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French à la carte: Maintaining a Language Program on a Shoestring

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INTRODUCTION

While the size of our honors college environment is almost always a positive, its smallness has decided disadvantages when it comes to the study of less popular foreign languages. Fewer students, fewer subject offerings, and the absence of multiple sections all have a negative impact on language programs. Shrinking budgets have not helped matters. Despite these disadvantages, the French program at Florida Atlantic University's Harriet Wilkes Honors College has steadily grown from a total number of sixteen students in fall 2005 to forty students (more than 10% of the student population) in the fall semester of 2009. To achieve this outcome, Florida Atlantic University's honors college employed effective strategies that could be successful in other disciplines within honors at other institutions.

BACKGROUND

The Harriet Wilkes Honors College had its first intake of students in the fall of 1999. Robert J. Huckshorn, then vice president of FAU's northern campuses, championed our unique setup. The honors college was established on FAU's Jupiter MacArthur Campus, some forty miles from FAU's main campus in Boca Raton. Designed to be a curricularly independent, freestanding, four-year honors institution, the honors college exists alongside—yet independent of—the other colleges in FAU's Research II university. With a single exception in the history of the college, faculty members are external hires.

A tenure-track French professor was hired and began teaching in the honors college in fall 2000, but moved on after three years. An adjunct professor was brought in to teach first- and second-year French on a part-time basis but left after two years. Insufficient critical mass had been built up to offer upper-division French classes. At the time, the honors college students' interest in French did not appear to be growing, and upper-division French had been more or less written out of the program.

When I commenced work as an adjunct professor at FAU's honors college in fall 2005, the budget line for a French professor had disappeared as the then

dean had made the strategic decision to reallocate this money to other disciplines. Housing prices in Florida had skyrocketed, and in order to attract new faculty to meet growing student demand in the social sciences, salaries had to be increased. As a part-time adjunct professor teaching anywhere from eight to twelve credits per semester, I am paid out of the “non-recurring dollars” funds. The “budget” for the French program is \$14,000 per year, or \$3,500 per four-credit class for two classes each semester. Upper-division French classes have either been offered for free or paid at a lower rate based on numbers of students enrolled.

Given the absence of a real French program and the near impossibility of students’ even minoring in the language, it has been difficult to attract students. Students who feel they may want to go beyond fourth-semester language do not choose French. Those who feel strongly about minoring or majoring in French even before they have started college do not enroll in the honors college in the first place. Seeing four of my best students transfer out of the college in order to pursue their love of the language has been a bittersweet experience.

While the honors college’s small student population means smaller class size and more contact with professors, it also, unfortunately, means fewer course offerings. Not only are upper-division French classes technically unavailable at our campus, but students who would not normally be grouped together in lower-division classes are classmates. Larger universities are able to separate “true beginners” from those whose test scores place them into the first-semester class even though they have up to two years of high school French under their belts. Moreover, some large campuses offer French classes for French speakers who need instruction in reading or writing the language and restrict that category of student from joining typical first-through-fourth semester French classes. Since our honors college is able to offer only one section of each class and lacks the financial means and sufficient student populations to fill “true beginner” or native speaker classes, students are placed into classes on the basis of their placement test scores alone.

The fact that only a single section of even the most popular classes is offered gives rise to schedule conflicts. These conflicts make it impossible for eager students to undertake—or perhaps, worse—to *continue* the study of French. Often students who took first- and second-semester French are suddenly unable to take a third semester because a class necessary for their major is offered at the same time. Because only a limited number of non-honors classes can be used for credit toward graduation, plugging in French classes taken at other universities is often not a viable option. In my ten semesters at the honors college, although many students have expressed an interest in minoring in French, only one has succeeded; four transferred out of the college in order to do so. The successful student minored in French by taking the four semesters of French offered at the honors college, taking a DIS (Directed Independent Study) with me, enrolling in one class at FAU’s main campus in Boca Raton, and participating in an eight-credit study abroad program run by FAU in Allès, France.

