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Reflective Teaching Portfolio
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A. Teaching Philosophy

Over the past thirty years, I have taught in academic departments that embraced both the direct rationalist and communicative methods of teaching the French language. In a perfect world, the direct rationalist method employs a variety of immersion exercises that enable students to learn the target language through induction (Think Pictionary and charades). The communicative method, on the other hand, is a much more forgiving learner-based approach whereby students are provided with tasks that use the target language to convey meaning. Often times, function is prioritized over form (that is, it is not always “pretty” French).

I like to think that I have availed myself of the best elements of both approaches in my teaching style. Linking language to culture especially plays an integral role in the way that I teach French. I continue to put an emphasis on functional activities that allow students to express themselves in French in meaningful contexts. Such contexts may involve hypothetical situations (being trapped in an elevator in Building B, giving directions to a French tourist, or asking for directions in Paris) or real and immediate situations (asking students class-specific questions: “Why were you late?” “Do we have a quiz today?”). On the cultural level, given the overwhelming consequences of the pandemic, it has been arguably easier to use that subject than many others as a learning tool (“What does one do during lockdown?”).

For contextualized activities of this sort – whether in-class or online – I have always prioritized creating a lively group dynamic, while spotting students' specific weaknesses and strengths. Focusing on the latter, I believe, creates an atmosphere that is conducive to learning, whereby, in a learner-based classroom, students feel comfortable producing language among themselves. Because I also rely on immersion-based exercises, a reasonable comfort level is essential for first- and second-semester students so that they do not feel overwhelmed or overly self-conscious. Maintaining a sense of humor and using material that has a comic content are helpful to this end.

While a set lesson plan is always useful, I have found it critical to be flexible. Being able to depart from the prepared script is important in order to sustain a healthy level of energy and attentiveness among students. Therefore, I believe that it is imperative to come to class with several lesson plans in mind that allow for different contingencies, including absences, students' fatigue and the unexpected.

Having taught both language and literature in the context of two different cultures, in the United States and Israel – as well as in more than a few institutions of higher learning – has made me acutely aware of the importance of empathy between teacher and student. The teacher has to put him or herself in the student's place and ask if the material being taught is being taught logically and comprehensibly. "Would I understand what I am saying if I were that person?" Such a

philosophy also entails incorporating cultural and – in the case of FIT students – professional references that elicit and maintain their interest.

B. Most Successful Experience

I. Whether virtually or in situ, breaking classes down into smaller groups for students to work among themselves continues to produce successful outcomes. It is a technique that has to be done in a controlled fashion and with one or more specific learning objectives in mind, generally focusing on learning and practicing vocabulary and/or grammar. By “controlled,” I mean that individual groups are supervised and observed by the instructor.

Dividing large groups of 20 to 25 students into groups of three, or more, facilitate achieving at least two major goals.

First, for those students who do not grasp the material initially, it allows them a second chance to understand it. For other students, such practice provides reinforcement. Smaller groups provide students with the opportunity to ask their peers questions that they might have been too shy to put to me in front of the entire class. In addition, as I pass by and check on groups, individuals feel less restrained to ask me questions. I can also ensure that the entire group is using and pronouncing the new grammar/vocabulary correctly.

Secondly, groups allow for the closest approximation of an “authentic” conversation among students in the target language. As effective communication in French is the core objective of any French language course, group work has become an invaluable aid for achieving that outcome. Depending on the level of the course and where we are in the semester, the material can be as simple as greetings or as sophisticated as a scenario involving strangers in a restaurant.

As we went remote this past semester, I was grateful for Blackboard’s Breakout Groups, which allowed me to virtually divide classes into smaller groups. In some ways, students were even more diligent in doing their work because, at any time, I could randomly monitor their group without them seeing me walk over! Breakout Groups allowed me to avoid the monotony of a straight remote lecture. Students also seemed readier to show themselves through video feed to one another than they were to the entire class on Blackboard Collaborate.

II. Necessity is the mother of invention. Like any language instructor, I need to evaluate students’ oral/aural proficiency in the target language. Teaching online has facilitated such evaluation for both me and the students in various ways. Given today’s “selfie” culture, students are seemingly much less self-conscious recording and filming themselves than they sometimes are speaking in class.

Using Bongo, provided by Cengage, in my second-semester French course, I had students respond to context-specific questions. In one exercise focusing on the French verbs *pouvoir*, *vouloir* and *devoir*, I asked students what they could, could not, wanted to and must do during the pandemic lockdown. They not only had to understand the clip that I made of myself asking the questions, but, in turn, had to use complete sentences to answer them while learning how to properly use and conjugate these irregular verbs.

For my first-semester French course, I used Cognero, also provided by Cengage, in conjunction with Blackboard, to evaluate students' aural comprehension so that they could provide written answers to questions that I asked on sound files. One of the main advantages of asking questions in this format was obviating the need to repeat any given question, which I frequently have to do when I am physically in class. This was also the case for the video-interaction produced via Bongo.

Such technology is particularly welcome for language teachers at FIT who teach in studios, workshops and other types of classrooms that are far from being acoustically ideal. Students can listen to the sound files as many times as they want within an overarching time limit, if applicable. In addition, students who are hearing impaired or might have other relevant disabilities hindering them from answering as well as they could are no longer deprived of an equal playing field.

