Training PhD Students to Teach in College

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IN FALL 1988 we offered a new three-credit course in the PhD program in French at the Graduate School of the City University of New York (CUNY). Entitled Teaching French in College, it has now become an integral part of our curriculum. The impetus for the course was a series of recommendations made at a meeting of the Modern Language Association sponsored at the University of Virginia in November 1985: stressing the importance of preparing PhD candidates for the profession of teaching, the participants urged universities to put into place specific mechanisms for providing the necessary training.

Almost all students in our PhD program teach part-time as adjuncts in one of the nineteen branches of the City University. Experience in such a laboratory can offer the most fruitful and stimulating preparation for a teaching career. Unfortunately, the supervision of part-time faculty members varies tremendously. The regular faculty member who theoretically oversees new adjuncts and coordinates multisection courses may, in reality, offer little advice. Our graduate students occasionally reveal their frustrations, but they need their part-time jobs and do not want to antagonize anyone. As a former chairperson of a large department of Romance languages in one of our senior colleges, I know how lost the new adjuncts often feel and how much guidance they require. I therefore welcomed the recommendations of the Virginia meeting and used them to convince my colleagues that training our students to teach was one of our responsibilities and that we could best fulfill it by offering a course that would integrate a solid historical and theoretical basis with actual teaching assignments supervised by a representative of the unit—a course that would provide numerous opportunities for applying theory to practice.

To bolster my argument, I had sent a questionnaire on teaching-assistant programs to all universities granting PhDs in French. The replies I received indicated a great disparity in the kinds of training offered, but almost every institution had an organized system for preparing future college teachers. In my report to the Executive Committee, I noted that in most universities TA training was supervised by a junior faculty member with competence in linguistics and pedagogy who had been hired especially for this function. We decided, however, that the structure of the City University, with its array of autonomous units, called for putting a senior professor in this post, at least until the responsibility of PhD programs for college teacher training had been firmly established. Thereupon I was asked to develop a course that would include the latest research and teaching methods and that would respond to the needs of the City University.

While I have always been interested in pedagogical developments and have been involved in teacher training and curricular development for many years, both as a department chairperson and as the director of a number of NEH institutes for teachers, I am not a specialist in the field. I certainly did not have the expertise to offer a graduate-level course on teaching French in college. I therefore applied for a City University faculty-development grant, which released me from one course for one semester. My reasons for making this application were political as well as professional. Approval would indicate that impartial colleagues outside our own program had given preliminary support to the concept of our responsibility for training future college teachers; it would give academic legitimacy to the whole endeavor and help publicize our efforts within the university.

In fact, the preparation of this particular course made extraordinary demands on my time. An enormous amount of research has been done in the last ten years and the number and quality of publications on language acquisition and pedagogy have increased tremendously. Since I wanted the course to have a solid historical and theoretical component, I set up

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an extensive reading program for myself, which included the MLA publication *The Teaching Apprentice Program in Language and Literature*, edited by Joseph Gibaldi and James Mirollo; the Cambridge University Press series *New Directions in Language Teaching*; the Hatier-Credif collection *Langue et apprentissage des langues*; and relevant books published by Newberry House. I used the bibliographies in these books to lead me to other texts and thus acquired a broad theoretical foundation.

During that time the process of getting the course approved was under way. It required a concise description, a rationale, a basic reading list, and a weekly schedule. Although sending out questionnaires had delayed the development of the course by several months, the information gathered from them served us well as we argued our case through the various stages of approval. The question of awarding graduate credit for the course was debated at length. Some faculty members maintained that since adjuncts are paid, they should be willing to acquire the necessary training on their own, without additional academic compensation. Others were adamant that the students receive credit, because the course was the equivalent of any other PhD course. These discussions publicized the concept of placing responsibility for the training of future college teachers within a discipline's PhD program, and several programs have since established similar courses.

