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The Language Program “Revolution”: Why and How Liberal Arts Colleges Can Lead the Way

Betsy A. Sandlin
Sewanee: The University of the South
bsandlin@sewanee.edu

The MLA’s recent recommendations for the future of foreign language programs include what some are calling a “revolutionary” overhaul to the traditional language/literature sequencing and an emphasis on “transcultural competence” at all levels of study. This essay examines both the theoretical and practical reasons why language programs at small liberal arts colleges are poised to lead efforts toward such change. It highlights conversations and plans that are currently taking place at one such institution, offering practical suggestions based on experiences there.

Confessions

Before I begin, I have some confessions to make. I studied and trained as a foreign language educator in Spanish departments housed in large research universities. Tenure-track faculty were able to design innovative courses in their areas of specialization and were given time to devote to research. Graduate students and adjunct faculty did most (if not all) of the language teaching, the communicative approach was the norm, and both human and monetary resources were rather plentiful. I was lucky to be mentored by excellent Second Language Acquisition specialists who were on the cutting edge of pedagogical trends and encouraged experimentation in the classroom. Workshops and discussion groups that focused on teaching practices were quite frequent. At the time, I did not realize the extent of my privilege to spend my formative years at such institutions.

Now, my professional life is markedly different. I am a tenure-track faculty member at a small, liberal arts college in the south in a Spanish department that could be labeled as “traditional” in nearly every respect. The requirements for our Spanish major look like they were taken directly from a Master’s degree program. Students must take courses in the following areas: Spanish literature before 1700; Spanish literature after 1700; Spanish American literature (with no temporal division); Spanish culture; and Spanish American culture. In addition to fulfilling credit hours in these areas, our majors must also pass a written comprehensive examination that resembles those found at many M.A.-granting institutions, as well as deliver an oral presentation on a topic chosen by the student in consultation with the faculty. Typical

comprehensive exam questions cover literary periods and movements as well as literary styles and thematic concerns, while the culture questions tend to focus mainly on the history of Spanish-speaking countries. As a result of these requirements, our majors often express that they feel “forced” to take a large slate literature classes in order to prepare for exams, although many of them admit they would rather have classes in conversation, film, translation, linguistics, composition, and advanced grammar.

Indeed, echoing student interest, some faculty in my department struggle with the desire to offer non-literary classes while also feeling the pressing need to “cover” the basic literary requirements so that our majors may pass their comprehensive exams and graduate. Meanwhile, we must also find time to serve those students who choose Spanish to fulfill the college’s stringent four-semester language requirement, which inevitably includes the majority of our student body. It is a difficult juggling act that involves some tough questions: what *should* we offer when our faculty resources are limited? What *can* we offer when we have been trained primarily as literary specialists? Inevitably, the lower-level (required) language courses and upper-level literature courses for the major win out, placing our program well within the parameters of what the MLA report calls the traditional “two-tiered language-literature structure” (Transforming Academic Programs section, para. 3).

A Call for “Revolution”?

Yet while literature has dominated the Spanish major at my institution for all of its more than seventy-year history, I am hopeful that the near and foreseeable future will bring changes such as those promoted by the recent report by the Modern Language Association Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, aptly titled “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World” (2007). Change is, indeed, on the horizon. Despite the MLA’s favor toward/emphasis on undergraduate and graduate programs at research institutions, it is my contention that liberal arts colleges can lead what MLA committee member Haun Saussy called a necessary “revolution” for language programs (Jaschik, 2007, Adding Relevance to the Major section, para. 3).

In its statement, the MLA (2007) acknowledges that “[a]s recent world events have demonstrated, deep cultural knowledge and linguistic competence are equally necessary if one wishes to understand people and their communities” (Background section, para. 5). To this end, they recommend a transformation from the aforementioned two-tier language/literature approach to “a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole, supported by alliances with other departments and expressed through interdisciplinary courses” (Transforming Academic Programs section, para. 3). According to this recommendation, a crucial goal of the language major, then, should be not only the achievement of “translingual competence” but also what the report calls “transcultural competence” (Background section, para. 4).