C. Least Successful experience

Implementing various distance- and remote-teaching tools at our disposal during the pandemic has proven to be both challenging and exciting. At the outset in mid-March 2020, one such tool – Blackboard Collaborate – provided an invaluable lifeline. I am highly indebted to both Jeffrey Riman and José Diaz for initially walking me and our colleagues through this particular Blackboard function. One of the things that Jeffrey said still sticks out in my mind, namely, that we were fortunate to know our students before we began to teach remotely. At least, we were not starting entirely from scratch, which was comforting, to say the least!

It is my firm belief that students were also comforted by my remote presence during the first weeks of the pandemic and were attentive throughout most of the time that I spent presenting the material online as I would physically in class. As time wore on, however, it became more challenging to maintain their attention, despite the fact that I had two screens at home and was curating and projecting for them a variety of images, exercises and texts stored on my own hard drive and Google account.

As the semester came to an end, however, students themselves became less present, turning off audio and video functions and reverting to a chat-only presence. Despite the fact that I was well acquainted with my students from before the pandemic, in some cases, it was hard to reconnect with some of them in a meaningful way online. It became apparent that a direct-lecture approach was becoming increasingly less effective. Specific students' own stressful circumstances and what has become known as "Zoom fatigue" may well account for why their interest waned.

D. Going forward

In addition to interspersing remote lecture with Breakout Groups, I plan to use two of the tools that Jeffrey and José brought to the fore this summer at their two-day workshop, entitled "Teaching with Technology," in June 2020, namely, Padlet and VoiceThread. Both will offer additional activities that can be done interactively with the entire class and individually between a single student and me. Based on Jeffrey Riman's VoiceThread exercise incorporating a vintage panorama of Manhattan's skyline, I am doing something similar with monuments in Paris

whereby students can indicate those monuments and structures that they are familiar with, add comments, and ask relevant questions.

In line with Padlet and VoiceThread, I will also ask students to make their own presentations. While this has been a traditional component of on one of the courses that I have taught in the classroom over the past several years – First-Semester Conversation (FR 122) – I will also ask my First- and Second-Semester French (FR111 and FR112, respectively) students to talk about aspects of French and Francophone culture that are normally covered in class. For instance, I will ask them to talk about a region of France or a Francophone country, using a presentation mode of their choice, PowerPoint, Prezi, Google Slides, etc. Students will be welcome to set up their own Padlet in tandem with these presentations whereby other students can add their own relevant information concerning the subject of the presentation at hand.

Another innovation using technology that I hope to implement this semester involves Adobe Character Animator to allow students to express themselves creatively in the target language. In First-Semester French, for example, students are required to give a short autobiography of themselves based on the following template from *Horizons*, 5th edition:

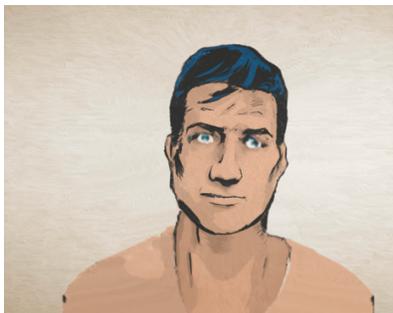
Talking about yourself and your schedule

UN AUTOPORTRAIT

Use these expressions to talk about yourself. Include the ending in parentheses if you are a female.

<p>Note culturelle</p> <p>In France, all students finishing secondary school have studied several years of a foreign language, and many have studied more than one. How does this compare to the situation in your area?</p> <p>Note de grammaire</p> <p>1. The words je, ne, and de change to j', and d' before vowels or a mute h. Similarly, parce que (because) changes to parçqu' is called elision.</p> <p>2. Many adjectives in French add an e when describing females.</p>	<p>Je suis... étudiant(e). Je ne suis pas... professeur. américain(e). canadien(ne). de Chicago. d'ici.</p> <p>J'habite... à Toronto. Je n'habite pas... seule(e). avecun ami / une amie. avec deux amis / deux amies. avec ma famille. avecun colocataire / une colocataire. avecun camarade de chambre / une camarade de chambre.</p> <p>Je travaille... beaucoup. Je ne travaille pas... à l'université. pour Apple.</p> <p>Je parle... anglais. Je ne parle pas... français. espagnol. beaucoup en cours.</p> <p>Je pense que le français est... intéressant.</p>	 <p>Je suis canadienne, de Montréal, mais j'habite à Paris maintenant. Je parle anglais et français.</p>
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With Adobe Character Animator, they will be able to choose an avatar to their liking and use the same information above for the benefit of the entire class. Below is an avatar/puppet that I effortlessly created for myself, based on my own facial features, and that Character Animator generated for me:



This particular technology makes the original assignment of handing in a few lines about oneself infinitely more dynamic, from “merely filling in the blanks” to actually speaking and hopefully pronouncing everything correctly.

E. Other Resources

MindTap (Cengage) provides an enormous reservoir of interactive exercises in both the online textbook and homework assignments. For instance, the publishers have provided videos on geography, culture and other items of interest at the beginning of each chapter. These were of enormous help this past semester, and I expect them to be once again. Such material offers students an opportunity to curate their own material by exploring related sites throughout the world and sharing them with the class.

Keeping current with developing technology and collaborating with colleagues have been vital. I look forward to future CET workshops and webinars. In addition, the SUNY Remote Teaching Institute held from 22 to 26 June was helpful in providing specific webinars on pedagogical issues related to remote and online learning, in particular with regard to evaluating students and maintaining their interest. I am also looking forward to participating in a Lumen Circle Fellowship this fall to collaborate with colleagues throughout the SUNY system.