

Chairing the Foreign Language and Literature Department, Part 2

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Thomas R. Beyer, Jr.

SEVEN years, 1994–2001, and it seems like only yesterday when language learning was experiencing a renaissance of interest and excitement fostered first by the proficiency movement and later by the articulation of national standards. But the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries have not been kind to some languages, including Russian, the language I profess. Interest and enrollments have declined (except, most noticeably, in Spanish) and institutions facing increasing pressures in other disciplines have reallocated lines from individual language sections or departments.

The challenges for chairs have remained essentially the same: fostering a welcoming learning environment for students, supporting colleagues, and trying to balance the needs of a department with the larger goals of the institution. Significant changes have occurred in the perception of language primarily as a skill or tool in support of other interests, in the growing implementation of technology in our lives, and in the changing faces of our students.

We language instructors may have unwittingly set the stage for a new sense of what it means to learn a language. The emphasis on proficiency and a shift in many programs from reading and listening comprehension to greater attention to speaking, along with a more realistic view of what can be achieved in classroom and study abroad in a few short years, have created students more capable of using their communicative skills beyond our departmental offerings in language, literature, and culture. Our students of Russian now routinely use their language in upper-level classes for work in history, political science, and sociology, just to name a few. Colleagues in these disciplines have eagerly embraced our students, sometimes at the cost of our own major program. Social and natural scientists want, indeed expect, us to provide them with students who have the skills necessary to do work inside of their disciplines in the original languages. Many colleagues and administrators lack, however, the training and background to appreciate fully what our students and we must do to achieve that level of language proficiency.

At the same time, students who once took our advanced courses in literature or culture are now enrolling in seminars across the college curriculum where increased student enrollments are accompanied by legitimate requests for additional staffing. The number of students in such classes often exceeds the small group prepared for senior work in our departments—and administrative choices must be made. Likewise, increased internationalization and an almost overwhelming role of English in many areas deflect attention from foreign language offerings. These factors, as Elizabeth Bernhardt notes, “make foreign language departments easy targets” (15). Recently, and for the first time in my twenty-five-year institutional memory, our department has been asked to rethink its teaching mission, to offer more courses in English that reach across the curriculum, to contribute to writing-intensive courses in English, to participate in broad introductory literature courses where any given national language may be represented in less than one-third of the assigned readings. We are being asked to do all this while continuing to maintain a solid language and literature curriculum for Russian majors, albeit in ways that may no longer count toward fulfillment of one’s contractual obligation of teaching loads. I am coming reluctantly to accept Heidi Byrnes’s assessment that “language learning is not part of the educational core at any level of the American educational system, and we should not be under any illusions that utilitarian pressures, globalization, or worldwide economic opportunities can and will soon change that” (9).

Our professional status as equals with colleagues in other disciplines is being questioned and challenged in an environment where the number of students counts more than the number of hours or the quality of the instruction delivered. Solutions can and must be found; compromises suggested and tested; new instructional designs, perhaps utilizing technology, developed. Otherwise we risk elimination one by one. In our own institution there is a

golden opportunity to integrate more closely the acquisition and study of language with study abroad; with the natural sciences, in particular environmental studies; and with literature. The explosion of technology in the past few years has likewise brought its own new opportunities and burdens. E-mail, voice mail, computer networking, and the Internet have all enfranchised us in a more democratic way. But there has been a shift of labor. What were once considered routine secretarial skills are now practiced by administrators campus-wide. Ever more frequently, chairs are asked to respond rapidly to messages from students, colleagues, and administrators on a daily basis. Routine correspondence is composed, printed, and mailed from one's desktop without the help of an administrative assistant. Departments and faculty members have Web pages that must be created, updated, and maintained. We can reach out to our students in Irkutsk or Yaroslavl or Moscow, and they can reach back to us—and they expect reasonably prompt replies. More and more colleagues are spending time acquiring the skills and using computers for classes and for research. We are now expected to appreciate, evaluate, and guide that work. Ironically, the very tools expected to save time now occupy increasing uses of our time. For many, both in the office and at home, we are now “technically available 24/7.”

Along with these challenges come new opportunities to experience and appreciate other languages and cultures. Our college like others across the country now actively recruits and attracts larger numbers of minority and foreign students, staff, and faculty members. In celebrating our communities and their increasing diversity, we can best restore the human and personal element in the humanities. Yes, we must recognize the inevitability of change, the depersonalization of the institution, the increase in technical and the decrease in personal contacts. But language has been and remains central to the human condition; to communicate with others in their own language is the finest way to appreciate and comprehend our own individuality and commonality. As language department chairs we must embrace and protect that traditional role of languages in the liberal arts curriculum.

Works Cited

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