

The Dynamics of Language Program Direction

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The Undergraduate Program: Autonomy and Empowerment

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Program direction has a longer history than we realize, and it is sometimes salutary to consider the experiences of our predecessors. One such was Professor Henry Wadsworth Longfellow of Harvard who as Smith Professor in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures was language coordinator and program director as early as 1834. Demands were even greater in those days. Professor Longfellow was expected to be highly proficient in four languages: French, German, Italian, and Spanish. The department chair at the time, Professor George Ticknor, insisted that Longfellow spend a considerable amount of time in Europe before taking up his appointment at Harvard to ensure this high level of proficiency. Not only did Longfellow direct programs in these four languages, but he also taught language classes and gave lectures on the texts being studied. He himself taught 115 students of French and 30 students of German, while also supervising and visiting classes in Spanish and Italian. Moreover, he did much materials preparation for French, Spanish, and Italian—writing grammar books and exercise manuals, and putting together books of readings. To make a scholarly contribution to the Cambridge community, he gave public lectures on leading literary figures in the four languages. He visited classrooms and gave evaluations to help his assistants (mostly nonacademic native speakers) improve their teaching, and he was present at the recitations of each student at least once a month (a practice some of his instructors regarded as “espionage”). After six years of this devoted

service, he had to suffer the frustration of a faculty committee report in 1840 that spoke of “the deleterious effects of too unrestricted study of modern languages,” which “on account of the simplicity of their grammatical structure and the enticing character of many of their productions, is apt to give a distaste for severer and more disciplining studies.” It seems that the faculty viewed with alarm the fact that the students were actually enjoying their language studies. Program directors today may empathize with the experiences of this program director of 150 years ago, who was overworked and underappreciated. By 1840 Longfellow, who was not treated as a full member of the faculty—where important decisions were made—was suffering from burnout. Since his wife was a millionaire in her own right, Longfellow decided at this point that the game was not worth the candle and retired to his Cambridge house to write poetry (Johnson, 1944). Not all contemporary stories end so felicitously!

Looking over Longfellow’s experiences, we should recognize many familiar features. Even today many of our colleagues within and beyond our departments remain convinced that language classes lack “solid intellectual content”—hence the prevalence of the term “service courses” for the first two years of language study. The work load of those teaching languages is still greater in most institutions than that of colleagues teaching “severer and more disciplining studies.” Those directing language programs are still, more often than not, offered appointments at subfaculty level or are sidelined to parallel career tracks of ambiguous status. Isn’t it time, surely, that language study should come of age as a fully respected partner of equivalent status with literature, linguistics, and the teaching of culture, with its own appointments at all ranks and autonomy in developing its programs at all levels of undergraduate study? What steps can we take to build prestige and respect for our work, so that its practitioners may be recognized as worthy of the usual rewards and opportunities of the academy?

The Psychological Effects of Terminology

We must cease to consider ourselves, or to refer to ourselves, as directors, coordinators, or supervisors of “elementary and intermediate” language courses (sometimes just of “elementary language courses,” which many faculty colleagues think of as being the province of high school), of “basic courses,” or worse yet, of “service courses.” We also do not help our situation by adopting the term “language training” for our work, since it encourages us and others to regard that work as merely technical or pre-

liminary—training for some more important activity—and therefore something that presumably any speaker of the language, without special intellectual preparation, or a colleague from another field, can do just as well as a specialized professional. The concept of “training” also ignores the interaction of teaching and student learning. Our students’ motivation, aptitude, and willingness to expend personal effort ultimately determine the level of proficiency they will achieve.

The vocabulary we use about our work is important psychologically, and sets the tone for discussion of future development of the teaching of the language. We must consider ourselves as being *charged with a language program*, of which elementary and intermediate courses are but one part—an important part, certainly, but not the whole. Then we must work to see that the entire language program through to the advanced level develops some coherence, diversity, and relevance in terms of present student and institutional needs. Even if, in a particular setting, we are still limited on appointment to directing the first- and second-year courses, we must see ourselves as creating the framework for further development of the program, setting our sights on a future stage when language courses, through to the most advanced level, will form one strong and purposeful sequence. If we work well, building up our colleagues’ confidence in our abilities and expertise and their trust in our leadership, we will often find the department willing, eventually, to extend our mandate, in part because our literary and linguistic colleagues, quite naturally, would rather be spending their time teaching courses in their own fields. They are often relieved to find someone who is capable of and really enjoys developing the advanced courses, especially as such development leads to more and better equipped majors for their own specialized areas.

