

EXTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITIES IN FRENCH: A RESPONSE TO CHANGING STUDENT INTEREST

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Abstract

With decreases in both funding to and enrollments in the humanities at many institutions, coupled with growing concern about student employability and job-readiness after college, many programs are looking to experiential learning for answers. While service-learning has been one option for those seeking to develop authentic and meaningful learning experiences that reach beyond the walls of the tower, internships within the foreign language curriculum are less common. The present article shares one program's efforts to offer a modified post-secondary internship experience to students of French. A description of the experience, renamed an externship, as well as student feedback, are shared as a model for others looking to start small-scale experiential learning opportunities in post-secondary foreign language study.

Keywords: internship, externship, french, service-learning, experiential learning

1. Introduction

Within higher education in general, and foreign language study in particular, student interests as well as societal expectations are changing. Both students and their parents “are more concerned than ever about the effectiveness of undergraduate preparation for employment following four years of expensive tuition” (Gault, Leach, and Duey, 2010: 76). Although students have been slowly moving away from the liberal arts toward more applied fields such as business and allied health for decades, the current focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) is only adding to the migration (Zakaria, 2015). Even the MLA (2009) agrees that the humanities “that were once prestigious and highly regarded are receiving waning public support and are treated as marginal in their home institutions” (8) as today’s students are “less likely to choose language or literary study as majors as they were thirty-five or even fifteen years ago” (1).

Also changing is the degree to which external forces, such as our students’ future employers, are impacting higher education. A 2014 Hart Research survey found that employers want universities to pay more attention to helping students learn to apply knowledge in real-world settings, with only 14% of those surveyed believing

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that recent college graduates come to the workforce prepared with the needed skills and knowledge. According to Sanchez-Lopez, the current national debate “revolves around new trends that incorporate innovative curriculum modifications to meet the needs of societal changes and demands” (2013: 384) and is reflected in the rise of experiential education. Examples of concepts of learning that have become prevalent educational tools include experiential learning, service-learning, community engagement, internships, study abroad programs, and transnational classrooms.

Within the foreign language context, both our students and our professional organizations have been calling for innovation for some time. Beginning in 1996, the ACTFL Standards heralded change, with its Communities Standard encouraging us to move language learning beyond the classroom and into the community. Moreover, a 2009 MLA report encouraged educators to prepare students for “full participation in the social, political, economic, literary, and cultural life of the 21st Century” (10) by being “responsive to the demands of technological innovations and the realities of globalized societies” (3).

These developments are not exclusively top-down in nature. Students themselves are asking for change. In a 2006 survey, Bok found that the percentage of university freshmen who rated “being well off financially” as an essential or very important goal rose from 36.2% to 73.6% from 1970 to 2006, while the percentage who gave the same ratings to “acquiring a meaningful philosophy of life” fell from 79% to 39.6% during the same period. Within the foreign language learning context, students are increasingly dissatisfied with the traditional ways languages are taught (Gascoigne, 2015; Hale, 1999), in that they “hunger for educational experiences that involve the whole person, get to the heart of the matter, and have a more direct connection with life” (Hale, 1999: 10).

Perhaps the most common response to these demands from the foreign language teaching profession; that is both those coming from beyond the academy (parents, employers), and from within (students, professional organizations), has been rise of experiential learning opportunities through service-learning. The most far-reaching and well documented examples of service-learning in foreign language learning have been in Spanish (Hale, 1999; Hellebrandt and Varona, 1999; Sanchez-Lopez, 2013; Zlotkowski, 2012).

Service-learning has been gaining popularity at both the secondary and post-secondary levels since the 1980s. And, with the formation of Campus Compact in 1985, a consortium of over 1,100 colleges and universities committed to the public purpose of post-secondary education, a push for civic- and community-based learning has become a priority for many (Gascoigne, 2015). Indeed, according to Butin (2010), service-learning is “no longer at the margins of the academy. It is oftentimes front and center on many institutions’ home pages, marketing

brochures, course catalogues, and faculty development programs” (75). However, in spite of the required link between a service-learning placement and the stated objectives of a given course, oftentimes—and in spite of good intentions—it remains “a disengaged addition rather than a meaningful and legitimate extension of the curriculum” (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013: 383). What is more, service-learning projects may or may not have anything to do with a student’s future professional goals.