While “communicative competence” has been encouraged as a learning goal in foreign language pedagogy for the last thirty years or so (e.g. Savignon, 1972, 1983, 1985), what is meant by “transcultural competence”? Aiming for “transcultural competence” rather than, or in addition to, teaching students to read and appreciate literature for literature’s sake would encourage the entrance of other types of cultural “texts” into the foreign language classroom at all levels. As the MLA (2007) document states

[o]ne possible model defines transcultural understanding as the ability to comprehend and analyze the cultural narratives that appear in every kind of expressive form—from essays, fiction, poetry, drama, journalism, humor, advertising, political rhetoric, and legal documents to performance, visual forms, and music. (An Integrative Approach with Multiple Paths to the Major section, para. 2)

In other words, “[t]he kind of curricular form we suggest will situate language study in cultural, historical, geographic, and cross-cultural frames within the context of humanistic learning” (An Integrative Approach section, para. 1). Jaschik (2007) describes the proposed change as a move toward “eliminating the language/content dichotomy” (Prospects for Change section, para. 1) since the MLA panel found, in many FL programs, “so much emphasis on literature that broader understanding of cultures and nations has been lost” (Dramatic Plan for Language Programs section, para. 1).

But just how significant, how radical, is this so-called revolution? Some of the MLA’s recommendations may already sound very familiar to language teachers, particularly those at the K-12 level, who have been trained to gear their lessons toward the American Council of Foreign Language Teaching (ACTFL) “Five C’s” model of language proficiency as outlined in their “Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century,” first published in 1996 and recently revised in a third edition. The five C’s—communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, communities—already touch on some of the goals mentioned in the MLA report, particularly the desire to teach students to “connect with other disciplines and acquire information” (*connections*), “gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures” (*cultures*), and “participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world” (*communities*) (ACTFL, 1996/2006). Standards 2.1 and 2.2, beneath the umbrella of *cultures*, emphasize the linkage between cultural practices/products and the perspectives they illustrate, an idea that seems to be at the heart of the MLA’s recommendations. Indeed, both the MLA and ACTFL agree that foreign language learning should promote human interaction and understanding in our ever-shrinking world.

Furthermore, it could be argued that a sort of “revolution” already took place when the communicative approach became the standard for foreign language teaching, beginning in the 1970s and mushrooming in the past three decades, as Metcalf (1998) contends. In Metcalf’s view, “the emphasis on communicative skills and authentic texts in the teaching of second language . . . brought about something of a decentering of literature and literary texts in language teaching” (p. 85). In addition to the “decentering of literature,” Metcalf also acknowledges the curricular move from insular FL departments to increased interdisciplinary efforts, since colleges and universities throughout the country have experimented for some time with collaborative programs such as Language across the Curriculum, or LAC, an initiative that began in liberal arts institutions (Metcalf, 1998; Straight, 1998).

So where is the drama in the MLA’s recommendations, labeled by *Inside Higher Ed* as a “dramatic plan for language programs?” As I have implied already, it seems that the most “radical” changes are being called for in the language major and in graduate programs. Since I teach at a liberal arts college where undergraduates are our focus, I will concentrate on the issue of the undergraduate major and the particular challenges encountered at my liberal arts institution. While educators have argued for the incorporation of literature into language classes for some time (see Barnes-Karol, 2002), the MLA is now encouraging the reverse, the incorporation of non-literature “texts” and contexts into literature classes. In addition, the recommendation seems to call for more non-literature options at higher levels of study,

particularly in culture and conversation, mirroring the desires expressed by many students at my institution. One factor behind this proposed move away from the dichotomous language/literature model is to attract and maintain students who have little interest in pursuing a degree that emphasizes advanced literary studies but who show an interest in the target cultures and a talent for the target languages. Although I do not advocate removing literature from language programs, I do agree with the MLA's insistence on "transcultural competence" as a learning outcome that should be incorporated into the language major, and while the liberal arts experience does not seem to be addressed by the MLA report, I contend that it is small liberal arts programs that are poised to take the lead.

Why Liberal Arts Colleges Can Lead the Way

It is pertinent to examine briefly the general mission and philosophy that underpin a liberal arts education to illustrate how the MLA's recommendations echo these aims. Liberal arts colleges, which are generally small and primarily award baccalaureate degrees, are characterized by Hersh (1999) by the following list of attributes: "[a] primary focus on teaching, their small size, residential nature, quest for genuine community, engagement of students in active learning, concern for a general and coherent education, and emphasis on the development of the whole person" (p. 192). Williamson (1999) adds another list of qualities, which he composed after scanning the purpose statements of many of the top liberal arts colleges in the nation. He notes that the following values are reiterated in many of the statements:

the acquisition of effective communication skills, the ability to see ideas in their full complexity, the undermining of parochialism, the openness to change, international awareness, the development of a sense of personal and societal responsibility, and a capacity for self-reeducation. (p. 10)

Several of these ideals—openness, social engagement, and personal growth, for example—are reflected in the MLA's recommendation to move our advanced students toward not only translingual but also transcultural competence. The report, for instance, quotes Daniel Yankelovich in its introduction as stating that "[o]ur whole culture . . . must become less ethnocentric, less patronizing, less ignorant of others, less Manichaeian in judging other cultures, and more at home with the rest of the world" (2007, Background section, para. 3). This is also one of the foundational ideas behind the liberal arts education, which aims not only to increase students' knowledge but also that "through their courses in liberal studies students will cultivate humanistic values, understand themselves better within the diversity of the / global community, and develop a more empathetic consideration of their relationships with others" (Laff, 2005, p. 3).