Purposeful Course Design

We must not limit our perspective to the task of developing a level of proficiency for something unspecified. In the federal agencies, from whose work the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) *Proficiency Guidelines* (1986) were developed, levels of proficiency are related to actual job descriptions, and learners are well aware that they need to attain a specified level of proficiency in a particular skill (and sometimes a different level for another) if they are to receive the appointment they are seeking. We are teaching languages in a college or university setting as an integral part of education in the humanities, or

science, or business. Carpentry apprentices learn more than how to saw wood, to hammer nails, or to dovetail joints: they learn these things in order to make cabinets, build houses, or repair roofs. Within our language program we must carefully consider the ends for which we are preparing students (their ends, ultimately), planning content accordingly, and giving the students many opportunities to develop the level of proficiency they need in both the content area and the language. Serious content in language courses is of great importance as part of the general education of the students, as well as for motivational reasons. As Benseler (1991: p. 190) observes, we expect instructors in language courses "to add strong elements of intellectual rigor and challenge by enhancing literacy and the appreciation of literature, adding to student knowledge of the target culture (a comprehensive term) and its people, and contributing to the general education of students who populate them, whether major or non-major."

Our decisions regarding course design may mean involving other departments in developing content to help students achieve educational and professional objectives satisfying to them. We are not experts in every field: we draw in experts to help us. The experiments with content-based instruction at Earlham (Jurasek, 1988), St. Olaf (Allen, Anderson & Narváez, 1992), Brown (Rivers, 1992: p. 24), and Binghamton (Badger, Rose & Straight, 1993) can teach us much in this regard. "Interdisciplinarity" is today's watchword, and we must become adept at networking to ensure access for the student to the best of all possible educations.

Language Teaching and Culture Specialists

We need a proper title for fully qualified personnel in our field, to distinguish them from the many pinch hitters from tangential areas of study who are, often reluctantly, put in charge of language programs. A new professional title for those who are trained to direct programs helps us to see ourselves, and others to see us, as more than just "service" personnel who are easily replaceable. A suitable title for fully prepared language personnel would be language teaching and culture specialists (LTCS's), as I suggested in 1992 (pp. 295-312). We can then work to see that positions in our departments in the future are filled by persons with the requisite preparation as LTCS's. Specialists have a high level of professional expertise for performing specific tasks—a professional preparation that enables them to keep up with a field of knowledge and an area of research in which they are expected to show leadership and, in academic contexts, to publish. We can

then encourage our departments when advertising positions to make clear that they are seeking thoroughly qualified LTCS's and that any less-qualified appointees will be expected to devote the requisite time and energy to acquiring professional preparation at an appropriate level. If we learn to respect ourselves, others will learn to respect us.

Planning a Long Sequence

Just being empowered by a name and a field is not enough. *We must be seen to be doing interesting and worthwhile things in our program.* We must work toward a planned long sequence of language courses at the college level that is imaginative in design and wide ranging in appeal, and which students perceive as related to their needs in the twenty-first century. After a careful analysis of foreign language curricular problems at the undergraduate level, Benseler (1991: p. 181) concludes that "the upper division curriculum in foreign languages and literatures qualifies for designation as the most neglected area of our entire enterprise." For too long the bulk of our efforts has been devoted to repeating over and over again elementary and intermediate courses that leave students with a certain foundational knowledge and a shallow level of proficiency, which rapidly evaporate because they are not yet usable in wider contexts. We know that through use even a fragile grasp of the language will develop and become consolidated, but what we leave students with is too often insufficient for this consolidation to occur without some immediate cultivation. A well-designed period of study abroad can act as a consolidator and whet students' appetites for more, but not all students can afford this experience.¹

If we offer within our departments a planned and graduated sequence of courses through to the advanced level, one that provides opportunities for students to progress, if they wish, to a Superior Level of proficiency on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Scale, incoming students will be able to integrate themselves into the sequence at the level at which they feel comfortable.² We thus valorize their previous high school experiences, variable as these necessarily are. Unfortunately, in too many institutions previous study is denigrated or merely ignored. Byrnes (1990: p. 289) considers the practice of placing students who have had previous instruction into beginners classes to be "not only devastating from the standpoint of learner motivation and, thus, educationally totally unsound," but also "fiscally irresponsible." With a well-developed long sequence of courses with different contents, calibrated to a scale of increasing proficiency, we can, with

patience and encouragement, integrate all incoming students into study at an appropriate level that will not only maintain and develop their ability to use the language, but increase their enjoyment of language study. A sequence of increasingly more demanding language courses equivalent to eight or nine years of language study (16 or 18 semester levels) can be a viable objective in a large department, offering students real options in terms of the level of proficiency and of the content area they seek. Smaller colleges with a more restricted student body and fewer faculty will inevitably have to set their sights less high, while building on the entrance strengths of their particular constituency.