While service-learning opportunities in foreign languages are thriving, internships have been slower to expand among the liberal arts disciplines (Gascoigne, 2015), especially in languages other than Spanish. The following pages share one post-secondary French program’s history and recent curricular developments responding to some of the internal and external pressures discussed above. Student input and feedback on these developments, specifically the creation and offering of an internship-type of experience in French, are shared.

2 First steps

At University of X, the very first course to include a service-learning component in French, which also happened to be the very first service-learning component in any foreign language course at the institution, was offered in 1999. Service-learning courses or components in Spanish soon followed and readily proliferated, likely due to an abundance of Spanish-language placement options in the area, an increasing number of students taking Spanish, and high faculty interest. For opposing reasons, namely a paucity of French-language placement options, a smaller pool of language students, and fewer faculty members, service-learning experiences in French faded away within a handful of years. While anecdotal student comments and requests for courses over the ensuing years rarely mentioned service-learning explicitly, students of French (and other languages) often inquired about other more applied types of courses, such as translation, or experiential learning opportunities, such as internships.

A Traditional Curriculum

The foreign languages’ curriculum and course articulation at University of X had remained virtually unchanged for decades. With the exception of a handful of new upper-level electives over the years, there have been no substantive changes in living memory. In French, occasional new elective courses have been taught, albeit without any regularity, over the past 25 years. These courses originally included electives in Francophone women’s literature and literature and film, and more recently courses in Business French or the Structure of the French Language. With or without these electives, the curriculum remained highly traditional. For example, a true beginning language student must first complete a two-year, four-semester beginning and intermediate sequence. The first-year courses are five credits each, while the second-year courses, which essentially review the first-year material, are

three credits each. A minor in French requires five additional upper-level courses beyond the completion of the second year while the major requires ten courses beyond the second year. Students are required to take a third-year conversation course and a third-year grammar-composition course before moving on to any literature or elective courses. In addition, French majors are required to complete two introductions to French literature courses, one devoted to literature of the Middle Ages through the seventeenth century, and the other to the eighteenth through twentieth centuries. Additional major requirements include a third-year civilization course, a fourth-year advanced conversation course and a fourth-year capstone composition and stylistics course. The remaining three electives could take the shape of a special topics course in literature, such as French theater, or the literature of a given period, or one of the “newer” electives mentioned earlier: literature and film, Francophone women authors, Business French or the Structure of French. The catalogue of both required and elective courses, as well as the articulation among them, can be considered traditional and literature-oriented.

In light of increasing requests for new course options beyond those currently available coming from students across languages, the Department of Foreign Languages decided to survey students in all languages and at all levels of instruction in order to gain a better understanding of what types of courses students were interested in pursuing. Anecdotally, however, through open-ended comments on student course evaluation feedback and during advising sessions, it appeared that students were interested in taking courses in translation and in internship opportunities.

Student Feedback on Curriculum

In the spring of 2013, a survey was emailed to all language students of French, German, and Spanish at all levels of study, or 916 students overall. The response rate was admittedly quite poor: 9% overall and 10% for students of French. Nevertheless, the feedback that was received echoed the comments and requests that the department had been receiving informally for several years. In terms of survey feedback from students of French, when asked which courses they have enjoyed taking, Conversation and Grammar-Composition rated the highest at 35.7% each, the highest rated elective course was the Structure of French at 28.6%. Similarly, students rated these three courses the highest when asked which courses have been most beneficial for improving their language proficiency. When asked which types of courses they would like to see offered in the future, 92.9% requested coursework in translation, 71.4% requested internships, and 71.4% wanted a public or professional speaking course in French.

Using a five-point Likert-type scale (5= Strongly Agree, 1= Strongly Disagree), students were asked to respond to a set of statements:

1. I am satisfied with the current course options.
2. I hope to use French in my future career.
3. I need more practice writing in French.

4. I need more practice reading in French.
5. I need more practice listening in French.
6. I need more practice speaking in French.
7. I like the idea of having [revised requirements with] different tracks to choose from.

