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Engaging the World: Social Pedagogies and Language Learning

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Chapter 10

A Socio-Constructivist Approach to Developing Intercultural Empathy

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The field of foreign language learning has increasingly come to emphasize critical awareness of cultural differences to successfully prepare learners for intercultural encounters (M. Byram, 1997; Garrett-Rucks, 2016). Experiencing the complexity and diversity of perspectives engages empathic understanding. As learners come to recognize the situatedness of culture, they can begin to view themselves and others as culturally situated beings (Kearney, 2010). In practice, engaging learners' reflections on the subjective dimension of cultural codes and frames of reference requires moving beyond explicitly comparing differences between cultures (Garrett-Rucks, 2016). To encounter local shared values (Kramsch, 2014), students need to learn to consider the world as it appears to others. This is a necessary first step toward learning to interact respectfully and responsibly across cultures (ACTFL, 2014).

The pedagogical intervention presented in this chapter illustrates an empathy-generating approach articulated around an event that received global exposure: the terrorist attack on the satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015. The learning activities, designed for a third-semester French course (Intermediate level), were guided by the following desired learning outcomes: (1) to recognize that values and frames of reference are culture-bound; (2) to demonstrate awareness of multiple perspectives; (3) to identify historical, social, political, and cultural references tied to the concept of freedom of speech; (4) to appraise and compare perspectives in French and native cultures; and (5) to construct their own viewpoints and interpretations.

I begin the chapter by discussing what motivated the choice of this specific event as the basis for a classroom-based intervention where frames of references can be offered, explored, and reflected upon. Next, I draw on socio-constructivism (Gould, 1996; Su, 2011) and geosemiotics theory (Scollon & Scollon, 2003) to frame the instructional learning approach. To facilitate the adaptation to lower or higher level French (or other language) courses, I provide step-by-step instructions for implementation of the research and creative projects. I then describe how to make use of the sequence for the purpose of training graduate teaching

assistants in designing learning activities that encourage interpretation and reflection. The chapter concludes with suggestions for using this pedagogical sequence as a template for further curricular development.

A Perspective-Generating Event

The results of a Brulé Ville et Associés (BVA) Orange iTélé survey published on January 7 and 8, 2016, motivated the development of this pedagogical intervention. One year to the day after the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, 1,026 French citizens were polled via phone and the Internet. To the question “Consider the events that occurred a year ago in Paris. Which one of these sentences best represents your position?” 76% responded “Je suis Charlie” (I am Charlie) and 22% “Je ne suis pas Charlie” (I am not Charlie). Forcing respondents to choose between one sentence or the other without offering more nuanced choices may give the impression that freedom of speech trumps empathy toward groups targeted by satire and that there are only two acceptable categories. However, the way in which the dichotomy suggested by the question is perceived, interpreted, and processed will vary based on the point of view from which it is considered. Creating a space in the instructional setting to directly encounter differing “referential and symbolic networks of meaning” (Kearney, 2010, p. 334) can help students grasp the emotional and intellectual dimension of *Charlie Hebdo*’s symbolism in the French collective consciousness and the significance of the terrorist attack from differing French perspectives.

Subjectivities and Cultural Understandings of Freedom

An investigation into variations in reactions to the January 2015 attack should begin with a consideration of differences regarding cultural frames of reference related to the conception of freedom. While some rendering of freedom is universal and present across cultures, its mental and physical representations differ, reflecting a culturally situated understanding of the concept. The opportunity to examine and contrast what freedom means for learners and for members of the target culture can generate a new appraisal of a familiar (if perhaps mono-culturally centered) concept. Awareness that freedom may be construed differently can help learners grasp the influence of culture(s) on their own and interlocutors’ subjectivity, which “is locked into the historical experience of groups” (Freadman, 2014, p. 368).

Identifying frames of reference that fuel differences can make visible symbolic meanings and myths within a group’s collective cultural imagination but may not reveal “power differentials and conflict within and between cultures” (Kramsch, 2009, p. 244). Frames of reference used within a discursive context expose differing interpretations, perceptions, and feelings tied to an individual’s subjectivity.

The juxtaposition of multiple points of view, however, is not sufficient to learn to cope with the complexity of constantly shifting reactions and opinions “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (Hall & Hall, 1990, p. 225). K. A. Byram (2011) remarked that “in the absence of targeted consciousness-raising, students may not be aware of, let alone appreciate, the differing perceptions and modes of thought with which the L2 operates” (p. 528). Thus, learners need the opportunity to address their own cultural subjectivity through personal and emotional engagement with (or interactions within) the learning experience. As they move beyond interpretation of others’ intentions, learners reenvision their own selves (Kearney, 2010) and are empowered to derive their own meaningful understanding of the contextual use of frames of reference.