Swaffar (1990: p. 32) points out that one of the problems facing students who wish to continue language study at a level appropriate to their previous experience is the curricular shift from the high school emphasis on “self-expression in casual conversation, factual reports, and describing familiar people, places, and events” to “narrowly defined linguistic expectations” or unfamiliar learning styles. She feels that high school students who would like to advance further in a language would fit more easily into upper-division programs that emphasize literature as part of cultural values, with multimedia options and a thematic rather than a period emphasis, providing for pragmatic use of language in a variety of content courses—for example, culture tracks, language study keyed to particular careers, or study abroad (p. 46).

When we address the question of a sequence of courses at the advanced level, centered on students’ interests and needs rather than on some traditional set of compartmentalized skills (review of grammar, pronunciation exercises, and advanced composition, or “comp-and-con”), many of our colleagues protest that we are proposing the impossible. This has not been found to be the case where such a program has been tried. Fortunately, we can group students’ interests and needs into categories and design courses that meet aesthetic, pragmatic, professional, cross-cultural, or intra- and intercommunity needs, linking diverse fields. Rivers (1992: pp. 7–18, 21–33) makes suggestions for several diversified courses at the elementary level (providing for different learning preferences and interests), 16 highly varied courses for the intermediate level, and more than 20 possibilities for the advanced level. Naturally, not all of these courses will be appropriate in the particular context of every institution; departments may select among these and other possible courses of their own invention. These suggestions are intended to spark the imagination of program directors. Once the idea takes root that language learning can take place while discussing and ana-

lyzing subject matter, engaging in diverse activities, and incorporating any type of media assistance (film, video, tape, laser disc, television, computerized materials), a concerned and dedicated teaching team will soon come forward with their own innovative course proposals.

The proposed sequence must be coherent within the context of a particular college or university, that is, it must take into account the linguistic, institutional, and regional needs in a local situation. These may be determined in part by the ethnic composition of the college body or the local area; the established aims of the institution, whether as a four-year or community college or a large research-oriented university; the occupational opportunities open to the students (see Rivers, 1993) or provided by the faculties and schools within the institution; and the way in which the institution can best serve the surrounding community. In this sense, *no program can be borrowed*: each must be tailored to its particular setting. James (1989), for instance, describes a well-articulated advanced language program geared to the humanistic and literary aims of her department. This may be the way to start for other institutions as they bide their time for a favorable climate to develop for further diversification.

In order for a sequence of advanced courses to be maximally useful, *there needs to be some kind of placement device*, not just for requirement purposes, but for placement at all levels of the undergraduate program. The language courses offered must be clearly cross-indexed in relation to levels of the placement device, so that students can easily recognize which courses are appropriate at their present stage of development. In a program sequenced and articulated in this way, students are motivated to continue with language study as they are able. They may also return to it after a pause if they are anxious to have the consolidating benefits of further study, integrating at that time into a level where they can progress beyond what they had previously achieved. In a well-designed sequential program, students continue for as long as they perceive the study to be of utility or interest to them.

Wherritt, Druva-Roush, and Moore (1991) report on the Foreign Language Assessment Project (FLAP) at the University of Iowa, which developed a placement device and was integrated with incentives for attempting courses at higher levels (Foreign Language Incentives Project, or FLIP). They found that larger numbers of entering students enrolled in upper-division courses when they were carefully tested for level of proficiency by means of a carefully constructed test that had been developed in consultation with high school teachers. Although some faculty had

misgivings at first, "course instructors who had taught in the program for more than one year indicated that there were no discernible differences in the background skills of students placed by the FLAP tests and those of students from previous years placed by other criteria [usually completion of a previous course at the University of Iowa]" (p. 91). It is encouraging that, as a consequence, more students at the University of Iowa "are opting to continue study beyond the two year requirement" (p. 90). The FLAP and FLIP initiatives are worth study by other institutions that are looking for a place to start on encouraging students to enter at different levels of a long sequence.

