped by my office for a visit. In fluent French and with evident enthusiasm, she spoke of her memorable experiences and her enjoyment of life in France. Then, with obvious embarrassment and with a bit of irony, she also mentioned her greatest disappointment: while she had no problem comprehending the classics during her graduate studies, once in France, she was unable to read a newspaper. Hers was not a problem of linguistic deficiency or insufficient vocabulary. It was a matter of understanding references to various French institutions and programs, identifying notable individuals whose names appeared in the articles, and deciphering allusions to current events. More than twenty years later, the student's words still ring in my ears; the impression they left is indelible. Of the two of us, I believe I was the more embarrassed, for having failed to prepare this young woman for life in France. The discussion sharpened my sensitivity to the need for strengthening the teaching of culture and bolstered my determination to remedy the situation. Since then, my teaching of culture has no longer been confined to the few courses that bear the word on their titles; it has become an integral part of the teaching of French at all levels and in every subject. Films, newspapers, and magazines now are used in nearly every course that I teach.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INCORPORATING CULTURE AT THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL

1. The press is an invaluable pedagogical tool. Its versatility makes it adaptable to any level, from basic elementary classes to advanced graduate courses. It reinforces the four skills by providing endless opportunities to practice oral and reading comprehension, pronunciation, spelling, and written exercises, both structured and communicative. Naturally, the type of activity involving the press and the expectations of student performance vary according to the level and focus of each class. As students develop their skills and expand their knowledge, assignments can increase in complexity and sophistication.

When leafing through the pages of popular weeklies and women's magazines, beginners concentrate only on illustrations and headlines. Advertisements, in particular, offer a chance for acquisition of new vocabulary and practice of simple conversation while arousing students's curiosity and interest in all things French. They can be given specific tasks, keyed to the textbook in use. For example, work on time-telling can be enhanced through TV program guides or simply through pictures of everyday activities. Students answer the question "quelle heure est-il?" with a logical response to the pictured scenes. Similarly, food vocabulary can be practiced while, at the same time, students observe cultural differences in attitudes toward food. Learners compare advertising styles, indicate if they ever saw or purchased the publicized products, and speak of their favorite French designers and food items. Likewise, photographs contribute to the expansion of cultural knowledge. Celebrities in politics, cinema, literature, music, arts, or sports are identified, leading to basic acquaintance with their field of prominence. Gestures, expressions, or clothes are observed and described. Places and sites depicted in the illustrations are also identified and located on the map.

2. By the time students reach junior-level courses, activities offered to them through the press increase exponentially. Beginning with this level, students are expected to read for meaning and discuss the substance of the articles. In conversation classes, reading material for the course requires short-term subscriptions to the *Journal Français*. Specific articles are assigned for class discussion; however, prior to reading the assignments, students are handed a list of questions relating to each article in order to help them focus on the most important information. Studying the articles in the *Journal* is a multifaceted exercise with immense educational benefits, reaching beyond practice of the French language. It develops the students's reading comprehension and enriches their vocabulary; it provides meaningful ideas and substance for discussion in class or outside; it allows students (and teachers) to remain current in their knowledge of events in France and the world; and, by affording students an opportunity to compare French and American viewpoints on current affairs, it sharpens their analytical skills. Thus, the study of the French press contributes to students's overall intellectual growth and enhances their general education. Furthermore, reading the advertisements

for French products and the lists of French cultural activities in the U.S., outlined in the *Journal*—lectures, meetings, art exhibits, concerts, and film screenings—provides added benefits. Students realize that the exploration of French culture does not necessarily require a visit to France; opportunities to enjoy it abound in the U.S. and may be found near their cities and homes. Learners are encouraged to take advantage of these events, and extra credit is offered to those who provide evidence of participation.

3. In my contemporary civilization course, one that generally follows conversation and composition classes, students learn to use the press as a research tool. By now, their language skills and their more extensive college experience allow them to perform more complex tasks. Students select a topic from a list of 20-25 subjects dealing with issues currently debated in French society. These range from unemployment, AIDS, drugs, school violence, the war in Kosovo, French multinationals, or elections to the European parliament, to the Cannes film festival, political scandals, same-sex marriages, social security, the National Front, or application of the 35-hour work week.