As for the first statement, “I am satisfied with the current course options,” not a single student strongly agreed, 28.8% agreed, 28.6% were neutral, while 42.8% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. When asked if they hope to use French in their future career, 78.6% agreed or strongly agreed, while the remaining 21.4% were neutral. The majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that they needed more practice writing (57.2%), speaking (85.7%), listening (87.7%), and reading (74.1%) in French. When asked if they would prefer a revised set of major requirements that would allow them to choose courses from, and potentially specialize in, tracks or menus of courses such as literature and film, culture and society, and linguistics and language for the professions, 78.6% agreed or strongly agreed, 21.4% were neutral, and not a single student disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Initial Changes

Based in part on this feedback, the traditional foreign languages major requirements outlined earlier are in the process of being changed. The new curriculum will remain unchanged at the first- and second-year levels. It will now contain a short set of required courses, such as Conversation, and Grammar-Composition, along with a new Introduction to Reading (not Introduction to Literature) course. The capstone Advanced Composition and Stylistics also remains. However, students will now select from a menu of courses, including new course additions, from three major tracks—Literature and Film; Culture and Society; Linguistics and Language for the Professions—in order to complete the major. Ten upper-level courses are still required for the major.

Among the first new courses developed and included within the Linguistics and Language for the Professions track is a course in French translation focusing on literary translation from French to English. This course was first offered in the fall of 2014 with an enrollment of 23 students—average course enrollment in upper-level French hovers around 15. A second new course, and one that responds more directly to the call for experiential learning opportunities in French, was a modified French internship course outlined below.

Experiential Learning through Externships

In the spring of 2015 the first internship or externship experience of any kind for the department was offered in French. While originally envisioned as a true internship, the challenges of finding meaningful placements where students could actively use their French language skills in X recalled the initial challenges of

creating service-learning opportunities in that it proved to be time-consuming for the faculty member and produced few placement options. Therefore, responding to the realities of our environment, the original internship plan was recast as an externship, or “a short duration, less extensive version of an internship” (Merritt, 2008: 6). While the duration and the depth of each placement was both reduced and revised, the spirit of an academic internship, whose intention is to “help students gain practical, work-relevant experience, increase self-confidence, and enhance employability” remained (Qenani, MacDougall, and Sexton, 2014: 210). Moreover, the “externship” experience described below also met the U.S. Department of Labor’s (2010) six conditions for an internship:

1. The internship, even though it includes actual operation of the facilities of the employer, is similar to training which would be given in an educational environment;
2. The internship experience is for the benefit of the intern;
3. The intern does not displace regular employees, but works under close supervision of existing staff;
4. The employer that provides the training derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the intern; and on occasion its operations may actually be impeded;
5. The intern is not necessarily entitled to a job at the conclusion of the internship; and,
6. The employer and the intern understand that the intern is not entitled to wages for the time spent at the internship.

During its first offering, this course used a generic Pro Seminar number and title, and was listed in the schedule of courses as: French Externship. Clearly, this is not a very informative title or description for students, especially given the uncommon term, “externship.” Fifteen students, all majors or minors in French, initially enrolled. During the first class meeting, the course objectives and the atypical format of the class were presented to students. One student immediately withdrew, bringing us to fourteen students. The goals of the course shared during the first meeting were three-fold:

1. To expose students to various careers and professional opportunities where French language skills are valued.
2. To build students’ vocabulary in French through exposure to specialized professional environments and through specific projects.
3. To provide opportunities to use French both inside and outside of the classroom.

Because of the challenge of finding meaningful placements with a substantial number of contact hours, the original plan for an internship-type experience, with little to no classroom contact was modified to one of small-scale placements including only 1–2 hours of external contact per week. To compensate for the

limited placement contact, the revised plan for the class included weekly class meetings of 75 minutes. The weekly class meetings consisted of either guest speakers who spoke to the class in French about how they use French professionally, or of group conversations consisting of oral reports on their placement activities, mock interviews, or discussions of their past experiences and future professional plans, all in the target language.

When planning the course and while originally seeking full internship placements in the area, the faculty member reached out to local groups, organizations, and businesses with any type of tie to French language or culture. Numerous cold calls led to nearly as many dead ends. In the end, some type of connection was made with local groups such as the state chapter of the AATF, the Alliance Française, a group of French-speakers with their own table française, nonprofit organizations dedicated to refugee resettlement, a museum, and a small handful of businesses. While unable to secure a sufficient number of large-scale placements for students, we did identify numerous smaller-scale placements and projects that taken together, and supplemented by classroom contact, provided a unique language- and professional-development package for students.

