

Some of My Best Friends Are Foreign Language Teachers

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Two Views on Foreign Language Departments as Sites of Cross-Cultural Difference

AT THE 2000 Summer Seminars in Tempe, Arizona, and Wilmington and Newark, Delaware, participants took part in frank discussions of foreign language departments as microcosms of cross-cultural difference. The discussions were far ranging, touching on differences among students and faculty members based on race, national and ethnic origin, faith, gender, education and training, learned and native (and prestigious and denigrated) linguistic varieties, physical abilities, and sexual preferences. The image of the department in the context of the institution was also considered as a basis for a politics of difference. Issues of culturally determined teaching, learning, and working styles were touched on, and solutions evoking balance, civility, and transparency of expectations were offered. We present here two essays from discussion participants, and we invite additional contributions of up to four thousand words from our readers. Seminar participants took the Report of the Task Force against Campus Bigotry (see www.mla.org) as a starting point for their comments: readers might want to look at the report as well.

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IN "INCLUSIONARY Practices: The Politics of Syllabus Design," Linda Dittmar points out the limitations of relegating previously excluded material to a special unit of a course, as if the material were "alien to the mainstream but morally important and politically unavoidable" (38). As well-intentioned as such course development may be, it inevitably leads to a kind of tokenism in which what one felt compelled to include is made to appear so marginal that it cannot be taken as seriously as what it has been appended to. Dittmar is describing the design of course syllabi, daring us to imagine the potential a new course, if carried out properly, can have on curricular transformation. But much of what she says applies as well to the way university decision makers may conceptualize the organization of foreign language departments under their purview. And it also describes the way they interact with those departments.

It is easy to perceive the foreign language department as "alien to the mainstream," for several reasons. First and most obvious is its subject matter. The foreign language department is a site for preserving, maintaining, and promulgating the essence of another culture through the study of the culture's language and literature. Its primary reason for being is the study of a culture that is alien or foreign to the one of the institution that houses the department. Second, the foreign language department is

usually in a marginal position in relation to the center or mainstream of the curriculum, regardless of how an institution determines that center. Even in a curriculum devoted to international studies, the foreign language department dutifully takes a place in relation to departments and programs that deal with such issues as foreign policy, international management, and current affairs. But "alien" in this context does not have to mean "alienated" from the mainstream: the foreign language department, like it or not, provides a service, and as such it is in its own interest to make a niche for itself. Whether we view a given foreign language as a subject in its own right or as an applied skill, its place in the curriculum is to some degree alien to the mainstream.

Another way to talk about the status of the foreign language department is to highlight its diversity, which is apparent not only in the subject matter but probably also in the teaching corps (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the institution). In fact, the foreign language department is often held up as an example of diversity on campus, a place where one may turn for information and guidance on how to negotiate issues of cultural difference and diversity; it is, to use the terms introduced at a recent

ADFL seminar, a site of cross-cultural difference. But if the foreign language department embodies diversity as a site of cross-cultural difference and is also alien to the mainstream, it follows that diversity itself is alien to the mainstream or at least can be perceived as such. Needless to say, such a view diminishes the possibility for an authentic encounter with diversity, tucking the source of diversity away into Dittmar's separate and marginal course unit, thereby limiting its ability to transform the curriculum, the campus, and the academy at large. Such a view encourages a tokenism in which university decision makers are happy with the foreign enclave down the hall or across campus as long as it stays on its side of town and doesn't make too many demands.

Foreign language educators must recognize this tendency to view diversity from a distance and must try to correct the shortsightedness responsible for it. We need to educate not only our students (that's the easy part) but also our colleagues in our home institutions, especially our administrators, about what we do and how and why we do it. If the foreign language department becomes and remains a place to be kept at a comfortable distance (whose texts one might rather read in translation, as it were), we suffer the consequences and so does the diversity that we embody and embrace.

One of the most glaring consequences is the discrepancy in salary between the typical foreign language educator's contract and those of other educators. Why are our

salaries near the bottom of the scale? It may be that the increasingly pervasive view of language as a skill devoid of intellectual content promotes the notion that languages are easy to teach and that therefore the labor involved in teaching them is worth less on the market. One wonders if the predominance of women and minorities, not to mention foreigners or others perceived to be alien to the mainstream, who work and study in foreign languages also accounts for the low salary scale that characterizes the foreign language instructor's contract. Is the low pay really market-driven, or does a lack of genuine concern for diversity on the part of those drawing up the contracts underlie it? Are low salaries brought about by a disdain for the challenges posed by diversity? If you believe you get what you pay for and you pay as little as possible, then your minimal interest in your investment is confirmed. Perhaps someone has done research on the correlation between salaries and diversity. If not, someone should.

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Work Cited

Dittmar, Linda. "Inclusionary Practices: The Politics of Syllabus Design." *Journal of Thought* 20.3 (1985): 37–47.

Striking a Balance between Tolerance and Judgment

THE final report of the MLA Task Force against Campus Bigotry admirably captures some of the complexity facing campuses in an increasingly diverse society. If the bibliography and list of scenarios appended to the report are any indication, the task force was predominantly concerned with race, ethnicity, and gender stereotypes, though other targets of bigotry, such as religion, sexual orientation, and disabilities, were also considered. At the University of North Carolina, Charlotte (located in a booming Sunbelt city with a large international business presence and a quality-of-life climate for African Americans that is reputed to be one of the best in the country), race, country of origin, and gender per se are approached with a certain amount of civility, at least on the surface. Courtesy is the order of the day and hate crimes so infrequent that our campus police, when I inquired, denied awareness of incidents. To the credit of our administrators over the years, the university's attempts to attract minority applications have resulted in the highest percentage of African American students at any of the University of North Carolina system campuses except for the

historically minority institutions. If indeed we have bigotry issues on our campus, then, they are not of the blatant variety. But at a university newly anointed with Doctoral Intensive status, with ambitions for growth and a desire to strengthen its ties with Charlotte's formidable and conservative business community, voices that ruffle feathers or challenge the values of corporate America are seldom heard. When dealing with any issue that might impinge on individual students' systems of belief, fear of offending (or, perhaps more often, fear of criticism) can lead to such caution that honest and probing intellectual inquiry in the classroom is stifled. Not surprisingly, a recent faculty study of our general degree requirements reported dissatisfaction with the courses that meet the values goal for undergraduates.

I am grateful for the civility on my campus and would abhor discrimination toward individuals on the basis of their religious or ideological allegiances. With a wide range of backgrounds and cultures represented in our classrooms, however, it is not always easy to reconcile respect for each student's ideological allegiances with the