Students are required to find no fewer than four or five different sources for their research in order to acquaint themselves with more than one viewpoint. Teaching of this course requires the full cooperation of the humanities and social science librarians who guide the students in their bibliographical and computer searches. While use of the Internet is allowed and encouraged, it does not substitute for the concrete use of the French press. Perusing the pages of newspapers and magazines offers much greater learning opportunities than just finding information on a research topic. As they turn the pages, students encounter numerous headlines, see pictures of new players on the political and cultural scenes, spot current fashion styles and new products, notice titles of recently published books and newly released movies, come across plays performed on the Parisian and regional stages, and skim through job advertisements. While some of the information they encounter may be short-lived, a certain amount is likely to be stored and used in future contexts.

4. For beginners, the viewing of French films is encouraged, mostly for entertainment purposes. Their pedagogical use is restricted to questions related to title or names of characters and actors, given the students' limited vocabulary and skills. Beginning in the second year, however,

learners are required to see at least one French film in every course that I teach. Different lists, with appropriate titles, are prepared for each class. For their movie assignment, students write a summary of the plot, describe the time and place where the film takes place, identify the main characters and their relationships with each other, name the actors who played the parts, and add basic information on the stars and the director, including brief mentions of their previous work. In this respect, the Internet proves to be an invaluable tool.

In more advanced courses, when students have developed greater linguistic skills, they discuss the cinematography, the theme of the movie, and the problems encountered by the protagonists. Assignments vary according to the specific focus of the course. For example, in conversation classes, students prepare for oral discussion of the film by practicing proper pronunciation of names and places, by learning to incorporate newly acquired vocabulary in spontaneous responses, and by trying to overcome the fear of making mistakes while speaking. In composition courses, narration of the plot and description of the characters emphasize application of grammar rules, sentence structure, spelling, and the rational flow of ideas.

5. In survey courses, the viewing of screen adaptations of literary masterpieces contributes to a fuller appreciation of the original work. According to the period and genre studied, a selection may be made, for example, from movies adapted from *Cyrano*, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, *Le Colonel Chabert*, *Le Rouge et le noir*, *Madame Bovary*, *Germinal*, *J'accuse*, *Sous le soleil de Satan*, *Le Silence de la mer*, or *Zazie dans le métro*. Films may be used in a variety of ways. They may constitute an integral part of class assignments. In this case, several films are viewed by the entire class while they read the literary works or excerpts. Discussions involve all students, and short papers may be written on each screen adaptation and its closeness to the original work. On the other hand, instructors may choose to make more limited use of movies. Students make individual selections, view different films, and write an in-depth term paper, making more extensive use of primary and secondary sources on both genres.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INCORPORATING CULTURE AT THE GRADUATE LEVEL

1. In graduate courses, films may be used in ways similar to those described in the paragraphs above. However, the more advanced linguistic and intellectual devel-

opment of students permits more sophisticated usages as well. For example, films may serve to illustrate the evolution of vocabulary and language throughout the ages or the diversity of regional accents in France and other Francophone countries. In recent years, the film productions of Belgium, Quebec, and Francophone Africa have become more easily available in the U.S. and facilitate such guided analysis.

In my history of civilization course, period films contribute significantly to students's understanding of France's situation in a given era. For example, *La Reine Margot* underlines the horrors of religious conflicts in the sixteenth-century; *Ridicule* epitomizes the use of wit among eighteenth-century elites; and *Lacombe Lucien* illustrates the tensions between collaborationists and resisters during the difficult years of World War II.

2. Following my student's comment about her inability to read the newspapers, I developed two graduate courses on that topic: one on the daily press and another on the periodical press. In terms of time, organization, and preparation, these are undoubtedly the most difficult and challenging courses that I teach. However, given the enthusiasm they generate among graduate students and the superlative evaluations they receive, I continue to offer them.

When studying the daily press, students read same-day issues of *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Libération*, *Aujourd'hui*, *La Croix*, *L'Humanité*, *France-Soir*, and *Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*. For background reading, they rely on two short studies in the "Que sais-je?" collection: *La Presse* and *Histoire de la presse*. Preparation for the course requires that students commit to taking the course at least seven weeks in advance, so that orders for the exact number of materials may be placed. Friends living in Strasbourg handle the purchase, packing, and mailing of the books and newspapers.