Student Reaction to a Well-Designed Program

*If the program is coherent, well-designed, and well taught, students become aware of it, even if the faculty at large and the department faculty remain uninterested. News of opportunities and successes travels by word of mouth and students vote with their feet and with their evaluations. The Harvard Assessment Seminars Second Report (1992) bears this truth out. In 1986 the president of Harvard University, Derek Bok, established a long-term program of assessment for the improvement of the college's educational programs. More than 100 faculty members and administrators met with colleagues from two dozen other universities and colleges to determine, and learn from, what Harvard students and alumni/alumnae thought about their educational experience. The views of large numbers of present undergraduates and alumni/alumnae were sampled via questionnaires and interviews (for foreign languages, from the years 1978, 1980, 1983, and 1990). The *Second Report* comes up with what it refers to as an "unexpected finding" that "foreign languages and literatures are the most widely appreciated courses" in the college (p. 11). The director of the project, Richard Light (1992: p. 5), had "expected many undergraduates to characterize work in foreign languages and literatures as requirements to be gotten out of the way." "In fact," he notes, "hardly any do this. Students talk about language classes with special enthusiasm. Many rate them among the best of all their classes. Alumni agree, and strongly. When asked why, both groups point to the way these classes are organized and taught."*

During the period when the students surveyed were studying languages at Harvard, all graduate student teaching fellows, part-time teaching assistants, and exchange students were given extensive instruction in their first year about how to conduct their courses, with preteaching orien-

tation, a full-credit methods course, a practicum on teaching techniques, videotaping, classroom supervisory visits, and weekly course heads' meetings to discuss the ongoing course and the testing program. Opportunities were provided in subsequent years for them to develop the content of some courses according to their own interests and talents and to act as course heads themselves where this was feasible. They received preparation in interactive teaching with much student participation and small group work, as well as in ways of incorporating into their classes film, video, a variety of taped materials, computerized aids to learning, and realia. They were encouraged to involve their students in language use out of the classroom where possible, and to invite native speakers into their classes to interact with their students. The students they taught received constant feedback on their progress and personal help through instructors' office hours and a departmental clinic to which they could be referred for special help with pronunciation, writing, or any other problems. From the beginning they were taught to express themselves freely in the language, both in speech and in writing. The young instructors also read about and discussed ways of teaching literature, and graduate students who had gone through the development program conducted and coordinated many literature sections, both in the core program of the college and in departmental courses. The language courses were expanded to form a long sequence (18 semester offerings of advancing difficulty in French, for instance; 15 in Spanish), with provision for different learning styles, options in course content ranging from literature to film, cultural studies, case studies for business, advanced translation, and oral and written debate and discussion. The evolution of the program was closely related to expressed student concern and interest (through course evaluations and questionnaires), and graduate student instructors were encouraged to initiate and experiment with course innovations.

To quote further from Light's (1992: p. 11) report, we are told the students enjoy these courses "enormously." "They also rate the workload as equally enormous," yet they "give these classes higher praise than any other subject or courses categories, except small tutorials. And they give clear reasons why they appreciate these classes so much. The reasons have to do with the way language classes are structured and taught. Alumni are even more fervent. When asked to give advice to undergraduates, nearly all [actually, 94%] urge more intense study of both foreign languages and literatures. Many suggest programs to incorporate such classes as part of each student's study plan." Although Light confesses to a search for "mysterious

and inexplicable reasons” for the findings (p. 11), it seems that the explanation was there to be observed by those who would come and see what was taking place in the language departments. Quality of teaching and interesting course content pay off.

At present, students are eager for more language study, not only in Europe, Asia, and Africa, but even in the United States. Evening classes are full of adults seeking to make up for lost or neglected opportunities. Enrollments are on the increase, particularly in languages that the students consider to be of importance for their future. There is a rising interest in humanistic studies, and language courses have much to provide in that area. Where there is a well-conceived program that they see as relevant to their needs, students will come to language classes and stay in them. Promise and talk will not deceive them, however; they must see in place and experience a program that delivers.

