

The Failure of Utility: Redefining French Studies in the Twenty-First Century

by Corbin Treacy

IN 2006, I WAS A FRENCH TEACHER at an independent school in the suburbs of Philadelphia. One fall afternoon I was sitting on the sidelines of a soccer game at which our girls' team was playing an area rival. Behind me, I overheard two mothers talking about their daughters (both freshman) who had recently decided to take Spanish. At one point, Mother A said to Mother B: "She wanted to take French, but I said 'What can you do with French besides travel to France?'" My face went red; I fought back the urge to whip around and shout: "Only travel to France?!? What about Senegal? Ivory Coast? Tahiti? Tunisia? Canada, for crying out loud? What about the United Nations, the Olympics, the European Union?" Being a young and untenured faculty member, I elected to say nothing and left the game feeling somewhat defeated and frustrated by my decision to remain silent. After all, if a French teacher does not stand up and proclaim the usefulness of French, who will?

As I replayed the footage of that scene in my head several times in subsequent years, I came to some rather different conclusions about what happened and what I should have said. Mother A's initial question, "What can you *do* with French?" set the utilitarian terms of the trap into which I almost blindly flung myself. Understood only as a tool, as a means to a financial or professional end, French indeed has a tough argument to make in twenty-first century America. At least once a year, my local AATF chapter sends me a link to a Web site with a list of ten (or twenty, or a hundred) reasons to study French. These sites are full of statistics about who speaks French where, how much trade the United States does with France and Francophone countries, the use of French by international NGOs, etc. I have used these in my classes before and even quoted them when, on an airplane or at a cocktail party, I am asked the inevitable question that follows my outing myself as a French teacher, "So, are people still studying French?"

But I should not have used these with my students and I should not defend my chosen profession by explaining how useful it will be for my

students to know French when they vacation in Madagascar, interview for a job with the United Nations, or go to work for a company that happens to do business with Cameroon. As French instructors we are increasingly called upon to "sell" our language to parents, students, school and university administrators, and strangers on planes. But the question, "What can you *do* with French?" is the wrong one. The question people should be asking, or rather, that we as professionals in the field should be answering, is "What can French *do for you*?" If we are being honest, we realize that on a purely utilitarian level, French is not as useful to most Americans as Spanish is. It will not open as many corporate doors for students as mastery of say, Mandarin or Japanese. The CIA will not recruit you out of college for your familiarity with Proust the way they will if you have Farsi, Pashto, or Arabic under your belt. And yet I have never once come across a non-native fluent speaker of French who has regrets about investing years in their study of the language. Beyond what you can "do" with French, there is much that French can do for you, and it is these benefits (rather than the promise of a great career with Nestlé) that we should promote.

As is true with learning any language, the process of allowing French into an English-speaking brain is one of stretches and pulls. It is at times a clumsy process and at others, almost painful, but it is always a process of growth and development. New neural connections are made and new spaces of the brain explored. And one of the most gratifying gifts I've received from my study of French and the years I spent living in France is the cultivation of a new aesthetic sense that might best be described as "sober" and "tempered" when compared with my inherited American one. Ours is a nation of big cars, big houses, big portions, and big people. Not long into a serious study of French culture, one realizes that this is not the case everywhere. I recall one afternoon I spent staring at a *petit café* in a small cup, on a small saucer, with a small silver spoon and a small chocolate artfully displayed on my diminutive café table in Marseille. I remember comparing this to the 24-oz coffee I purchase in a Styrofoam cup on my way to work back in the States. What did this contrast say about me and my way of being, both in France and in Philadelphia? I learned to notice just how dominated we are by the "more is more" approach to living, and to question the wisdom of buying into the culture of consumption that has become the norm in the United States. The French language and its various constitutive cultures offer us beauty (described by Kant as that which is "purposive without a purpose") as an antidote to excess for the sake of excess.

Just as there is much to be gained from appreciating the finer points of France's aesthetic moderation and delicacy, there is much to be learned from her history, both past and present. France is currently grappling with a changing population and new understandings of what it means to be "French." Despite recent and ongoing attempts to draw a

firm line in the sand around the sanctity of so-called "French culture," the winds of change will demand that these lines move and shift. As we in America confront our own prejudices, xenophobia, and frequent inability to name injustice and privilege, we might find creative solutions in and beyond current French engagements with (or flights from) multiculturalism, and question our own approaches to collective life.

There is a very real risk that if French disappears from the curricula in public schools, state universities, and community colleges in the United States, it will retreat behind the high walls of elite private schools, liberal arts colleges, and the more select (and well-funded) universities. The language will no doubt continue to enjoy a certain social currency in the upper echelons of American society, but if the pluralistic teaching of French is dispensed with for "budgetary reasons," the more precious gifts to be gained from it will be withheld from large segments of the population. And the scholarly field of French studies will be similarly impoverished if it is denied the diversity of voices that the language's relatively broad presence in American schools currently furnishes.

If as French teachers we continue to enter into the utilitarian argument over the quantifiable value of French language study, we will undoubtedly lose. Not long into defensive explanations extolling the hundreds of millions of French speakers currently living in the world and the likely effects of population growth in West Africa, our interlocutors will gaze upon us with a look that says, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." The time has come to recast the terms in which this conversation is begun, and to do so with any credibility we must also adjust the way we are teaching. The recent shift, particularly at colleges and universities, to increasingly content-driven instruction is a positive move that will do much to redraw the lines of the "Why French?" conversation. If we continue to view French as a communicative tool to be mastered we reinforce the utilitarian mindset that French is something one does things with. If, on the other hand, we see the French classroom as a space in which to unsettle expectations, trouble existing assumptions about the world, shift perspectives, and foster critical thinking, we will invite various stakeholders (parents, school administrators, college deans) to consider French (or any language, for that matter) not as a dusty piece of curricular antiquity, but rather as a core element of the liberal arts education, like English or History.

