AAUSC Business Meeting & Panel at ACTFL 2014

Johanna Watzinger-Tharp

For this panel presentation, I take the topic of the 2016 AAUSC volume that Per Urlaub and I will edit, “The Interconnected Language Curriculum,” as the starting point: We are positioning our volume on “articulated K-16 contexts” against the background of a fragmented FL education landscape.

Post-secondary frameworks such as the recently updated ACTFL Standards and the Common European Framework, models of integrated genre- and task-based curricula (for example at Georgetown, and, in development, at Emory), calls for change by professional organizations such as the 2007 MLA Report, and increasing pressure from various stakeholders to build enrollments and document measurable outcomes have prompted many university language departments to consider restructuring their undergraduate programs. Often, their efforts focus on overcoming the persistent two-tiered structure that separates lower from upper division by way of integrating language and content at all levels.

Articulated, integrated curricula routinely specify proficiency goals, but FL scholars in the humanities have also characterized proficiency as too narrow and limiting, especially when it is principally manifested as oral proficiency. The 2006 MLJ Perspectives column articulated this critique by arguing that communicative competence “has come to be associated with interactive, transactional oral language use” (Byrnes 244), which may undermine the intellectual and scholarly presence for which FL departments seek to be known. In response, a number of FL scholars have shifted to notions literacy, genre and discourse as underlying principles for the selection and sequencing of form and content.

Although collegiate FL program reforms may be prompted by *external* forces such as accountability, enrollment directives, and federal funding that privileges so-called critical language, they have largely focused on *internal* articulation of lower to upper division levels. FL departments have paid relatively little attention to the preparation that students receive before joining our programs. We continue to build our curricula on the assumption that the vast majority of our FL students will start, or start *over* at the beginning, and that only a fraction will continue into upper division. This attrition was confirmed by the 2009 MLA report on enrollments in languages other than English, which uncoverd a 4:1 ratio of introductory to advanced college courses.

Attrition actually starts earlier: We know that many high school students with foreign language experience opt out of FL study in college; and those who do continue are placed notoriously low in collegiate programs, even if they have completed an AP world language course & exam. Complex budgetary, institutional and cultural factors contribute to these disruptions and discontinuities of FL education, which have prevented most students from achieving high, or even respectable levels of competency.

Let me return for a moment to the foreign language requirement: Although I myself headed a task force at my own institution to implement the FL requirement for the BA degree, I now believe that this institutional requirement actually undermines our efforts. It has not only failed to deliver its promise of attracting more students to foreign language studies, but it fundamentally communicates the wrong message: To students, it is yet another degree requirement that detracts from completing major courses; it is usually seat-based rather than competency-based (especially bad in an age of outcomes and assessment); if limited to liberal arts, which it typically is, it further divides humanities from hard sciences and professional schools; and it reinforces the separation of upper and lower level, especially when courses that fulfill the requirement do not count toward the major.

A notable exception to course-based requirements: Minnesota's proficiency-based requirement, which was established in the 90's as part of articulation with high schools. In the face of 21st-century challenges, however, the requirement was modified in 2003-2004 to offer students a choice between a proficiency exam and completion of courses.

So, why in the face of fragmentation, a volume on Interconnectedness, reaching from K-16? Recent educational reforms have already altered students’ skill sets and expectations and will continue to do so in the future. New student populations are unlikely to accept default placement into lower levels, or to be satisfied with traditional curricula that consider upper level literature courses the pinnacle of language study. To respond to the needs of rapidly changing student populations, we look to models, for example:

- The curricular redesign at Minnesota, based on the premise that for FL education to matter in higher education, programs have to be meaningfully aligned with general liberal education outcomes. (See article in the current volume on assessment, which might help create some thematic continuity to our volume.)

- And dual degree programs like those at the U of Rhode Island, which combine a foreign language major with professional, in particular engineering, and science degrees.

Both speak to the premise of the 2016 volume: In order to provide students with meaningful language learning experiences that transcend the current fragmentation, post-secondary programs need to align their curricula with significant changes in the educational landscape, such as the ACTFL Standards, the recently redesigned AP Course and Exam, the Common Core State Standards, and immersion education.

Let me briefly discuss an example of a momentous change with enormous implications for higher education: Dual Language Immersion in Utah. About 25,000 students in 118 schools, currently learn their academic subjects concurrently in English and in one of five languages: Chinese, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese. The first (small) cohort of students entered 7th grade this Fall.

Dual immersion students will complete Honors language courses, and then the AP course and exam in 9th grade, at which point nothing will be available at the high school level. Educators, students and their parents, who have greatly invested in becoming bilingual and bicultural, will look to higher education to offer courses that bridge the gap from 10th to 12th grade. In addition, the Utah higher education system has to anticipate the arrival of immersion students. FL departments will need to articulate with elementary and secondary immersion programs to serve students with high levels of proficiency who will seek to embed their second language abilities in a wide range of disciplines and careers. Simultaneously, we will need to attend to students from traditional, non-immersion classroom, and students brand new to language study.

This complex web of needs will challenge our existing programs and our way of doing business in the areas of placement, proficiency assessment and course and curriculum design for majors. We now collaborate across educational levels, not only to build articulated curricula, but also to understand each other's cultures and to build trust. The scale of the project also requires collaboration across languages, which, in turn, supports our philosophy of language diversity that offers students a choice of immersion languages.

For the curricular transformations I have discussed here, and for achieving not only internal, but also external ariculation, the FL profession will rely on its leaders: Those who direct, and strive to integrate FL programs (we might want to rethink the label of *language* program director). They possess the knowledge, expertise, leadership skills and professional networks to lead initiatives that will make language education cohesive across all levels.