Feeling strongly that theory and practice go hand in hand and hoping that our course on teaching college French would be a model for analogous ones at the CUNY Graduate School, I took it upon myself to negotiate placement of each student in the course as a TA at a branch of the City University and to obtain a departmental supervisor who would be responsible for that student. I was pleased with the response I received from both chairpersons and deans. To demonstrate their support for the goals of the course, they even arranged to split sections to make room for the TAs when there was no real need for additional faculty. Thanks to the many contacts I had made through the years, I was able to scatter my students in the system as adjuncts or team teachers, thus ensuring practical application for the theoretical work of the course.

The course itself required a great deal of reading, for the participants—all intelligent, interested, and highly qualified graduate students—were completely ignorant of the history of foreign language instruction and unaware of current research and publications in language acquisition and pedagogy. Some had a few vague notions about certain methods, based on their own experiences as students but not on any theoretical readings. They had heard the term *teaching for proficiency* but could not explain what it meant. The course served as a weekly think tank where we all worked together and where students brought back difficulties they encountered in the classes they were teaching. Although no grades were given, students had no problems doing the required work and no one dropped the class. On the contrary, several PhD students who were not enrolled in the course attended it regularly, attracted by their fellow students' reports of its usefulness.

Our basic reference works were *Teaching Language in Context*, by Alice C. Omaggio, and *Teaching French: A Practical Guide*, by Wilga Rivers, both of which are filled with invaluable information on a great variety of topics. After an introduction on the goals of the course and on the importance of establishing a relaxed and nonthreatening atmosphere in the foreign language class, we discussed the role of the teacher, expectations, responsibilities, ethical concerns, and professional issues. Steven M. Cahn's *Saints and Scamps: Ethics in Academia* is an excellent starting point for reflection on and discussion of these topics. We then turned to the historical background and to a brief overview of past and present trends in the teaching of French. Three sessions on theory and methodology followed, for which our main texts were *Approaches and Methods in Language Technique*, by Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers, and *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, by Diane Larsen-Freeman. Each book provides concise and clear chapters on the history of language teaching, its principles and methods, and a bibliography for further reading. To involve everyone in research and application from the beginning, I asked each student to be a spokesperson for a particular method and made it that person's responsibility to do all the necessary background reading and to present the method to the class. Thus everyone became acquainted with the specific characteristics of the grammar-translation method, the audiolingual method, communicative language teaching, total physical response, the "silent way," community language learning, and Suggestopedia. The presentations led to stimulating discussions as the advantages and the disadvantages of each approach were evaluated. Three weeks were spent on the teaching-for-proiciency approach, for which the Northeast Conference 1985 report, *Proficiency, Curriculum, Articulation: The Ties That Bind*, edited by Alice C. Omaggio, was our reference. Each student received a copy of the ACTFL *Proficiency Guidelines*, which we used to contextualize classroom activities and to develop techniques that would fit real situations. At the end of this basic training the students presented sample elementary language lessons, using whichever method or combination of methods they wished, and these lessons were videotaped and critiqued. The students were unanimous in preferring approaches that fostered direct communication and
related to the immediate reality of people's lives. They all tried to illustrate how much cultural information is imparted as the language is studied. They incorporated aspects of several methods, and they were invariably right on target, during the question period, in explaining their choices of exercise or activity. Yet these videotapes made the presenters acutely aware of their own shortcomings. Again and again they would comment in dismay at the rigidity they displayed, on their lack of movement, on the seriousness of their demeanor, on their tenseness, on their surprising inability to reply quickly to obvious questions. Their responses clearly showed that telling someone about teaching mistakes is far less effective than letting that person see what had occurred.