A faculty member in my department recently taught a very popular advanced undergraduate course on libertinism that I had the privilege of observing one evening. When I returned to my second-semester French course the following morning, I told my students about what I had seen and could see them perk up at the idea that they too might one day be discussing underground, liminal, or subversive texts in French. We even had a lively discussion of our own about what it means for a text to be "out of bounds" or "amoral," and they shared stories about books being

banned from their local libraries and parent complaints over Mark Twain. It was one of the more stimulating discussions I've had with my students and, based on conversations I had with them after class, expanded their concepts of what an intellectual engagement with French studies might look like. Such "Aha!" moments cannot be reproduced by a computer program and recast the stakes and consequences of what studying French comes to mean to students.

To create the conditions for content-filled engagements with the ethical, social, aesthetic, and political questions that can flow from a study of French, we should rethink the way in which language teachers are educated. Many M.Ed. and M.A. candidates in Second Languages receive little or no graduate-level instruction in their language's literature, history, or politics. In my four years of coursework as an M.A. and Ph.D. student in a French department, I did not once sit in a classroom with a colleague from the College of Education.¹ Having made friends outside of the classroom with some of these students, I learned that much of their time is spent mastering systems, terminologies, and acronyms, analyzing data, and reading quantitative studies about language acquisition. These are no doubt useful in learning how to teach a language, but this approach assumes that if teachers have learned their chosen language sufficiently and are familiar with how to design good lessons, they can easily insert content and culture in meaningful and appropriate ways. But where is the deep knowledge of the literature, the philosophy, the art, the music, the history, the sociology that one needs to competently deliver a content-based curriculum?

I am often struck by how many textbooks will drop in an excerpt from Hugo or a poem from Baudelaire with perhaps only an introductory paragraph offering a brief biography of the author. French teachers are tasked with teaching these in intermediate and advanced courses, despite the likelihood of not having studied such authors since their undergraduate days, if at all. Even more troubling is the obligatory "Francophone" culture boxes *qua* curricular hiccups in most text programs. Students quickly realize that these cultural snapshots (usually at the end of chapters) constitute the margins of the course content and fail to rise to the level of "need to know." That these topics are often assigned paltry point value on most assessments doesn't help much either.

If we evacuate our field of the meaty and juicy bits of real content, we become trainers, not teachers, at which point our eventual replacement with computer programs becomes inevitable. To remain relevant, French studies in the United States should celebrate what it does well for our students and stop trying to be something it is not. If we lean into the critical thinking and perspective-broadening strengths of our discipline (as English instructors did years ago when they shifted the focus of their instruction increasingly toward analytical writing and literary analysis) French will *sell itself* at the secondary and post-secondary level. We will

no longer need the poster "Ten Reasons to Study French" hanging in our classrooms. If we unapologetically assume our place alongside English teachers, history teachers, and philosophy departments as essential pillars in an educational program designed to empower analytical thinkers and ethically-engaged global citizens, we will not need to lean on who-speaks-French-where statistics. But to do this, we have to align our teaching with the mission of promoting critical thinking and stop measuring our classroom success primarily on the basis of linguistic or communicative mastery. This will require conversations between courageous middle and high school French teachers and their colleagues in other departments, as well as between professors in schools of education and their colleagues in language departments. Approached carefully and thoughtfully, these conversations could bring our profession out of the defensive crouch in which it has found itself recently and toward a place of greater confidence.

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Notes

¹Many programs require no graduate coursework outside the College of Education for the M.Ed. degree in Second Languages and Cultures. Admirably, some universities now offer joint graduate programs through both the School of Education and the appropriate language department.

A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Building a Strong French Program

by Christine Berg

FIVE YEARS AGO, I was hired as the sole French teacher in a high school in upstate New York. The state of the program at the time reflected the difficulties faced by most French programs in terms of enrollment and support from the community and administration. Parents and administrators were increasingly questioning the relevance of the study of French and voiced support for the eventual elimination of French in favor of Spanish and the implementation of a critical language program such as Arabic or Chinese. In an attempt to combat the decline of French and increase awareness of the value of studying the language, I undertook a multi-dimensional approach designed to create a vibrant, sustainable program.

My initial efforts began on a relatively small scale, with attempts to recruit one student at a time. Given that the pool of language students was finite, and I did not wish to be seen as building my program at the expense of Spanish, I began by enlisting the help of my Spanish colleagues in encouraging upper-level students to undertake the study of an additional foreign language. We brought in college admissions officers to speak about the fact that being trilingual would increase their attractiveness to colleges and universities, as well as broaden their career opportunities in the future. Initially we only had a few students choose this option, but over the next few years, the number of students enrolled in both French and Spanish increased steadily.

As a result of the success of my collaboration with my colleagues in the Language Department, I decided to reach out to teachers in other disciplines. I partnered with the Global Studies teacher in creating a unit of study related to the graphic novel *Persepolis*. I also created a Web quest for the freshman classes to be used in conjunction with the short-story unit that included the translation of "La parure" by Maupassant. The Web quest included information about Normandy and contemporary figures in French history and culture. These two projects generated a considerable amount of interest and raised the profile of the French program. In