Empathy-Building Activities in a Classroom-Based Environment

Fostering the possibility of gaining an emic engagement in the target culture (Knutson, 2006) requires an approach that lets learners both directly observe and share how values, judgments, and mental constructs condition products, practices, and interactions (Freadman, 2014). Kearney (2010) advocates for the conceptualization of the instructional environment as a cultural immersive experience because it creates a space to recognize the self and members of the target culture as “cultural subject rather than cultural object” (Brière, 1986, p. 204). In a classroom-based experiential context learners are social actors, emotionally and intellectually involved in the learning process (Kohonen, 2001). They actively examine and analyze variations in meaning making and as a result are empowered to communicate their own informed interpretation (M. Byram, 2010).

The pedagogical intervention presented in this chapter combines a socio-constructivist approach and geosemiotics theory to create a multisensory classroom-based immersive experience. Investigating how language and signs make meaning in relation to where and when they are physically appearing (Scollon & Scollon, 2003) can transform learners into researchers and discourse analysts. As active participants in the learning process, they activate previous knowledge and experiences to guide themselves in discovering answers through observation, research, and evaluation of cultural frames of reference appearing in signs. Through interpretation, reflection, and expression of points of view, they co-construct new knowledge and gain new insights (Gould, 1996; Su, 2011). With this type of approach to learning, instructors can “learn along with students, relieving them of the role of expert in the culture learning process” (Knutson, 2006, p. 601). This consideration is especially relevant for language program direction because graduate teaching assistants might feel nervous or ill-equipped to engage in teaching culture in this manner (Schulz, 2007).

Digital Mediation Used in the Pedagogical Intervention

A classroom-based cultural immersive experience framed within a socio-constructivist approach suggests the efficacy of collaborative engagement inside and outside the classroom. LinoIt, a visual and text-based digital and interactive bulletin board, creates a multidimensional and multimodal assemblage environment in which learners can decide what information to share and how to find the information (Mitchell, 2016). They give each other access to multiple voices and images to undertake their evaluation of what may be shared, what may be different, and rely on each other's choices and reflections to uncover influences on differences and similarities. Thus, with this tool both learners and instructors co-research and coproduce content. As a result, the learning experience becomes more personally engaging since learners are in charge of choosing the signs and by extension the frames of references to be investigated and analyzed. No LinoIt account is necessary for students, but instructors must create one. It is recommended to keep the canvas private so only students and their instructor can see it.

The Pedagogical Intervention

The pedagogical sequence consists of a series of research-based and interactive activities divided in three phases for a course meeting three times a week during 50 minutes. Project-based assignments ensure continuous student engagement. For the purposes of this chapter, the sequence is presented in English; however, it should be noted that all the material used is in French and the activities are conducted in French.

Phase 1: Recognizing That Values and Frames of Reference Are Culture-Bound

The sequence begins with two main activities. During the first 50-minute session, learners and their instructor consider alternate viewpoints and develop a critical reflection on symbolic meaning making. The first activity invites students to analyze, contrast, and reflect upon the embodiment of freedom in the United States and in France.

- Step 1.** Organize students in groups of two or three and ask them to list three elements that embody freedom for an American (a prompt projected on the board can offer guidance, showing, for example, an object, monument, person, name, or adjective). Once the lists are complete, each group is invited to share while a student records results on the board.

Step 2. Invite students to observe which elements are the most cited, to give an opportunity to form an awareness of the ideological mapping of the concept.

Step 3. Ask students to do an image search on the Internet using their cell phones, tablets, or computers for “Les symboles de la liberté en France” (Symbols of freedom in France). One of the images that appears is Delacroix’s painting of “Liberty leading the people” (*La Liberté guidant le peuple*). Other images may refer to trees; display Marianne, who embodies the French Republic; or refer to pencils or doves. Have students consider the images resulting from their Internet search and list three possible elements that embody freedom for the French. The lists will most likely produce a reference to the French Republic.

The second activity builds on the first, providing the opportunity for learners to consider the association between freedom and republic.

Step 4. At the end of the first activity discussion, invite students to search the Internet for images of symbols associated with the French Republic and post them to the LinoIt board (prior to the class meeting, instructors will need to create a LinoIt canvas and share the link with students). The board can be projected in the classroom.