This student is now finishing an M.A. program in psychology and receiving a tuition remission in exchange for being a TA in French.

Despite these drawbacks, creativity and flexibility have allowed our honors college's program to more than double in size in four and a half years and to flourish in recent semesters. Following is a discussion of some of the solutions we have worked out in order to cater to a greater range of students despite the budgetary and staffing constraints. Particular attention is paid to an innovative class that meets the needs of students of varying levels.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

The first time I taught third-year French, which was technically not offered at the honors college, I had to do so in the form of a three-credit DIS. Two students enrolled in the class: one was a junior majoring in psychology who wanted to minor in French and had completed the two-year sequence offered at the honors college; the second was a junior who had just returned from a semester in Paris.

The following year, a group of math majors approached me in the spring during their fourth semester of French, hoping to find a creative solution for the following semester. A one-time-only physics class offered by a visiting professor was scheduled at the same time as the second hour of my class, and the students didn't want to miss it. I wanted to help the students continue with the language even though the honors college had no money budgeted to pay me for extra class hours. After a quick brainstorm with my section head and our associate dean, we created a viable solution which involved the creation of another three-credit DIS: the students would attend the first hour of class on Tuesdays and Thursdays and then meet with me for one hour at another time during the week to make a total of three contact hours. The workload was proportionately reduced from the regular four-credit class. Students in the regular class and in the DIS were to take the same tests. The arrangement resulted in an extra contact hour per week for me and some extra planning. I tried to arrange classes so that key material was introduced during the first hour. Dialogs, skits, group activities, and tests were usually scheduled for the second half of class.

There were two advantages to such lesson planning. First, all students were exposed to the same presentation of material, so I did not have to take meticulous care to present material in an identical manner to two different groups, one of them potentially disadvantaged because they were never there for the whole class. Students were, after all, taking the same tests and competing along the same curve. The second advantage was that, with an even smaller group, students got more opportunities to speak and interact in the target language. The major disadvantages were the juggling act I had to do and the fact that, because I tried to get most of the grammar presentation finished during the first hour, my lesson plans didn't always have an ideal balance of passive and active learning activities.

The DIS solution is obviously not a viable long-term solution for a foreign language staffed by a single part-time professor, but for four semesters it was the only solution other than turning eager students away from the study of French. Because Harriet Wilkes Honors College students are all housed together and eat in the same dining hall, both groups of students in the class had frequent contact with one another and were able to bridge any social gaps in the class that the set-up might have engendered. I frequently ate lunch with groups of students from this class at a back table in the cafeteria, continuing our discussions about culture or answering grammatical questions the students had thought of after class. The small setting of our honors college makes such ongoing contact with professors possible. Even when the instructor is not strictly in “teacher mode,” discussion with him or her in more social settings provides students with valuable learning opportunities.

In the spring semester of 2009, two different groups of students approached me. One wanted a literature class, and the other wanted a class that would develop his reading skills. Neither group necessarily wanted a traditional third-year language class, and the honors college was not in a position to pay me to teach a third full-fledged class anyway. Teaching two DIS classes for larger groups of students simply wasn't viable. I decided to brainstorm once again, this time to develop “Reading French Literature,” a two-credit class that met in the evenings (the only available time everybody had in common) and in which I attempted to meet the needs of both groups of students. While the class was in the development stage, a third group of students emerged: two particularly strong seniors who had completed the first-year sequence and wanted to continue French just for fun. All potential students had already satisfied the honors college language requirement.

Originally capped at eight, the group enrolled in Reading French Literature swelled to a total of fourteen students with a wide range of language backgrounds. The six most advanced students were extremely diverse: one, a native English speaker, had completed an IB program through the medium of French in Florida and had spent the previous summer using her French working in a U.S. embassy in north Africa; another had been educated in Haiti through the medium of French until age thirteen; two were native speakers of Portuguese and near-native speakers of Spanish and had completed the two-year sequence of lower-division French; and the other two had recently returned from study abroad experiences in French-speaking countries and had rather opposite skills—one lacked confidence in speaking but was excellent in grammar while the other suffered considerable grammatical lacunae but communicated effectively in French. The least experienced students were the two seniors I allowed in at the last minute; they had completed only two semesters of French. Because I had taught them, I was familiar with their skills and was confident that they could succeed. The other six students had varying skills above the intermediate level.