It may be argued, then, that the liberal arts college and foreign language study make a natural match, given the inherent goals and design of a liberal education. Besides theoretically reflecting the philosophy behind the pursuit of a liberal education, my contention is that the small liberal arts institution is also the ideal setting for the so-called curricular revolution in FL programs for more practical reasons. Two factors that may play a role in the emergence of liberal arts FL programs as leaders of change are the basic structure of the faculty and the value traditionally placed on teaching at such colleges.

The MLA (2007) report states:

[t]he work of revamping and unifying the language department curriculum can only be carried out through a sustained collaboration among all members of the teaching corps,

including tenure-line faculty members and those with contingent and long-term appointments in all related fields, such as linguistics, literature, and language pedagogy.

(Collaboration and Governance: Transforming the Two-Tiered System section, para. 1) The document continues, “it is crucial that tenure-line faculty members have a hand in teaching language courses and in shaping and overseeing the content and teaching approaches used throughout the curriculum, from the first year forward” (Collaboration and Governance section, para. 3). This type of cooperation already occurs at most liberal arts colleges, where language faculties tend to be small and everyone teaches and plays a role in curricular design at all levels. While anecdotally it seems that many liberal arts colleges are hiring more and more contingent faculty to meet student demand, the hierarchical tenured/tenure-track versus contingent faculty structure is still greatly lessened in small departments where everyone must necessarily wear multiple hats. That is, at small colleges, tenured and tenure-track members of the language faculty must teach a little bit of everything, from beginning language classes to advanced seminars. In fact, this is the very reason some of us choose to work at such institutions: we simply enjoy teaching, including those courses which are negatively called “service” courses at research institutions. Furthermore, small departments with fewer faculty members make even more possible the exchange of ideas and cooperation when planning and discussing the curriculum than at large research universities, where many of the language classes are taught by graduate students with their own academic lives, or by a large team of contingent faculty that may or may not be involved (or have a voice) in faculty meetings. In addition, while those of us in liberal arts colleges often have our specific fields of training and course preferences, we must be willing and able to teach a wide variety of courses at any given time. It is, in my experience at least, quite rare to teach an entire class on anything that remotely resembles my actual field of specialization.

Yet a challenge for my department is the fact that we have been trained primarily as literary specialists, and we do not have the ability or funds to hire linguists and second language acquisition specialists, whom the MLA deems “essential” in 21st century FL programs (2007, Collaboration and Governance section, para. 2). Thus, we must be committed to experimentation and a willingness to step outside our “comfort zones.” We need to be creative in finding ways to adjust our current courses or offer new ones that address not only literature in a traditional sense but rather the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which the literature (and other cultural artifacts) were produced. We have all been abroad, conducted research, and been intrigued by the cultures we study on a personal level, not simply by the words that appear on a black-and-white page, but by the “information” between the lines. It is possible, with effort and an openness to change, to share that “other” side of language and literature with our students.

While many language professors at liberal arts institutions more often have the necessity (and indeed, some might argue, the pleasure) of stepping outside our areas of specialization, there is yet another difference between the faculty at liberal arts colleges and research universities worth exploring here. That is, at least in theory, the “publish or perish” attitude toward tenure and promotion is lessened in most liberal arts colleges. Less pressure to research, as well as the high value placed on teaching excellence and growth, may mean that those of us in liberal arts institutions have more freedom (and more motivation) to work on the curricular issues raised by the MLA report.

This is not to say that liberal arts faculty members are not already stretched thin, as others have pointed out (see Beyer 2001; Williamson 1999). In small departments and small schools such as mine, we must be “jacks of all trades,” which means we spend a tremendous amount of

time not only in the classroom but also advising, serving on committees and engaging in other such service to our departments and colleges, working with students in co-curricular pursuits, and more. As one of my colleagues put it, “in such a small department—if I don’t do it, who will?” Despite the challenges of time management, over-extension, and the heightened importance and delicacy of collegiality at small liberal arts institutions as noted by Williamson (1999), she also maintains that teaching is still the major priority at most such colleges. She states, “[t]he ability to teach well and to be flexible is . . . a prerequisite for success in a small liberal arts college, and it is measured carefully in all considerations of reappointment” (p. 11). In other words, curriculum reform is and should continue to be recognized and rewarded by chairs of departments and deans who grant tenure and promotion in the liberal arts context, wherein conversations and research about teaching are valued as highly as conversations about one’s (literary) research, making our institutions ideal places to begin to envision, plan, and carry out changes as a result of the MLA’s recommendations.