The diversity of viewpoints on same-day events allows students to understand the orientation of each publication regarding political, social, and economic issues. Relations with other nations, especially the U.S., take on different colors depending on the tendency of the publication and its readership. Students learn to note every detail in the newspaper and to analyze its significance. Much information can be inferred from the space devoted to various types of advertisements; size of headlines and photographs; amount of coverage dealing with crime, national and international affairs, and the economy; type of jobs advertised; amount of space devoted to TV schedules, horoscope, and weather; level

of language used, depth of historical references; and from the comparison between national and regional dailies. Through their readings, students learn the names and tendencies of political parties and their leaders; the intricacies of government institutions; the relationship between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches; the links between politics and the economy; the various social programs underwritten by the State; the tensions between the various countries on European issues; and the most recent publications, shows, and styles. The list of topics encountered is endless.

Students also observe that despite the difference in coverage and the diversity of opinions, there are constants in the French press. These include, among others, a passion for the arts and culture, evidenced by daily articles on new books in French or in translation, plays, movies, shows; interest in international affairs beyond politics and the economy; the importance of humor and *jeux de mots*; and frequent references to literature and history. No other courses offer students as much opportunity to understand contemporary France and the mentalities of its people.

Term papers for the course include a variety of options. Students may choose to focus in-depth on one theme as treated in all the newspapers, for example, the economy, human rights, the U.S., or culture. They can research a single newspaper by studying the history of its creation and evolution, its distribution and readership, its ownership and journalists, and, where appropriate, any change in its perspective. Other students choose to compare a French national daily with an equivalent American publication, noting parallels and contrasts. Those who prefer creative writing can submit an article on a current crisis, written in a style espousing the perspective of a specific daily. Another option yet is to write a book review of a recent publication dealing with the French press.

The course on the periodical press parallels the one on the daily press; student projects are also similar. Reading material usually includes same-week issues of *L'Express*, *Paris Match*, *Le Point*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Marie-Claire*, and *Le Canard enchaîné*, as well as *La Presse périodique* for background information. Format and content of magazines have a different focus from those of dailies. Their coverage tends to include more information on the arts and culture, life-styles, popular restaurants, and celebrities. Recent movie releases can occupy several pages devoted to interviews with the actors and director and an elaborate develop

ment of the topic treated. Likewise, reviews of important publications can be extensive and may include interviews with the authors and discussion of their ideas. Advertisements are compared and studied in detail in order to deduce the type of audience and consumer they attempt to reach. Class discussion also involves the reading habits of the French people, as it contrasts the prosperity of their periodical press with the growing difficulties of their dailies.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, I have been more pleased with comments made by students returning from France. They have shared with me their enthusiasm for French life and culture, told me of the films they saw, and spoken of their pride in reading the papers and following current events in France and the world. Sharing the life of the French in this manner has given students more self-confidence, inspired a sense of community, and allowed them to relate more comfortably and more meaningfully to their hosts. There is no greater satisfaction for any

teacher than to discover that French culture has not only impregnated students' minds and broadened their horizons, but it has also fulfilled their hearts.

As we enter the new millennium, our student body will, in all likelihood, continue to be increasingly diversified and demanding. As French teachers and curriculum developers, we need to broaden our own perspectives and search for novel ways to touch the lives of these students through French culture. In the late 60's and 70's, when the relevance of foreign language studies was seriously challenged, enlightened members of our profession responded by linking the study of French to the needs of the corporate world. The trend was reversed with the development of a new curriculum combining French with international business and the creation of a new specialty—commercial and business French.

As dwindling enrollments have given rise to another major crisis in the late 1990's, I submit that we can react creatively in the new century. Because of its richness and

diversity, French culture can offer unique opportunities in certain areas where no other language can contribute as much. I propose that, once again, it is time to reach beyond our departments in order to seek colleagues in other disciplines whose work complements our own. Together, we can create new courses and curricular models that would benefit majors in both areas. Combining French with the study of journalism, film production, hotel and restaurant management, nutrition and foods, fashion design and merchandising, would not only be relevant, it would greatly enhance the education of future professionals in those fields. Besides benefitting students, such bold initiatives can regenerate interest in French studies, add new allies to our cause, and strengthen our position on campus. Indeed, the teaching of French has yet to be fully explored. As we look toward the future, it will become increasingly clear that culture is the soul of our discipline.

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