Through the original outreach and placement search, we also encountered eight local Francophone professionals (both native and non-native speakers of French) who agreed to serve as guest speakers once the class was ultimately offered. The eight guest speakers came from the following fields or disciplines: medicine, banking, insurance, translation, interpretation, education, import-export, and singing-acting. Each guest speaker was asked to speak to the class in French about his or her language learning history, professional experiences, and how the French language has played a role in their careers. A guest speaker was scheduled to present approximately every other week. Each target-language presentation and question and answer session lasted from 60-75 minutes.

The final list of modified placements for students included translating documents for two different State agencies, serving as an assistant for a foreign language film festival, which included preparing promotional materials with target-language phrases and greeting patrons in French, working with Francophone and other immigrants, providing tutoring at the university level, assistant teaching at the high school levels and working as assistants for a language-teaching conference and a French-immersion weekend for middle and high school students.

On the first day of class the instructor scheduled individual meetings with each student to determine which placement or placements might be of most use and interest to the student. Placement assignments were based on a discussion of the students' prior experiences, current interests, and future professional plans (Gascoigne, 2015: 12). Students were then given a placement contact and were required to reach out to their contact in order to establish parameters for their externship. They were also required to report back to the class during the next class meeting.

Because of the variation in target language use across placements, the weekly class meetings allowed the instructor to supplement the language contact and allow for multiple skills practice. For example, while those students working on document translation may have had a large amount of written practice, there was no listening or speaking involved in those activities. During the weekly class meetings, on the other hand, students had regular speaking practice during group conversations and oral reports, as well as listening practice during the guest speaker presentations. Finally, all students wrote a final paper (7–10 pages) where they were again asked to reflect upon their future personal and professional goals, but this time in light of their experiences as a result of the course.

3. Conclusions

All of the 14 students completed the course. Both the standard university-wide course evaluation form and a short questionnaire specific to this course were administered. The course-specific form asked students to rate the three major components of the course: guest lectures, external placements, and in-class activities on a Likert-type scale of 1 to 10 with 1 indicating very low interest and 10 representing very high interest. Average student interest scores were high for all three components, but highest for the guest lecture component ($x = 9.83$), followed by the external placements ($x = 8.91$), followed by the in-class conversations and reports ($x = 8.41$). None of the differences between average interest scores, however, proved to be significant.

The official course evaluation form, completed on-line after the conclusion of the course, had an 85% response rate. On this measure, students respond to statements according to a five-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Agree). The average score for select statements that related to the course, rather than to the instructor herself, are shared below:

1. I learned something that I consider valuable, $x = 4.63$.
2. My interest in the subject increased as a consequence of this course, $x = 4.63$.
3. Compared to other courses I have taken, this course is (1= Poor, 5 = Excellent). $x = 4.36$.

Among open-ended comments, one student shared that this course “made students feel like young professionals rather than students.” Another stated that “this class will be beneficial for future French students and I hope it continues to be offered for French majors and minors.” Another felt that “the guest speakers were awesome and provided information [he or she] would not have gotten anywhere else.” And finally, one offered that “having different speakers from different fields from X speaking on how French can be used here professionally was very inspirational.”

According to Woodhouse, the conversation about students' job readiness after college is not only taking place among students and their parents, or even among employers, but it has reached a momentous level now appearing regularly in the national media. It appears that stakeholders at every level are demanding that higher education do a "better job preparing students for the workplace and a better job educating prospective students [so] that they can [secure] equitable employment with a liberal arts degree" (Woodhouse, 2015: 1).

The continued decline in humanities majors has led some Colleges of Arts and Sciences across the nation to take measures to make more traditional degrees attractive to today's students. Indiana University, for example, has created various career-readiness programs and begun offering majors that combine the humanities with more applied coursework typically found in a professional school. In the absence of College-led and College-wide direction and support, individual faculty members in smaller at-risk programs can no longer afford to go along with business as usual. Instead, they may need to take the initiative and make their own small, individual steps toward creating courses that combine the true spirit of the discipline with some type of career exploration or development. The French externship course described above provides one example to others looking to move in this direction.

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