How Liberal Arts Colleges Can Lead the Way

As I have illustrated, while not every liberal arts college nor language department has the same structure, needs, requirements, or goals, there are inherent characteristics of our programs and faculty that could allow us to be at the forefront of change in the nature of the foreign language major. While I do not pretend to speak for all liberal arts programs, I offer my experience as a way to open dialogue about the issues that may be common to language departments in such schools.

In my department, we are beginning to re-think the goals of our so-called language requirement, which in reality involves the completion of a literature course in the target language. Recently, the college faculty worked together to create a list of “competencies” at which our general education requirements should aim, in order to reflect the idea that “[s]tudents will graduate . . . having developed competencies that encourage lives of service, achievement, and personal fulfillment” (University homepage). After a great deal of discussion, the competency that emerged for language programs is worded thusly: “Use a foreign or classical language to apprehend another cultural world.” Therefore, the goal of the four-semester requirement seems to be moving toward a merger between what the MLA calls “translingual” and “transcultural” competence, as discussed earlier. While in theory, all language courses involve a cultural aspect (to a greater or lesser degree), how should this goal affect the final course in our required sequence and the first course in the major for most of our students, Spanish 300: Introduction to Hispanic Literatures? This is one of the questions we are attempting to answer.

Traditionally, the course has been taught as the title in the catalog indicates, that is, as a (traditional) introduction to literature. The description in our catalog is as follows: “Readings from a number of authors and periods introduce the student to the variety of genres, themes, and styles that predominate in Hispanic literatures.” The course has focused on the acquisition and successful employment of literary terms in Spanish, an exposure to different literary genres, and an overview of the literary history (i.e., major movements and authors) of Spain and Latin America, featuring syllabi that appear to follow a “great works” approach. The course as it currently stands, in other words, seems to have been conceived as a bridge to the (traditional) Spanish major, providing the tools for literary comprehension and analysis that are deemed essential at the higher levels of study, from survey courses to theme and period-specific

seminars. Yet the reality, as the MLA report points out, is that most of our students never become majors or even minors in the language. They will, however, enter a world in which the realities of globalization, immigration, and international relations are increasingly touching everyone. Thus, the need to “apprehend another cultural world” is becoming a fact of life. Is this type of learning achieved through literary study? Is it achieved *best* through literary study? Or, perhaps an even better question: Should the very idea of “literary study” itself be redefined?

Right now, we in the Spanish department are in the discussion and experimentation stage with Spanish 300. Many of us will be adding non-literary cultural “texts” to the class such as film, articles that feature current events, and art. Some of us are planning to downplay the emphasis on literary movements and styles in order to more directly approach literature and other texts as representations of the cultures/contexts in which they were written and as points of departure for conversation and writing about important cultural themes and issues. While our ideas may differ, we all agree that we want to teach students how to read and interpret, not just a sonnet by Góngora, but any “text” (broadly defined) that they may come across in the target language and to recognize it as an artifact of its time, place, and people. The conversation about how to do this is ongoing, and for now the title of the course remains “Introduction to Hispanic Literatures,” but I for one am hopeful that the future will bring a different kind of course that will not only lead to more satisfied students but that will also more closely match our learning objectives, particularly the push toward “transcultural competence.”

Along the same lines, I have created two new courses for majors and minors, US Latino/a Literature and Culture and Contemporary Hispanic Caribbean Literature. The title of the first one indicates one of my primary objectives: to merge the study of culture and literature. While the title of the Caribbean course does not indicate this, my methodology in that course is much the same. That is, we examine not only the literature but also the history, social movements, and cultural practices of the people who write the literary texts. For example, as we work through a difficult novel like *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho* by Puerto Rican author Luis Rafael Sánchez, students deliver presentations on the myriad cultural references found in the work, be they historical or pop culture figures, features of Puerto Rican spoken Spanish, traditions/customs, or any such allusion my students may not understand. Likewise, in the Latino/a class, we not only read works in different genres but also watched and discussed the images of Latinos and recurring themes (such as family, gender, sexuality, and religion) portrayed in several films, including *Mi familia*, *West Side Story*, *Zoot Suit*, and *Almost a Woman*. Also included as “texts” for analysis were “corridos,” or Mexican-American folk ballads, murals and other forms of visual art, and performance art, such as that of El Vez and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Both courses have been popular among students, and I am in the process of developing other such upper-level offerings that do not abandon literature completely but rather view literature as merely one type of artifact from the Spanish-speaking world that should, in fact, be put into dialogue with other modes of cultural production.