I was excited, if not slightly daunted, by the challenge of trying to meet the needs of all members of such a diverse group. I reassured myself that Harriet

Wilkes Honors College students, more than any other type of university student I had taught, are good at learning; they tend to be conscious and self-aware learners, so I could put part of the pedagogical task back onto their shoulders. I told them, "Think about what it is you want to learn most this semester. Then think about the best way to achieve that learning outcome." The answers they came up with determined the theme of one quarter of their class work and made up the bulk of their personal theme-based journals. Most students had strong ideas from the start ("I want to improve my reading skills. May I read four plays by Molière and a book about the history of Morocco's relationship with The Western Sahara?" and "I don't get the language used in French language comics—I can't understand what I'm reading. I'd like to focus on five books from four different comic series."). Some, unsurprisingly, needed more direction with their personal theme-based journals. Working with the "fuzzier" students was a good curriculum planning drill for me.

Class work and assignments in Reading French Literature consisted of the following:

IN-CLASS TRANSLATIONS

We started every other class with a ten-minute, in-class translation. Being present for the exercise was part of the participation grade, but the actual translation was not graded. Students were given a professional version of the translation at the end of the ten-minute exercise for immediate feedback. My intention was not to teach translation skill as such but rather to provide a medium for students to understand how well they had understood a passage. A series of reading comprehension tests instead might have better helped achieve this goal.

JOURNAL

Each student kept a personal theme-based journal throughout the semester in which they pursued their individual class goals and documented their ongoing work: The student reading Molière kept a list of vocabulary and turns of phrase for discussion with me; the one confounded by the language used in *bandes dessinées* (comics) used the journal as a forum for her *bêtes noires* and turned them into areas of relative expertise; and the Haitian social sciences student who had been educated in French used the journal as a place to revisit a long-forgotten interest in writing poetry.

The journals were also a forum in which students would consciously explore the process of reading and document their difficulties and triumphs. Students asked questions about a variety of topics, investigated responses on their own, and received feedback from me. The less verbose were able to document their efforts by pasting in print-outs of online tests or exercises or other outside work. Worth a quarter of the class grade, the journals were designed to be the component that allowed the course to meet the academic needs of all members of the class, no matter what their level.

READINGS

Each student purchased a book of excerpts (with parallel translations) of the French literary canon from the seventeenth to twentieth century. This part of the syllabus was hardest to coordinate with such a diverse group. While the more experienced students made use of the library so that they could read beyond the excerpt provided in the text, the two least experienced were mired down in the first two paragraphs. The upside was that the stronger students' discussions of the translations (particularly when they didn't like them) were useful to the least experienced students.

CLASS PRESENTATION

Each student presented in French on a literary, cultural or historical topic of their choice relevant to the literary excerpt that was being studied.

PORTFOLIO

Each student turned in a portfolio containing assignments worth a total of ten points. The "buffet style" portfolio enabled students to tailor the class to their needs. All but the two least experienced students were required to turn in at least three different types of assignment. A list of assignment types are shown in Table 1.

Students experienced the usual alternating forms of stress and excitement over their portfolio activities. After most classes, the group would shift to the cafeteria and continue informal discussion. After we had allayed our hunger, the talk around the table invariably turned into a round-robin discussion about the portfolio items students were currently working on. Predictably, the less experienced students learned a great deal from the more experienced ones. It was particularly satisfying to me, however, to witness the experienced students' interest in the work and ideas of the former group. Contact beyond the classroom heightened students' awareness that they could learn from one another regardless of apparent skill or experience level.