Step 5. Once the corpus of images is created, organize students in groups of two or three, and ask them to discuss the following questions based on the images posted:

1. What symbols can you identify across the pictures?
2. How is freedom represented and characterized in these images?
3. How does *liberté* relate to *république*?

Once the groups have finished preparing their answers, a general discussion can ensue with the whole class.

Phase 2: Encountering Multiple Reifications of Freedom of Speech

The next class session focuses on an exploration of French perspectives on freedom of speech. Students and their instructor engage in direct observations and reflections through analysis of photos and signage during the Marche Républicaine (Republican Walk) organized on January 11, 2015. On that day, four million people across France took to the streets to pay tribute to the 17 victims of the January 7 terrorist attack.

Step 1. Start by projecting side by side the Delacroix painting “Liberty leading the people” and two photos that the media have titled “The pencil leading the people” (*Le crayon guidant le peuple*) taken by the independent photographer Martin Argyroglou and by Reuters Agency photographer Christophe Mahé during the Marche Républicaine.

Both photos echo Delacroix's painting showing a young man brandishing a pencil, the statue "The Triumph of the Republic" depicting the symbolic Marianne, a French flag, and a crowd amassed at the foot of the statue. Ask students to consider the symbols appearing in both photos and to give their opinions of how they see the images connecting.

Step 2. Invite students inside the Marche Républicaine. Ask them to search on the Internet for photos of the demonstration and post on a common LinoIt board three photos where signage (other than the ubiquitous "Je suis Charlie") created by the demonstrators is clearly visible and readable. Students may write under their photo one or two sentences explaining their choices.

Step 3. Once the corpus is assembled, divide students into groups of two or three so they can proceed to analyze the data. To guide the process, the instructor can display the following prompts:

- Identify common elements across the different signage appearing on the LinoIt board. Possibilities:
 - Words
 - Images
 - Symbols
 - Quotes
 - Famous names
- Create categories to classify recurrent appearances
- Look for emerging patterns
- Create themes, based on the ideas expressed

Step 4. Once finished, pair each group with another to compare and refine analysis. Each group is then asked to present a theme and explain how the data support it.

Step 5. End the session with the projection of the following blurb, which summarizes the French conceptualization of freedom of speech:

The right to say, write or print what you want is rooted in the declaration of rights that came with the 1789 French Revolution. However, that freedom of speech ends at defaming, slandering, or inciting to hate others based on their, religion or sex.

Ask students to discuss in their research group the following two questions:

- For many, the journal *Charlie Hebdo* embodies freedom of speech. How?
- Can you really laugh and poke fun at everything?

At the conclusion of this session, invite students to imagine that they participated in the Marche Républicaine and that they decided to make their own sign. What would their sign say?

Phase 3: Constructing Learners' Own Viewpoints

The final class session is designed to prompt students to develop their own informed insights on the topic. By exploring why one-fifth of the population does not feel they are Charlie (results of the BVA Orange iTélé survey poll), students can start unraveling the complexity and diversity of the conceptualization of freedom of speech in contemporary France.

- Step 1. Start with a display of students' signs and ask them to identify in groups of two or three choices of words, symbols, and references. Are there patterns emerging from the signs? Invite students to consider the themes appearing in their own signs and to explain their decisions.
- Step 2. Project the results of the BVA Orange iTélé survey poll and show a video that France 2 (one of the main French television channels) aired on the evening news on January 12, 2015, the day after the Marche République. The story reports on some primary school and high school students who did not respect the government mandated minute of silence to pay tribute to the victims. Ask the following questions:
 - Based on the news report, how did the students justify their reaction?
 - The teacher interviewed states that children in his school have the impression that 50% of the French population is against everything that embodies Muslims.
 - How do they form their impression?
 - Does this impression reflect reality?
 - What is your reaction to this attitude?

This last question connects back to the students' home culture, the United States, offering an additional opportunity to consider and reflect on the similarities of the issue and how certain issues or concepts, despite apparent cross-cultural applicability, may conceal deep cultural differences. Students may relate the varying opinions expressed in France about the *Charlie Hebdo* attack to, for example, diverse opinions in the United States regarding the Black Lives Matter movement.

Activating Reflections through Assessments

This pedagogical intervention incorporates three assignments introduced at the end of each class session. The objective is to engage personal reflections on the subjectivity of cultural differences throughout the sequence. They can be assembled in a learning portfolio as suggested by Schulz (2007) to document students' journey of discovery. Each component provides an opportunity for personal expression and for reflection on the diversity of symbolic meanings. Engaging their own subjective interpretations encourages students to recognize their own

and others' emotional attachment to the meaning of freedom, laying out the foundation for new appreciations to emerge and intercultural empathy to develop.