In addition to revamping existing courses, we are constantly looking for ways to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration. While the MLA (2007) encourages team-teaching as a way to “counter the isolation and marginalization that language and literature departments often experience on American campuses” (An Integrative Approach with Multiple Paths to the Major section, para. 4), such a solution is often impractical, particularly in departments like mine, which struggle to offer enough seats to accommodate both majors and those seeking to fulfill general education requirements. An alternative model to team-teaching, then, might be to link courses in different disciplines. Under this system, two courses in two different departments with

a similar theme are taught at the same time. A periodic merging of the two classes for discussion and reflection, speakers, films, and projects ensures cross-disciplinary contact while each course still remains “housed” in its home department.

Such is the experiment that will take place in the fall of 2008, when I will offer my U.S. Latino/a Literature and Culture class, to be linked with an Anthropology course called “Anthropological Field Methods: The U.S. Latino Experience.” While we will have different students, we will share many common readings, pool resources to attend and host cultural events, and partner our students for extensive projects in the classroom and the community. We are in the planning stages, but we are hoping to add a service-learning component to the courses as well. In both classes, our major objectives are to illustrate the diversity within the Latino community, past and present, and to use real-life experiences as well as textual inquiry to open our students’ minds and create greater opportunities for relationships of mutual respect and reciprocity. Thus, the scholarly literature will inform students’ interactions with the community, and, conversely, their service experiences will help them to interrogate and internalize their academic readings. This model of linked courses from two different but interrelated fields, both of which will count toward fulfillment of our respective majors’ degree requirements, follows the MLA’s suggestion of offering “interdisciplinary collaborative courses [that] could fulfill both the needs of the students and the goals of the institution’s program” (An Integrative Approach with Multiple Paths to the Major section, para. 4).

Working toward a Conclusion: More Confessions

As I draw my comments to a close, I have yet another confession to make. My ideas and observations here might not make me very popular among some of my more “traditional” colleagues who still believe in the efficacy of the two-tiered language/literature approach, feel comfortable with the status quo, and genuinely hold on to the hopes that a great number of our majors will go on to graduate school to pursue a higher degree in Spanish, Latin American (or, now, Transcontinental) literature. However, I would point out one of the stark realities of our situation: we are slowly losing potential Spanish majors in favor of interdisciplinary programs like our new International and Global Studies major, which includes both a “Hispanic World” and “Latin American Studies” track. Many of my own advisees have, in fact, made the switch because they see International Studies as more “practical” for their future plans, more interesting, and/or simply do not wish to focus on literature in the way that our department traditionally has done.

Not only for the practical reasons of student retention and attraction, two of the issues raised by the MLA report, but also in the name of interdisciplinary engagement, cultural awareness, and global citizenship, I believe that the MLA’s recommendation to reconsider the very nature of the language major is one worth taking seriously. Since liberal arts colleges are historically places that encourage open dialogues about teaching, curricular experimentation, and gearing education toward the “whole person,” a person who in our current era needs to be a good global citizen, it makes sense that despite the MLA’s apparent preference toward research institutions, it is actually the liberal arts colleges who may be in position to lead the so-called language program “revolution.”

I realize that many of these suggestions may not seem innovative in large institutions that are lucky enough to have pedagogical specialists, instructors who specialize in language acquisition, and a large corps of educators. Yet one of my primary goals in writing this essay was

to raise awareness about the liberal arts college experience, which is something the MLA does not acknowledge. And while I cannot pretend to represent the whole of liberal arts foreign language programs, it is my hope that my personal experiences will at least encourage others in small and “traditional” programs like mine to insert their voices in this much-needed dialogue.

While the discussion about the future of the Spanish major (and other language majors) at my particular institution are ongoing, and we are still in the planning stages, I do see the winds of change beginning to blow. Although the recommendations outlined in the MLA report will have their detractors, to be sure, it is important to remember that all revolutions begin amidst controversy. The most important element of a good revolution, though, is a fearless attitude toward the future and the drive to envision the possibilities—a desire to thoroughly examine what already is (for good or for bad) and to imagine what *could* be.

Betsy A. Sandlin is an Assistant Professor of Spanish at Sewanee: The University of the South in Tennessee. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research interests include gender and sexuality in contemporary U.S. Latino and Hispanic Caribbean literature and creative writing in foreign language teaching. She teaches all levels of Spanish, from beginning language to advanced seminars in literature and culture.

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