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Languages Without Language Faculty

Back in 2001, Drake University did what to many language professors was nothing less than horrific: It announced that foreign language instruction wasn't working, killed its language departments, and got rid of the instructors, including those with tenure. Drake's president promised some sort of new approach, based on study abroad and individualized online instruction. Language professors at Drake and elsewhere were outraged and, noting that the university hadn't figured out what it would put in place, predicted that the university would do terrible harm to language study and the humanities.

Six years later, Drake still doesn't have language departments or language professors, but it does have a new approach to language instruction in place. And Drake — the institution language professors couldn't say enough bad things about — is being hailed in some quarters as a model. Last week the W.M. Keck Foundation and the Council of Independent Colleges announced a new program designed [to help small and mid-sized private colleges and universities transform their language programs](#) based on the Drake approach. Interest is not limited to the private sector: Portland State University, in Oregon, is about to start a pilot program using some of the Drake approach in its Spanish classes.

The interest in Drake's ideas comes at a time of considerable moves to reform foreign language instruction. The Modern Language Association is putting the finishing touches on a report that [will call for radical shifts](#) in how undergraduate and graduate programs in foreign languages are taught, with a shift away from a language/literature model to one that places much more emphasis on culture, history, economics, politics and more. Philosophically, there are parts of the Drake program that appear consistent with the MLA push — both approaches argue that traditional teaching methods need to change, and that students need a broad understanding of the cultures whose languages they are studying, not just vocabulary and literature.

But there are key differences as well. Most notably, the MLA views faculty members as not only part of, but crucial to, instruction. Drake, as a university that did away with language departments, takes a different view, with most of the learning taking place in small student groups of four — coached not by a professor, but by a native speaker of the language, typically an international student. Whereas Drake views this as a bold approach that gives students a more intense education on becoming fluent, many others view it as a cop-out and a dangerous sidelining of professors. And it's in that context that the move to encourage the Drake approach elsewhere is attracting both excitement and great concern.

"The problem with foreign language teaching in a traditional format is that an hour a day every other day just doesn't get people to the intensity that people need. People get discouraged and they drop out after a few years," said Richard H. Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges. Drake's method, he said, "is a winning approach, in which students have greater progress and reach a level of functional competency earlier."

Even if there is functional literacy, many say that the definition of college-level language instruction is being devalued and that the student experience is being cheapened. “There’s more than just the ability to learn to speak a language, which you could do in Berlitz,” said Ginny Lewis, who lost her job teaching German when Drake eliminated all the language faculty positions.

Lewis, who is now on the faculty at Northern State University, in South Dakota, said that “the students in my classroom have access to me around the clock — not only am I an educator with knowledge that goes beyond that of a 22-year-old native speaker, who doesn’t understand the how or why of language, but I offer students encouragement. I offer students a lot of background knowledge of why they are learning what they are learning.”

Lewis defends an idea that some at Drake consider old-fashioned: “Regardless of what a college student is studying, that student deserves an expert professor in the classroom.”

Of course Jan Marston, the head of Drake’s language program, in explaining its approach, happened to say: “You need to let go of the idea that it all happens in class.”

More Languages Than Before

The program Marston leads is called the [Drake University Language Acquisition Program](#) and goes by its acronym, DULAP. Students who want to study a language take a two-semester course, in English, on language acquisition skills — this course mixes students studying a range of tongues and does not focus on any particular language. The actual language instruction takes place in four-student sections for which the curriculum is organized by DULAP coordinators and the discussions are led by native speakers, typically international students at Drake. These four-student sections range from beginning to advanced and also can be grouped around student interests. Currently, Drake is offering these sections in Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Hindi, Japanese, Russian and Spanish — compared to just French, German and Spanish when the university eliminated departments.

The coordinators are educators with knowledge of various languages, and outsiders work remotely with the section leaders when Drake’s staff lacks background in a given language — Russian is led by a professor in Texas, for example. [Blogs are a key way](#) for these staffers to interact with students and the section leaders. The coordinators have been considered academic staff, but Drake is currently looking for ways to convert their slots to faculty. Marston said she expected the conversions to be done during the next year, but did not expect the positions to be tenure track. It is these coordinators who also set up outside reviews of student work — through electronic portfolios the students create, showing their progress at speaking the languages and studying the cultures.

Christen Bain, a junior at Drake who is majoring in international relations and marketing, has taken both French and Spanish at the university, and raves about the way the small sections work — with the e-portfolio tapes of conversations showing growth. “You really see how much you’ve improved. I’m amazed at what I’ve learned,” she said.

David Maxwell, Drake’s president, said that meeting student goals is the whole point. “The primary philosophy is that the learning experience for each student is tailored to the individual student’s learning goals,” he said, so we find out “what are their goals for the language?” (While some of the anti-Drake comments over the years have assumed that the place must be run by widget counters who just don’t get foreign languages, Maxwell is a Russian studies scholar who previously directed the National Foreign Language Center.)

A key part of that philosophy, Marston said, is admitting what language students do not want to be: professors. “Most traditional language departments are language and literature departments, and most of what they were doing is focused around their desire to prepare other people — their best students — to do as they were doing,” she said. As a result, she added “many enrollments are declining.” The Drake program is based on the idea that “students don’t want to become language professors — they want to go out in the world, so they have to be able to communicate.”