Assignment 1. At the end of the first class session (Phase 1), students are asked to reflect in a paragraph on how their conception of freedom compares to the French point of view. The objective of this first assignment is to prompt students to make sense of what has been discussed during that first session and to connect these ideas back to their own life.

Assignment 2. Asking students to make their own sign for the Marche Républicaine at the end of the second session (Phase 2) lets them connect directly with the topic by investing more personally. It compels them to voice their own conceptualization of freedom of speech and to encounter alternate understanding informed by differing frames of reference.

Assignment 3. The final assignment asks students to adopt the “identity” of an editorial journalist working for a media outlet and in that role to present opinions, viewpoints, or new insights gained during the explorative classroom activities. In this project, students can further explore potential connections to their own lives initiated in the first assignment. They can develop a multimodal BuzzFeed article with captioned animated .gif pictures (they can use the website giphy.com to find .gifs in several languages or make their own) and commentaries (one to three sentences per image) or a digital presentation with a recording of their own commentaries. The instructor can provide several options to students so they can pursue their own interests. Topics, for example, can include (1) Contrast French and American points of view on freedom, (2) What is l'esprit Charlie? (3) What does freedom of speech mean for the French and for Americans? and (4) To be or not to be Charlie?

The three components should be assigned different weight; the BuzzFeed article (or digital presentation) requiring much more time investment than the paragraph and the demonstration sign. To establish clear expectations for student performance and consistent grading criteria, it is recommended that instructors develop three rubrics (one for each component). The following categories were used in developing the rubric for this pedagogical intervention: content (relevant, elaborate, clear, logical organized); creativity (original, inventive, reflective); visual support (engaging, illustrates content); word choices (vocabulary); language control (grammar); and spelling and punctuation.

Considerations for Language Program Direction

With this pedagogical intervention, Language Program Directors (LPDs) can address both their responsibilities for curriculum design for courses under their supervision (in this case intermediate level) and graduate teaching assistants' professional training. The suggestions provided next demonstrate a potential avenue for preparing graduate teaching assistants to design their own classroom-based cultural immersive experience.

Engaging Graduate Teaching Assistants in Developing the Activities for the Pedagogical Intervention

From the practical standpoint of sequence implementation, scalability, and cross-sectional comparability, it might be tempting for the LPD to deliver the pedagogical intervention as a ready-to-use packet. However, giving teaching assistants the opportunity to collaborate on the design of the teaching material transforms them from consumers/executors to producers of curricular activities. The involvement of all graduate teaching assistants (and not solely the ones who are teaching the third-semester course) in the process establishes a community focused on curriculum building, in which competencies and experiential knowledge of the various members are engaged and valued.

To manage the development of the pedagogical material, I suggest creating four teams. Each team receives an instructor guide presenting the pedagogical sequence, learning outcomes, the steps in each phase, and detailed instructions on how to create a LinoIt account. Three teams are responsible for developing the material necessary to implement each phase. Team 1 creates a student worksheet for Phase 1, a PowerPoint presentation with prompts for teaching, a handout for assignment 1, and the grading rubric. Team 2 develops the PowerPoint for the lesson, a handout for assignment 2, and the rubric. Team 3 is in charge of the teaching PowerPoint, the student handout for assignment 3, and its rubric. The fourth team's task is to review all the material for consistency and accuracy. To encourage an interactive process facilitating collaboration, peer mentoring, and reflections, all the documents can be stored in a Dropbox folder. Graduate teaching assistants can use the comment function in each document to make edits and offer suggestions.

Involving Graduate Teaching Assistants in Program Articulation and Curricular Expansion

This pedagogical intervention can be used as model and template to develop additional sequences based on other cultural and sociological constructs or major events. Using LinoIt, graduate teaching assistants can submit ideas and indicate the appropriate level (introductory or intermediate) and explain why. Face-to-face

brainstorming sessions provide the opportunity to discuss how the suggested constructs and events might fit within the existing curriculum, stimulating reflections on program articulation. Once a selection is agreed upon, graduate teaching assistants can start the process of developing learning outcomes, material, teaching tools, and assessments. Using this type of approach establishes a sense of community within a program, provides firsthand experience in curriculum development, and assists the LPD in creating an intercultural language learning environment.

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