The same type of sample teaching (also taped) was done with literature lessons and it turned out to be one of the most fruitful class exercises. Each person was given a short literary selection, such as a piece in an anthology, and was asked to demonstrate how that selection should be taught in the basic literature survey course. These classes were revealing to the presenter as well as to the other student teachers. The students were astonished to see how badly they had misjudged the level of instruction; how much unnecessary information they had imparted; how hard it had been to guide others into reaching their own conclusions about the meaning and quality of a work, instead of telling the group what the answers should be. As they watched their classmates fall into the same pedagogical traps, they came to appreciate how difficult it is to raise the critical consciousness of a reader. The presentations became progressively more realistic. More attention was given to providing probing questions that would let the students do the work. By analyzing what they saw, the PhD candidates fashioned teaching techniques that would suit them. They came to realize that literature is the most revealing medium of a civilization and that the teacher's responsibility is to present literature in a way that will allow students to share the excitement of discovery. By selecting intellectually stimulating literary works at the appropriate linguistic level, the teacher can lead college students to uncover the distinctive and underlying features of the society that speaks the language studied—its approach to life, tradition of learning, way of thinking, evolving psychological attitudes, and contribution to the world. There is no point in expecting second-year students to hold abstract literary discussions in a foreign language, yet those very students can form a sophisticated appreciation of a literary piece if they are encouraged to draw on their own experiences in interpreting a work. Thus, prospective college teachers need practice in devising specific approaches to teaching, and they must have opportunities to experiment. If we professors of French want to maintain our discipline in the American college curriculum, we must pay as much attention to training our future college instructors to teach literature as to preparing them to teach language.

A session on the use of authentic material to teach contemporary culture was based on the October 1987 special issue of the *AATF National Bulletin, The Teaching of French: A Syllabus of Competency* (9-11), and on a number of textbook instructors' manuals. Another class on techniques for teamwork and peer teaching demonstrated how inventive foreign language teachers can be when they have the time to reflect on what goes on in the classroom. Explanations of the goal for a particular activity were always followed by specific illustrations contributed by the members of the entire group. For a wealth of excellent suggestions see Gertrude Moskowitz, *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class*; Macdonald and Rogers-Gordon, *Action Plans*; Alice C. Omaggio, *Activities for the Foreign Language Classroom*; and Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby, *Games for Language Learning*.

For a session on testing I used a kit, produced in cooperation with the Educational Testing Service, that includes a book by Judith Liskin-Gasparo, *Testing and Teaching for Oral Proficiency*, and a set of two audio cassettes for each of four languages (ESL, French, German, and Spanish). My students and I listened to selections from the tapes and evaluated together the performance of the student tested as well as the behavior of the tester. We stressed the difference between testing for achievement and testing for proficiency, and the members of the class offered numerous examples of each. The final session on the college curriculum in French touched on the laboratory, computer use, francophone studies, and translation and led to a wide-ranging and heated discussion that clearly illustrated why the profession has never reached a consensus on these matters.

From my talks with the PhD students in French, in and out of the classroom, I believe that the most valuable effect of my course was to make them think about teaching. Of course it gave them a great deal of information on the theory, art, and techniques of teaching, but most important, it raised their consciousness about an aspect of their future careers to which they had given very little thought. It may still be true that many PhD students have unrealistic expectations concerning their careers as college teachers. In spite of the many negative reports on the current state of language and literature in the college curriculum, the students see themselves as the successors of the professors whom they admire and who influenced their career choices. They give no thought to the different stages of an academic career, nor to the shifting demands and expectations faced by faculty members as they go up in rank. Even when the students teach part-
time while studying for the PhD, they view their jobs as a way of making a living while getting the degree. They do what they are told. They follow the syllabus and complete the required assignment. They do their best, and some are quite successful; but they do not reflect on their teaching.

The course Teaching French in College changed that attitude. Their reading, research, class presentations, and discussions made the PhD students realize that there were other ways of teaching, various approaches, techniques different from the ones they had encountered as students. They discovered models that intrigued them and that they wanted to try. They saw that certain strategies are more successful than others and that teaching on any level becomes more stimulating when the instructor is conscious of the dynamics of the classroom. The realization that they now possessed techniques allowing them to make the material they were teaching more meaningful to their students gave them a real sense of accomplishment. Concrete proof of the interest the course had stimulated in the department came the next semester when for the first time the colloquium sponsored by the PhD students in French was focused on pedagogy.

Yet all of us in CUNY's PhD program in French know that this course was just an introduction, that teacher development is a constant process, and that we have only sensitized our students and made them aware of some of the resources available to them. For me, the course Teaching French in College turned out to be a most challenging and rewarding experience. Through discussions and interchanges with the students, it had the same effect on me as it had on them: it made me reflect on teaching. Above all, the course afforded me one of the greatest pleasures of teaching, the pleasure of witnessing a student's delight on seeing or understanding something not seen or understood before.

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