

## **An Interdisciplinary Approach to World Language Education**

### **Personal Teaching Statement**

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I have always been an interdisciplinary learner. I thrive on making connections between literatures and theories from a multiplicity of contexts that support a more complete understanding of my chosen fields of study. As an educator, I have remained aware of the importance of interdisciplinary learning while planning my lessons and lectures. In a college classroom, this usually means making the material relevant to a variety of student interests. It is also important to keep students' language learning and/or writing goals in mind. Why have they chosen to study French, English, writing or literature? What are their long-term goals? How can I best serve these goals, appeal to their interests, and cover a substantial amount of material? Maintaining a curriculum that is both rigorous and engaging continually proves to be both challenging and exciting.

Inspired by the Communicative Method and Content-Based Instruction, I approach language as both a system (full of patterns and structures) and as an evolution of cultural, social, and political constructs. For each grammar structure learned, we apply it to a "real life" cultural situation. This way, I avoid teaching language "in the void" with no concern for cultural and historical context and overall applicability. It is my job as an educator to make these cultural and linguistic connections clear in my teaching. It is also my responsibility to encourage my students to think about the ways in which French can be an asset as they embark on future professional or personal endeavors. Above all, it is important to furnish them with the knowledge that learning a world language will allow them perceive others in a more intelligent and generous way as they journey through life.

In general, my academic interests include notions of diversity and community, and I enjoy teaching material related to these themes. The moment I began to examine why my personal interest in diversity and difference (which has always manifested itself academically in the study of postcolonial literature, art and theory) was relevant to my future career as an educator came early in my graduate career. A fellow student approached me one day and asked me why I found such value in studying postcolonial literatures of the African Diaspora. "Are these truly 'great' texts?" he queried. In a biased and skeptical tone, he continued: "Do they express universal human ideas and experiences, or are they riddled with provincial concerns that don't related to the majority of the Western world?" What interested me about his line of questioning was not what (for him and many others) constitutes "greatness" in literature. This is an entirely different and complex debate. Rather, I began to think about the ways in which one approaches the

universal in relation to literature. What terms are used to define “universal ideas?” Furthermore, is it even effective or accurate to use the terms “universal” and “humankind” in the fragmented 21<sup>st</sup> century world in which we live?

Following the surrealist thinkers of the 1940s, I prefer to think of the universal as taking on a “multiplicity of forms.” Some postcolonial literatures express a universal condition, or serve as a manifesto (or manifesta) of ideals. Others paint detailed portraits of individual experiences of coming to terms with issues of and “difference” (among others). To some extent, the individual narrative is representative of the universal. In these texts, we find moments that resonate (emotionally, intellectually or both) with our experiences because they describe a condition we have known. Or perhaps we don't find these moments. Instead, we learn about experiences unique from our own and gain a better understanding of the world in which we all live. This exchange of information, and the process of coming to terms with differences, *is* a universal experience. After all, each one of us is “other” in some way or another, and we are constantly made aware (by the media, our peers, or our own internal filters) of differences in those around us.

I try to impart to my students the notion that we are all part of a community; yet we are all “other” in some way or another. My hope is that this perspective will make them more culturally sensitive and respectful throughout the rest of their lives. To this end, I infuse my cultural lessons with different perspectives on history and culture. By viewing ourselves as a part of the interconnected web of experiences that make up universal conditions, we begin to understand how our own actions can produce reactions of change on larger social and political levels. We also learn that we must arm ourselves with the knowledge necessary to best educate and effect change in situations where individuals are being denied respect or rights as a result of race, gender, sexuality, or other “differences.” It is my hope that through my teaching, research and publications I will help others deconstruct the rhetoric that has historically shaped negative associations with race, culture, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. In understanding these histories, we are better equipped to effectively discuss difference and reverse the systems of injustice we observe on a daily basis.