EVALUATION

I made notes on ways to improve the class both before and after reading students' anonymous written evaluations at the end of the semester. My own observations and the comments of students lead me to conclude that it is possible to meet the needs of such a diverse group of learners in a single class. The two weakest students exhibited significant learning without slowing down the rest of the class, and the strongest students were satisfied that their skills had augmented significantly as well.

Were the class to be offered again, the most significant improvement would be to focus the portfolio exercises more tightly on the improvement of reading skills. Students could complete a series of reading comprehension tests and could possibly create reading comprehension tests for their classmates. Also,

Table 1: Assignment Types

A.	Worth 2 points	Translation from French into English	Two pages. You choose an important passage from any literary or scholarly document that interests you.
B.	Worth 2 points	Translation from English into French	Two pages. You choose an important passage from any literary or scholarly document that interests you.
C.	Worth 4 points	Critical Paper	To be written in French. 3 to 4 pages in which you explore a theme, support an argument, or make a claim about a piece of French language literature you have read in French.
D.	Worth 4 points	Analyse de Texte	To be written in French. This is an in-depth study of a small chunk of text (3 to 4 well chosen paragraphs, a poem, an entry in the philosophes' <i>Encyclopédie</i> , etc.). Whereas a major goal of a critical paper is usually to show how a work is an artistic expression of the history and culture whence it issues, an <i>analyse de texte</i> is different. The goal of the latter is to study the mechanics (vocabulary, choice of words, rhythm, speed) of the piece you are studying. You study the work <i>within the context of itself</i> .

personalization of journal tasks distracted from the stated goal of the class (developing reading skills and exposure to the French literary canon). While the individual projects in the journal were developed as a safety measure to ensure that the academic needs of all levels were met, they were at times an unnecessary distraction. The goal of catering to diverse learning needs could also be achieved by fine-tuning reading-skills-centered work or having students read more and keep a reading log in which strategies, successes, and difficulties in reading are documented.

Prior to reading student comments, I felt that the least successful part of the syllabus was the reading of canonical literature. The excerpts were too difficult for the two weakest students and too short to satisfy the needs of the most experienced students. I was therefore surprised to read that students were unanimous in their opinion that the readings, coupled with the student presentations,

enabled the class to learn what they felt was a great deal about French literature, culture, and history.

Somewhat surprising to me as well was the students' fondness for the biweekly in-class translations. Students reported that their skill at translating from French into English increased significantly and attributed the improvement to the in-class translation work. Not a single student was, on the other hand, entirely sure that his or her ability to read French improved all that much. Some pointed out that they were unsure how to evaluate how much their reading had improved. If I were to offer such a course in the future, I would add reading comprehension exercises to their portfolios, and I would strongly consider alternating in-class reading comprehension exercises with in-class translation exercises. I believe that testing students frequently made them more accustomed to (and therefore more confident about) the task of translating and made them conscious of their improvement. Perhaps accustoming students to reading comprehension tests would, in turn, focus them on the act of reading and make them more confident readers.

CONCLUSION

Meeting the diverse needs of students who are taking on a less-than-popular language in a small honors college setting is a challenge. Working individually or in small groups with students is not a long-term solution when there is only one part-time professor teaching the language. Gathering a larger group of students with diverse needs and experience into a single upper division class, while potentially cumbersome, is a possible solution. One key to success is a flexible syllabus that can be manipulated to suit different types of students at various levels. This said, such a flexible syllabus needs tightly focused learning outcomes. The goals within those outcomes can be individually adjusted to suit the needs of varying levels of class members. The other key to success is students' informal discussions about their assignments outside of the classroom. An honors college provides the ideal setting for this kind of intellectual growth. Such meta-academic contact with their professor and their classmates of varying skill and experience levels makes the subject matter real to them and gives it real-world importance. The French experience at our honors college can potentially be applied to other curricular areas and to other institutions. The unique living/learning environment of an honors college and the contact students have with their professors outside of the classroom help ensure the success of such an endeavor.

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