The Politics of Transforming a Program

As we contemplate redesigning or transforming a traditional program, we have a choice between the “new broom” approach or “nibbling around the edges.” Should we strive for a position of control where we can impose a blueprint for a radically different program or should we be satisfied with gradual progress, making a few changes here and there, adding and subtracting, until we slowly reshape the whole?

In an established program, a number of people have beloved bailiwicks (even fiefdoms) of which they are very proud; others are nervous about a new administrator “breathing down their necks”; and still others fear and may even resent changes they see as creating extra work for them. New brooms may sweep clean in the practical world of housekeeping, but metaphorical new brooms tend to rouse hostilities; colleagues feel that their tried-and-true approaches are under attack and, to vary the metaphor, they sometimes combine behind a wall of shields. Unfortunately, as a consequence of too much brash enthusiasm and impatience on the part of the new program director, the cooperation of colleagues who feel threatened may be lost forever. We need a more tactical approach.

With a new appointment or position of responsibility, we have time to “play it cool.” We can afford an initial period—Lee and VanPatten (1990: pp.121–22) suggest the entire first year of appointment—to get to know people, to observe what is being done, to show appreciation for good work, to compliment and inquire in a friendly way; to give our colleagues the

opportunity to know us and understand our way of looking at things, while we spread around in general discussion a few of our own ideas in an unthreatening way. An initial period of this type will pay enormous dividends in goodwill and protect the newcomer from serious errors of judgment through lack of knowledge of past developments and existing internal networks.

In this period we lay the groundwork for our “nibbling around the edges” approach. The ideas we have shared in discussion circulate, stimulate discussion, and begin to come back to us as concrete proposals for change—proposals that come from those who will be involved in their implementation and that they rightly see as their own. We then assist them in working out the practical applications of what are now *their* ideas, their “babies,” of which they are very proud. With a few modifications here, an innovation there, change begins to take place, with those involved in this change hardly noticing the direction of the change, while themselves feeling that they are the initiators of progress. As leaders, we must be secure and mature enough not to feel threatened by the success of our colleagues, or to feel the need for personal attribution and accolades. We encourage demonstration in pilot projects of the kinds of ideas we have been sowing about, so that the results can be observed, talking appreciatively and informatively about what is being done so that others take note, allowing students’ reactions to innovations to penetrate, and waiting for still others to offer to try these new ideas or techniques. When they begin to do so, we make ourselves available with assistance that is now welcomed and even sought out.

Responsibilities of the Administrator

Scheduling, budgeting, monitoring the testing system, attending to student problems and bureaucratic hassles, and other organizational duties must be performed efficiently (which means almost invisibly). The first responsibility of the administrator, however, not the last, is the development of the potentialities and expertise of the team. The leader is the facilitator for the success of others:

1. We provide expert orientation and professional development for all new instructors, but we also help our more established team members to gain further knowledge or professional preparation where necessary, informing them of available resources and means of support.
2. We keep them informed about developments in the field and where to find out about new trends.

3. We help them to think through their problems from an informed viewpoint, always supporting them when they need our help.
4. We assist them in implementation of their ideas for course design, new techniques, or materials development, without feeling threatened when they go further than we do in innovation or modernization.
5. We make sure that their successes become known within the department and across the college (through departmental bulletins, newsletters of centers for faculty development or improvement of teaching, student and administration news outlets, and alumni bulletins), as seems strategically appropriate.
6. We encourage them to make public presentations of their ideas and initiatives (sometimes for the first time) locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. We inform them of opportunities of which they may not be aware to present their ideas in wider circles, helping to launch them until they are flying on their own.
7. We help them write about their work, their research, or their ideas for new developments, advising through the initial stages of their projects, reading early drafts and suggesting improvements; later, we help them find outlets.
8. We guide them in developing and implementing research projects, in writing grant proposals, and in searching for sources of funding.

In brief, we put the members of our team on the map. The successes of the members of the team bring rewards and respect to its director.

When instructors are enthusiastic and empowered to do interesting and innovative things, to work together to create a program, students are enthusiastic, the department (even if sluggishly and belatedly) becomes enthusiastic, or at least sympathetic and cooperative, and we have a program of which all can be proud.

Ultimately our strength is in student satisfaction and team loyalty and cooperation—these are the oil for the wheels of our enterprise, which now has a momentum of its own. At this point we can relax and enjoy.

Notes

1. For research into the effects of study abroad programs, see Weaver (1989).
2. For a full explanation of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and Levels, see Byrnes and Canale (1987).

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