

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

BROWN UNIVERSITY ■ VOLUME 3 / NUMBER 2 ■ JANUARY 1999



Bridging the Gap between Language and Literature teaching literature in the Foreign Languages

Lisa Voigt
Hispanic Studies

Acquiring knowledge is not the only component of a graduate student's education; learning how to transmit that knowledge to students is just as important. In foreign language and literature departments, graduate students are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to acquire pedagogical experience by teaching language classes. However, most graduate programs in these departments do little to prepare their students for teaching the upper-division literature, culture and civilization classes that they will be responsible for once they finish their degree and secure their first jobs.

As the graduate representatives of the Hispanic Studies Department's Language Committee, Domingo Ledezma and I recognized the value of the experience that graduate students gain through language instruction as well as the need to address the questions and concerns that we have about teaching literature. We sought to connect these issues by organizing a roundtable on the teaching of literature in the foreign languages, which we called "Bridging the Gap Between Language and Literature." Indeed, recent Ph.Ds are not the only ones who are challenged to "bridge this gap": any professor of literature in a foreign language department faces the unique task of teaching students who may be learning the "medium" (language skills) as well as the "message" (the course content).

Recognizing that our colleagues in other languages would share the same concerns, we also sought to bridge the interdepartmental "gap" by inviting three professors from different departments to speak informally on these issues. We asked Professors Stephanie Merrim (Hispanic Studies), Monique Fecteau (French Studies), and Nelson Vieira (Portuguese and Brazilian Studies) to give brief ten-minute presentations followed by discussion, modeling this format after the roundtables organized by the Center for Language Studies. Although all speakers addressed ways of enhancing students' understanding of foreign language texts and stimulating in-class discussion, they did so through different focuses. Professor Merrim concentrated on how to effectively use groupwork in literature classes. Professor Vieira discussed the importance of designing theme-based (rather than

strictly survey) literature courses. Finally, Professor Fecteau described French 52, a literature-based course at the intermediate language level, and several graduate students related their experiences teaching this course. Each speaker blended insightful commentary on theoretical issues related to foreign language teaching and learning, with concrete and practical suggestions on how to design and teach literature courses.

The audience response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic, with comments and questions following the presentations that spoke to the need for an ongoing discussion of these issues. The attendance at this rather modestly-publicized event was particularly revealing of such an interest among both graduate students and professors of all departments involved, as well as a few others; in a room that comfortably seats about thirty, many people had to bring in extra chairs or sit on the floor. Suggestions were made as to the possibility of holding a follow-up session or even a series of roundtables, perhaps one or two each semester, dedicated to different aspects of teaching literature in the foreign languages.

Clearly the interest exists, even beyond our initial expectations of organizing something beneficial to graduate students about to go on the job market. It seems that by responding to one need - the lack of training that graduate students in foreign language departments receive in teaching literature - we have revealed another: the need among all faculty members to recognize and perhaps reevaluate the relationship between language and literature courses. We certainly hope to continue this endeavor as an interdepartmental initiative, and I welcome your comments or suggestions (Lisa_Voigt@Brown.edu).

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