

Teaching Advanced Grammar and Composition as a Skill Set

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Project description

Having learned more about mastery-based teaching approaches this year as a CTL fellow, I am eager to apply some of its principles to the advanced language classroom. In 2020–21, I will be teaching French 241: Advanced Grammar and Composition, and I want to use my first time teaching this course as an opportunity to refine its objectives and develop a concise set of skills necessary for the study of French literature and culture. This course, which is taught every semester and typically has fewer than 15 students, attracts students with a relatively strong knowledge of grammar, many of whom go on to major or minor in French. It is their first exposure to literary analysis and to French literary texts longer than a few pages. Since my colleagues have expressed to me that this course could benefit from a more focused curriculum, I hope to become a CTL fellow next year in order to:

- 1) Break down the course into a checklist of the reading, grammar, and writing skills that are most essential to students' continuing success in French (Summer 2020);
- 2) Design reading and writing assignments that will allow for those skills to be practiced and applied in the context of studying literary and cinematic texts, including in an online format if applicable (Summer and Fall 2020)
- 3) Elicit student feedback and assess the strengths and weaknesses of a mastery-influenced approach in the context of the humanities (Winter 2020 – Spring 2021)

In order to accomplish the above aims, I will pare down and revise existing course materials in conjunction with members of the French section who have taught this course many times (in particular Sara Kippur and Karen Humphreys). I will create a "checklist" of the skills most crucial to student success, divided into three categories: grammar, stylistics, and composition (see last page for a few examples). I will then match them with appropriate readings of poetry and prose and design assignments that students can rewrite and revisit in order to improve their grades. I will be teaching this both semesters, which will give me the opportunity to assess my project and make necessary changes prior to the spring semester.

Rationale

My interest in this project grew out of student demand for the teaching of specific skills, my curiosity about applying a mastery-based approach in the humanities, and a desire to make grading criteria clearer. It is my belief that working towards the above aims will generate a more focused curriculum with no "busy work," alleviate anxiety about grading, and push me to experiment with a new teaching style.

In my upper-level French literature course in Spring 2020 (French 355), many of my students expressed appreciation for the time that we spent in class working on the nitty-gritty tools of literary analysis and paper-writing: summarizing plot structure, describing narrative voice, integrating and explaining citations from a novel, identifying and interpreting literary devices. I want to ensure that students have the opportunity to understand and practice those skills before pursuing more advanced coursework in which the focus on content makes it challenging to devote sufficient time in class to the basics of composition—especially given that this is all being done in a student's second (or third, or fourth) language.

During CTL discussions this past year, I was interested in Kyle Evans' focus on outcome rather than process through his mastery-based approach to teaching mathematics. I often found myself asking how such an approach could apply in a humanities course where the types of critical thinking skills that we teach are not always so easy to measure out into discrete units that one can quantifiably "master." At the same time, there are certain core skills that all students need if they are planning to major or minor in languages and literatures (such as close reading), and I firmly believe that students learn best when they know which specific skills they are learning, why they matter, and how they are assessed.

Finally, my motivation stems from a desire to explore the relationship between a mastery-influenced approach and classroom inclusivity. I have always held the belief that it is impossible and undemocratic to teach and grade using a mastery-based approach in my French classes since each student arrives in class with a different background (linguistically, culturally, socio-economically); while I certainly avoid student-to-student comparison and do not "curve" grades, I *do* take into account each student's individual progress over the course of the semester (thus, it cannot be said that there is one absolute standard). However, my views on this matter have shifted this year as I have realized that I already use a number of techniques that reflect the principle of mastery (such as encouraging rewrites for a grade increase and handing out rubrics at the start of major assignments). I have also become increasingly frustrated with students who think they should receive an "A" simply because they claim to have put in the required number of course hours per week, with little regard for the fact that time spent does not necessarily translate to a perfect grade. Giving them a checklist of concrete skills will make my expectations and grading criteria clear from the outset.

Expected impact

This project will give me the opportunity to reflect upon clear and reasonable course expectations and techniques for evaluation, which will help to motivate us as a class and help us stay focused during such a challenging and distracting period (to put it mildly). While the specific skills I teach focus on French specifically, many of them are transferable to other academic disciplines as well as to their professional and personal lives (such as concisely summing up an article or story, learning how to quote material in context, and identifying biases in headlines and the media). Explaining that to students from the outset will help me articulate the importance of a liberal arts education and make the humanities more relevant to their lives.

While this project focuses on a specific course, it will also provide me with the opportunity to reflect upon mastery-based approaches that could be adopted in the humanities more broadly, and to evaluate whether such an approach might negatively impact disadvantaged students. Conversation with CTL fellows would prove especially helpful in regard to the latter. My participation in the 2019–20 CTL program allowed me to become better acquainted with a variety of pedagogical approaches and disciplinary perspectives, and our discussions and feedback have pushed me to reconsider some of my teaching practices. As a junior faculty member and new member of the Trinity community, I would relish this opportunity for interdisciplinary pedagogical exchange—especially with the prospect of a virtual or hybrid fall semester on the horizon.

Sample Mastery Checklist: Stylistics, Grammar, Composition

This is a rough outline of each category of skill along with the types of evaluation I will use to teach and assess mastery of them.

- 1) Stylistics (mini-quizzes and final exam)
 - Recognize literary genres and identify the main differences between them
 - Identify literary devices in context and describe their effects upon the reader

- 2) Grammar (mini-quizzes and midterm exam)
 - Combine sentences using relative pronouns
 - Translate between direct and indirect discourse
 - Transform the passive voice into the active voice
 - Recognize the literary past tense

- 3) Composition (4 compositions with corrections, from 1-2 pages to 3-5 pages)
 - a) Summarize texts and paraphrase sentences
 - b) Embed quotations
 - c) Transition logically between sentences, paragraphs, and ideas