

The French Review

From the Editor's Desk

In May 2007 the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages issued a report entitled "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World." The introduction, as might be expected, references "the current language crisis that has occurred as the result of 9/11" and the need to examine "...the effects of this crisis on the teaching of foreign languages in colleges and universities." The three-year study offers analysis and recommendations which should be of interest to all of us who teach language, culture, and literature.

Some of the findings are neither surprising nor new—the "rapidly changing environment marked by a sense of crisis" reminds me of Sputnik (4 October 1957) and the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1962). Then too there was a language deficit, and people were concerned about the United States' "inability to communicate with or comprehend other parts of the world." Sustained initiatives like the National Defense Education Act led to record university enrollments of 388,096 in French by 1968, as opposed to 206,426 in 2006 (FR 81.4, 677). Now, as then, most new federal funds have been devoted to defense and security needs and less commonly taught languages, and once again scholars such as Daniel Yankelovich have issued warnings: "Our whole culture must become less ethnocentric, less patronizing, less ignorant of others, less manichean in judging others, and more at home with the rest of the world" (Qtd. from report, pp. 1–2).

The Ad Hoc Committee, while adamant about the usefulness of studying languages other than English, pointed to the debate over goals and means of language study as a potential roadblock to future success: "At one end, language study is considered instrumental, a skill to use for communicating thought and information. At the opposite end, language is understood as an essential element of a human being's thought processes, perceptions, and self-expressions; and as such is considered to be at the core of trans-lingual and trans-cultural competence." In spite of the debate, it should be clear that language helps us to learn not only about others, but about ourselves while revealing ourselves to others.

It has always struck me that the division into instrumental and constitutive described above is a false dichotomy, much as is the age-old debate about "forme" and "fond." It is also similar to the artificial division between language and literature and their faculties at too many universities. We should recognize from experience that language is culture and that literature is both language and culture. As the report signals, "...deep cultural knowledge and linguistic competence are equally necessary if one wishes to understand people and their communities" (2).

The authors go on to discuss the problems and antagonisms that occur in universities when the goals of language study are focused too narrowly. In my view part of the problem arises from the fact that language and literature departments are all too often relegated to a service role and not seen as providing the same high-quality training in the humanities as say, history departments. Another negative bias is that in universities in the United States science majors and majors offered in professional schools are often considered more important and thus inherently superior to the humanities, music, the arts, and education. This translates into lower salaries and morale as well as internal division, as the different disciplines battle over resources.

While the report states clearly that "National defense and security agendas, which often arise during times of crisis, tend to focus goals of language study narrowly," they also criticize the configuration of university foreign language curricula. They rightly state that this configuration "...in which a two- or three-year language sequence feeds into a set of core courses primarily focused on canonical literature, also represents a narrow model." It does seem to me, however, that the curricula of many French language and literature departments have begun to reflect the growing importance of literature written outside of France and that the national concern with globalizing the curriculum and incorporating diversity within the core curriculum has pushed us in the right direction at the intermediate level by calling for the inclusion of literature of francophone writers from all over the world. This has moved us to consider problems of culture, language (French that is different from that of France), economics, race, gender, etc; thus allowing us to meld the instrumental view of language with the constitutive view. Elements of this approach do trickle down to beginning level classes, and this is reflected in recent beginning textbooks. Many former French departments now call themselves French and Francophone Studies.

As for the narrow model referred to above, its configuration creates a division "...between the language curriculum and the literature curriculum and between tenure-track literature professors and language instructors in non-tenure-track positions." Many of us have observed this phenomenon and the strife that results. It is also true that "...cooperation or even exchange between the two groups is usually minimal or nonexistent" and that the foreign language instructors have little say in how the educational mission of their department is determined. This is also true in many English departments. The authors do not mince their words about the frustrations of language specialists over the rigid two-tiered language/literature model: "Their antagonism is not toward the study of literature—far from it—but toward the organization of literary study in a way that monopolizes the upper-division curriculum, devalues the early years of language learning, and impedes the development of a unified language—and content curriculum across the four-year college or university sequence"... "In this model humanists do research while language specialists provide technical support and basic training." And it is the literature faculty which sets the goals for the language faculty while jealously guarding their own power. Though this may be less true in institutions like mine, where many of us teach both language and literature and have a vested interest in the integration of the curriculum, I have seen echoes of the problem. Recently I gave a talk at a major Ph.D. producing French department. A well-known methodologist I spoke with could not stop talking about the years of frustrations s/he had experienced from being patronized and blocked by literature colleagues who possessed the very attitudes described in the report.

The Ad-hoc Committee calls for changes in this antiquated two-tier system. In the April issue I will discuss the recommendations for change in both the goals of language learning and the two-tiered system as well as the prospects for the future.

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