



# Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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## Reflections on Teaching: The Science of Showing Off

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In the French Department, new TAs traditionally take an introductory course on foreign language pedagogy in which we discuss the vicissitudes of teaching, discern some strategies for dealing with weekly crises, and worry about what to wear. As part of our final project, we compile a teaching portfolio: a collection of critiqued lessons and exercises and quizzes, as well as some thoughts about our own teaching style. The goal of the course and the portfolio is to have us think seriously, at the start of our careers, about how we teach. Do we tailor our methods to match our students' particular moods? Can we devise snappy composition topics that will make a student happy to write? Can we convey to our students that learning French is about more than ordering baguettes and brie and asking for directions from the bookstore to the train station?

A less emphasized aspect of the course, but one equally as important, is the directive to think about why we teach. Indeed, it is a challenge well worth some honest reflection. Now in my fourth year as an instructor of beginning and intermediate French, I've come to realize that I teach for selfish reasons. I teach for the intoxicating high that inevitably follows a well-paced, well-organized language class. I teach for that moment of epiphany when, at semester's end, my students ask how they can

get into my next class. I teach for a glowing

(yet earnest) course evaluation. I teach to convert those students who think they hate required courses. And I teach, I suppose, to show off.

Such self-consciousness does require, however, a hefty dose of resourcefulness. Left on my own, I would soon wear a hole in my bag of pedagogical tricks. I've learned in my four years that the best teacher's aide is the gossip in the departmental lounge; over a cup of bad coffee, my colleagues often drop precious classroom hints while they swap war stories. Bit by bit, I've learned to borrow Susie's strategy for assigning essays, Paul's approach to pronunciation, Karen's cultural overheads—all of them useful roadmaps to carry along on my admitted ego-trip. Teaching, it seems to me, is always a group effort, even if the glory one seeks is solitary. One would be negligent not to profit from the style and creativity of one's colleagues. In fact, I profit most when I sit in on other French classes or substitute for other instructors. Little do they know how often I pilfer their lesson plans.

Because my students each learn differently and because each has a different degree of interest in my subject, I try to incorporate in my classes various ways of learning. I play Jeopardy; I show music videos; I lead my students to the letterbox where they recite and mail the postcards they've written. But I also love the structure and discipline of mechanical drills, perhaps because I couldn't have learned my subject without the charts, graphs, and momentary fear that such exercises demand.

Word games and role plays have become for me effective teaching tools, as have tension and dread. The trick, then, is to steal ideas from colleagues with varying temperaments and a wide range of teaching styles. If I've learned anything as a teacher, it's that the science of showing off demands little selectivity. Every colleague is my personal orchard, ripe and awaiting harvest.

The nature of my discipline requires that I teach students how to form a coherent thought in a foreign language. I have a professional responsibility to monitor their choice of words, their accent, the way they conjugate verbs. In a larger sense, however, teaching a language is about allowing people to question their experiences, to wonder about things they take for granted, to think about the mechanics of words and how they limit and liberate our perception of the world. Though I have no delusions of grandeur, I do understand that helping people acquire a new language is really about helping them form new habits and new outlooks. It's about teaching them how to pilfer accents and pet phrases and philosophies of life. And since we live our life in language, we live better when we understand more than one.

Why I teach, then, determines how I teach. Vainglory helps me find fresh ideas and vanity keeps me from embarrassing myself. My students, who come to me as trustworthy citizens governed by a code of honor, are, I hope, all the better for it.

TRC NOTE: If you're persuaded by Wade's reasoning, consider joining the TRC Mutual Classroom Observations, described on the Announcements page, or setting up departmental TA observations.