Marston, who spent much of her career as more traditional French professor before coming to Drake, said that she understood that some people would view this approach as a threat to faculty jobs. But she said faculty jobs were already changing — and not necessarily the way professors want — as retiring language professors are replaced by adjuncts on many campuses. Spanish departments can’t fill positions fast enough while many other professors lack enough students, Marston said, so uncertainty in the profession shouldn’t be blamed on the Drake approach. (The [most recent job data](#) from the MLA actually show a stable market, with improvements in languages besides Spanish.)

“The traditional jobs are facing a shift — we’re having some kind of a monumental shift,” she said.

Ekman of the Council of Independent Colleges agreed, and he said some of the blame rests with language faculty members. He said that had Drake done nothing six years ago, language professors still might have lost their jobs — due to declining enrollments. Like most colleges, Drake does not require foreign languages (although some majors have a requirement). “If you take the long-term view with this, the initial view to eliminate foreign-language requirements came from foreign-language faculty who couldn’t be bothered to teach the basics to short-term conscripts,” Ekman said. “They would have been well served by teaching those courses and building a base of people” committed to learning languages, he added.

Drake foreign languages went through “a rough period,” but Ekman predicted that the revived program would eventually attract enough interest to generate positions for more traditional faculty slots, including those teaching literature. “There is a light at the end of the tunnel,” he said, adding that other language programs might go through similar difficult periods, followed by revivals.

Since Ekman’s council and the Keck Foundation announced the grant program to help other colleges apply the Drake approach, the calls from institutions “suggest that this is pretty popular” with colleges, Ekman said.

A ‘Counterintuitive’ Approach

Should it be? Many foreign language observers say that there are parts of the Drake program that impress them a great deal — and other parts that worry them just as much. Robert Sanders, assistant professor of Spanish and coordinator of first-year courses at Portland State, said he was excited about adding the small group sessions on to more traditional language instruction. He said he viewed this approach as consistent with the “culture and languages across the curriculum” in which foreign language is not viewed through literature alone, but as part of a broader educational experience.

“The literature degrees have their place,” he said, but programs all over the country suffer because of “this institutional creep in which everyone is trying to copy the Ivy League and reproduce specialists in literature,” rather than focusing on globalization or culture or any number of other topics. “We need to break out of the fetish of literature,” he said.

Where he was troubled — and wouldn’t advocate that his university follow — is with the elimination of

departments and positions.

Many educators are pushing for more expertise about different cultures to be woven into the curriculum, and that requires professors who have expertise, and that they work together in departments, Sanders said. “By eliminating the department, they gutted the program — and this is counterintuitive,” he said.

For MLA leaders as well, the question is one of balancing enthusiasm over some of the innovation at Drake while preserving faculty roles. The MLA’s president, Michael Holquist, a professor of comparative literature and of Slavic language and literature at Yale University, said he was “always pleased” when foundations back foreign language education. But he said it was important to recognize that “language is not merely the exchange of existing information — it is the means by which cultures think and dream.”

The MLA is committed to the idea that departments need to consider new approaches, he said, but academic programs should rely on professors, he said. “I believe language professors are the logical key players in formulating any new model of instruction. It is they who have in-depth knowledge not only of words but the contexts that give those words meaning,” he said. “We advocate experiments that incorporate many of the goals DULAP has set, yet we do so within a structure that honors the intellectual contexts as well as the communicative competence.”

Rosemary G. Feal, the MLA’s executive director and a former Spanish professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo, said she viewed language education and the staffing of language education as both being “on a continuum.” The small student groups at Drake could be viewed as a great way to enhance traditional language instruction, especially at certain stages in a student’s education. “The first step in studying a language is acquiring basic fluency,” she said, and the Drake approach is well suited.

But as students advance, it’s time to ask questions like: Are there courses offered in the literature of Latin America? Feal noted that she could find plenty of English courses at Drake teaching foreign authors in translation, but wondered where the other courses were. And she stressed that this extends beyond literature.

“The question is: What comes next? After the foundational experiences, colleges and universities need to offer the opportunity to delve into academic content — in history, economics, popular culture, film,” Feal said, questioning how much of this could be taught without professors. She added that “professors with advanced degrees in languages are uniquely qualified” to offer such instruction.

Maxwell, Drake’s president, said that he hoped people would not judge the ideas about languages coming out of his university based only on the elimination of traditional faculty slots. “This started out as a solution to a set of Drake-specific problems,” he said. But he quickly added that the university’s model — the basis for the Keck program to help other colleges — “does have significant advantages to other institutions” and that many of the Drake-specific issues he mentioned “may be shared” by other colleges.

He said he hoped the Keck grants and the experimentation they would support at other colleges would answer the question of “what parts are adaptable” from Drake to other campuses.

Lewis, the former Drake professor, hopes the answer to that question is fairly limited. She said that being forced out of a job was “quite devastating,” and not only because she had to job hunt. “I personally felt a sense of professional failure because I had not done my job as a young professor in communicating the urgent need to offer this kind of high-quality language education,” she said.

Six years later, Lewis remains stunned that it is somehow acceptable to suggest that language professors can be replaced with new systems, and she wondered what would happen if colleges started to say that historians or biologists could be replaced. “Why would you not want your language students to have the same chance as the history students — to work with professors,” she said. “Why are languages different?”

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
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