

SERVICE LEARNING: ANOTHER TOOL FOR PROMOTING YOUR FRENCH PROGRAM

With French programs being threatened at all levels of the educational ladder, it behooves us as French teachers to make our programs clearly relevant to the changing world and, if possible, interdisciplinary in order to create a cadre of vocal supporters from outside our discipline. Creating Service Learning projects for students of French allows us to reach all three of the goals proposed by the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages. Proposed is "a ... curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole, supported by alliances with other departments and expressed through interdisciplinary courses" (4). At the least, Service Learning projects in French can fall loosely within the committee's continuing priorities:

Promote alliances between K-12 educators and college and university faculty members to strengthen language learning at all levels and to foster collaboration.

Develop programs for gifted learners, especially in the precollegiate years. Push for enriched, intensified programs for those learners on college campuses (8).

The successful projects described briefly below have generated spokespeople who are ready to defend French programs to administrators. Furthermore, these projects have shown students that their knowledge of French *sert à quelque chose*, and the learners have become stronger advocates for our programs as they approach mastery of the language by using it to provide a service to others.

The first project is fairly easy to replicate with advanced university students. The teacher planned a two-week summer camp for 4th and 5th graders at which undergraduate students enrolled in an applied linguistics class teach French to the youngsters. Because the undergraduates had to select which items were to be taught and how, they met one of the goals set by ACTFL: "use community resources to research a topic related to culture and/or language study; and present information about the language and culture to others" (65). The undergraduates had to "use various media in the foreign language, design culturally authentic activities, create games, enjoy music, and research topics of personal interest" (66-67). The working parents and grandparents of the 4th and 5th graders were happy to have their

charges gainfully occupied and they quickly became enthusiastic advocates for the French program at the university. Readers will find more information about the nuts and bolts of putting together a French summer camp for young learners and about the benefits to the students, the French program, and the university in "Keeping the 'Learning' in Service Learning."

The other projects, also for undergraduates, are more ambitious and ultimately likely to be more life changing for the students. The students in a French culture and literature course that was taught in French teamed with students of entomology to fight malaria in Mali through an exemplary interdisciplinary Service Learning project. They studied the culture and literature of Mali with their French teacher before spending spring break acting as informants for the entomology students. The latter were effective in introducing malaria-fighting strategies because they understood the social structure of the Malian village, thanks to the students of French, with whom they met regularly before departure. More information about this project is available at the following Web site: [www.montana.edu/mali].

A professor at another university led similar projects to Mali, partnering with professors from sociology and engineering to work on developing a local seed potato industry at village level. The French students spent fall semester studying the culture and literature of Mali and introducing key elements to their colleagues on the other academic teams. They also helped translate surveys and instructions developed by the others for use onsite. Once in Mali the French team functioned as cultural liaisons and language facilitators for the other teams. Again, their work was instrumental in helping the other teams succeed. Information about these projects is also available at [www.montana.edu/mali].

These truly collaborative, interdisciplinary projects generated enthusiastic support from colleagues in the sciences, social sciences, and engineering, and from administrators who promote Service Learning experiences for their undergraduates. They epitomize the kind of courses the MLA Ad Hoc committee encourages foreign language teachers to implement, which they suggest will "reinvigorate language departments as valuable academic units central to the humanities" (4) and which are needed if

French departments are to be meaningful players in higher education in our changing world.

While it might be unrealistic to expect high school students to spend time during the semester sharing their knowledge of language and culture in French-speaking Africa, they can easily be asked to teach French to youngsters (or tutor middle school students) in after-school programs. Similarly, they can present culture-based programs to senior citizens and community groups during National French Week or throughout the year. After all, most of us believe that the best way to learn something is to teach it to someone else; only then do we really "know" if we know the material or not. As long as the students are earning class credit and learning to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate class content as they provide service to others, they are engaging in the pedagogy known as Service Learning.

If you have completed a Service Learning project with your French students, please contact me at [j-thomas@tamuk.edu] as I intend to publish a collection of essays on the topic.

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References

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