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Framing the Issue: The Modern Language Association's Report and the Future of Foreign Language Education

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One year ago today, the Modern Language Association (MLA) released its report, "[Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World](#)" (2007). Charged in 2004 to investigate the state of foreign language education at the postsecondary level in light of the "current language crisis" (Background section, para. 1), the members of the ad hoc committee suggest significant reforms to improve students' linguistic and cultural competence. Specifically, the committee suggests dismantling long-held hierarchies concerning curriculum and governance.

In terms of governance, the report advocates greater collaboration amongst faculty members, regardless of rank or content specialty (e.g., literature, linguistics, pedagogy, area studies), in both curriculum development and instruction at all levels in foreign language studies. In other words, the report proposes a more egalitarian mode of governance where non-tenure track faculty are integral to curricular decision-making, and tenured and tenure-track faculty have more direct contact with introductory and intermediate undergraduate courses.

As the MLA report suggests, such collaboration could aid greatly in the revitalization of the foreign language curriculum at large. The norm in language departments is a concentration in language studies in the first 3-4 semesters, followed by mostly literary studies in subsequent semesters. Instead, the ad hoc committee urges more cohesiveness throughout the curriculum. Every course within a language department would have specific objectives for cultural content and language study. Cultural content, understood more amply to include not only literature but also media studies, history, anthropology, and geography, amongst many other possible content areas, would be central to introductory and mid-level classes as well as upper-level classes for majors and minors. Upper-level classes would also include explicit language goals so advanced students may continue to improve their language skills.

This new breadth in content and a sustained emphasis in improving language proficiency throughout the program of study may lead to greater translingual and transcultural competence, meaning students are able "to operate between languages" and "to function as informed and capable interlocutors with educated native speakers in the target language" (The Goal: Translingual and Transcultural Competence section, para. 1). The articulation of translingual and transcultural competence as the goal of foreign language education is perhaps the most

provocative aspect of the report, particularly as related to the notion of “crisis” as the context of the report. As former MLA President Michael Holquist (2007) notes, language study often assumes center-stage due to “the need to understand the enemy” (p. 3), and the MLA’s report relates the “current language crisis” cited previously to events surrounding 9/11. Specifically, the “current language crisis” was made evident as “language failures of all kinds plagued the United States’ military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and its efforts to suppress terrorism” (Background section, para. 2). In other words, the reported lack of translingual and transcultural competence in relation to the Middle East explicitly links foreign language education to national (in)security. This discourse of “us vs. them,” which seems incongruous with becoming “more at home in the rest of the world” (Yankelovich, cited in Background section, para. 3; also, see Goulah, this issue), was also evident in the Russian Studies boom prior to the conclusion of the Cold War, for example. The “current language crisis,” then, may be the latest manifestation of the perpetual language crisis of this nation’s monolingualism.

Mary Louise Pratt, chair of the ad hoc committee and past president of the Modern Language Association, describes the United States as “a multilingual country” with a “monolingualist ideology” (cited in Jaschik, 2007, *How Close to Washington?* section, para. 2). The context of the report, that is, the state of foreign language education in a post-9/11 world characterized by globalization, hints at the paradigmatic shift (Kuhn, 1962/1996) that is required for students to become successful language users (i.e., to have translingual and transcultural competence). In this new paradigm, bi- or multi-lingualism is not exotic in this country, but rather is made possible, practiced, and valued throughout a wide range of personal, professional, and institutional contexts. Perhaps we are in the nascent stages of such a shift; certainly the events of 9/11 and the simultaneity of time and space made possible by current technologies such as the internet highlight that we are not insulated from the rest of the world (and thus the “changed world” in the title of the MLA’s report). The field of foreign language education must actively and critically promulgate this shift. Yet beyond focusing on *how* translingual and transcultural competence may be achieved, we must also question, both as individual language professionals and as members of the field, what the purpose of language is/will be in what Gunnels (this issue) insists is a “*changing world*” (p. 24) and to what ends we encourage/will encourage language study (e.g., to know our enemy, to promote understanding and tolerance, to have a marketable skill, to learn another language for the joy of learning, etc.). In other words, what is foreign language education and what could it be in the future? These are the implicit questions the authors of this special issue query, answering them in the context of their professional experiences as they respond to the MLA’s report.

### **Framing the Special Issue**

In August 2007, JoLLE invited select professionals in university and college language departments and teacher training programs, K-12 language teachers, and current language students to respond to the MLA’s report. Specifically, we suggested authors consider the MLA’s report as related to a wide range of topics: curriculum reform, particularly the call for greater interdisciplinarity in the field; faculty integration and equality; the use of technology in foreign language teaching and learning; preparing teachers for K-12 and/or university-level instruction; and the effects of reform of postsecondary foreign language programs on K-12 foreign language instruction. The authors of this special issue are diverse not only in their role in and relationship

to the field but also in the languages they have studied and taught, including Japanese, Russian, Spanish, French, and Latin.

The “Features” section, comprised of five articles by professionals working at the university level, begins with Goulah’s work on transformative world language learning as a mode to radically alter language education and to ultimately improve the world. Transformative world language learning emphasizes content-based instruction so that students may critically consider the interconnectedness of linguistic and cultural practices, ecology, and spirituality in order to achieve “a new cosmological citizenship” (p. 9). Gunnels, who stresses the notion of interconnectedness in a technological sense, explains how online courses in foreign languages not only simulate the communicative classroom, but also afford unique opportunities to both teachers and students in the virtual classroom, including real-time access to native speakers across the globe. Gunnels’ article thus addresses one area in which the MLA’s report is notably quiet, that is, the role of technology in language education today and tomorrow. Gala and Sandlin, respectively, take the MLA’s two main recommendations as the points of departure for their articles. Gala presents a case study of the revisions in curriculum and staffing enacted by the Department of Romance Languages at her university in the 1990’s in response to surging enrollments in Spanish. With the MLA’s report as the impetus to reflect on these changes, Gala discusses the triumphs and remaining challenges of reform in her department. Sandlin, too, focuses on curriculum and staffing within her department at a small liberal arts college. Specifically, Sandlin asserts liberal arts colleges, which she feels have been discounted in the MLA’s report in favor of large research institutions, are ideally suited to lead the “language program ‘revolution’” (p. 52) because of such colleges’ mission of a well-rounded undergraduate education. Kearney’s empirical piece also focuses on the undergraduate experience, studying how students in one intermediate French course viewed culture in foreign language education in general and in the context of the course they were taking at the time. Notably, the students echo the ad hoc committee’s findings that the division between language and culture is unsatisfying and that re-imagining the curriculum as a creative and interdisciplinary space may enable students to transform their perspectives of other cultures as well as their own.

The first of three texts in the “Voices from the Field” section is the language learning autobiography of a current student of Spanish. Marcott, currently a college sophomore, explains what first attracted her to language study in high school, what she wishes had been different in her programs of study at the secondary and postsecondary levels, and her recommendations for change in the field to attract and maintain students to foreign languages. Several of Marcott’s comments, including the need for greater connections between language and culture at all levels of study, are reiterated in Bridges’s article on the state of foreign language education in Georgia. Bridges, a public high school Spanish teacher, also urges greater connections between K-12 teachers and university faculty to better train foreign language teachers who are knowledgeable about their content area, teaching practices, and how to link student experiences to the curriculum. Pickens, a first year Classics teacher in a private high school, narrates two such occasions when students’ experiences were used to overcome reluctance and confusion in reading Greek and Latin texts and to ultimately help students understand similarities and differences between the ancient cultures under study and their cultures today.

### **Beyond the Frame: The Future of Foreign Language Education**

Several texts, including reviews by Barnes, Goldoni, and Kohl in the “Book Reviews”

section, can be read as complementary pieces (e.g., Goulah and Barnes, Gala and Marcott, and Gunnels and Kohl). Reading across the texts in this special issue, however, three trends emerge. First, a concept of citizenship related to understanding and collaborating with members of the cultures under study, and thereby gaining the ability to understand and collaborate with others, is explicit throughout the texts. That is, foreign language education is related to the formation of global citizenship. Again, to recall Gunnels, the dynamic, changing world in which students find themselves requires new conceptions of interpersonal, linguistic, and cultural relationships, and foreign language education should be a privileged field with respect to teaching students to construct and navigate such relationships.

The field, however, must first evolve to meet such demands. The second theme to emerge throughout the texts is change, particularly as related to dismantling the status quo of curriculum and governance. In this sense, contributors are in agreement with the MLA's report, though there is also a sense that such changes may be slow in coming, and not the "dramatic plan" or "revolution" that the MLA's report was purported to be one year ago (Jaschik, 2007). Despite the doubts as to how reforms should be initiated, by whom, and for what purposes, authors in this special issue seem optimistic about the field of foreign language education and their work in particular.

This optimism, the third trend, is evident as the authors discuss those areas untouched by the MLA's report (e.g., ecology and spirituality, technology, spaces outside of research universities, etc.). These areas demonstrate the vitality of the field, meaning that the field cannot and should not be reduced to a one-dimensional model of what "typically" constitutes foreign language education. In fact, as Rosemary G. Feal, the Executive Director of the MLA, notes (2007), she is optimistic about the future of the field because she often meets language professionals who declare that their programs have already addressed issues raised in the report in creative ways which may allow us all to re-think foreign language education.

Like Sandlin (this issue), we believe that such movement can only happen if we "examine what already is [...] and to imagine what *could* be" (p. 60). We hope the responses in this special issue anchored in the MLA's report provide a substantive description and critique of the present state of the field and new directions for its future.

As a final note to orient the reader, all authors refer to the MLA's report as published on the organization's [website](#). We hope readers will access the MLA's website as they read this special issue.

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