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My Journey Performing Language: A Perspective on the Challenges and Rewards of Getting Out of Your Comfort Zone in the 21st Century

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When I was invited to be part of a roundtable discussion in celebration of the *L2 Journal's* tenth anniversary, and I was told we each had ten minutes to present our perspectives, I panicked. My debt to the BLC was so great that there was no way I could do it justice in such a short time. I am therefore grateful for the opportunity to further reflect on my journey in this essay.

Together with my students and the performing arts, the BLC has been my most precious source of inspiration. When I look at my professional trajectory over the last eighteen years and how I got here pedagogically, I recognize the enormous impact that the BLC has had on the development of that ‘knowledge base’ that was discussed at the roundtable on October 9, 2020. It has done so by:

- a) providing a dynamic community of practice where language lecturers could engage in serious conversations and debates over the theory and practice of language teaching and learning
- b) organizing lectures and workshops in a wide range of disciplines from applied linguistics and second language acquisition to cognitive science, psychology, education, performative teaching, and many more
- c) encouraging language lecturers to reflect on their mission, their profession, their goals and to contribute articles and books to existing scholarship
- d) offering fellowships and travel grants to further lecturers’ professional development

I have taken full advantage of these resources, and I have grown through active participation and engagement on all fronts. I have grown by getting out of my comfort zone—crossing the aisles of our beloved Dwinelle building, venturing into projects with colleagues from departments I hardly knew, researching and writing about delicate issues when all I wanted to do was ‘teach’.

I have come to recognize the central role that scholarship has had in encouraging my reflexive and critical thinking, and in fostering innovative pedagogical practices in my classrooms. Acquiring new skills and attaining a certain degree of competence and mastery in fields related to language teaching and learning, in addition to knowing the politics, social issues, history, art, literature of the culture we are teaching, has become more critical than ever. A great deal of knowledge and expertise is expected from language lecturers in 2021, and it should be carefully valued at the departmental and institutional level, and fairly evaluated by

review committees. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, as a significant number of lecturers are not given the time, the resources, and the opportunity to develop such knowledge. Regardless, the new generation of language lecturers need:

- a) to become more interdisciplinary than ever before, as language teaching encompasses so many other disciplines;
- b) to be active participants in their language community;
- c) to be flexible, open, ready to be ‘uncomfortable’ at times, and accepting of the ambiguity, unpredictability, conflict, and difference that are part of the journey we embark on with our students.

We grow when we are faced with struggle, any kind of struggle. Intellectual and emotional growth cannot occur without some experience of discomfort, and professional development, training and scholarship are key in understanding that struggle. The complex social and political reality in today’s multicultural societies requires us to help students become reflexive and critical individuals. Students are demanding more, and they deserve more.

A language class is a well of opportunities, it is an experimental lab where...

- a) identity construction occurs
- b) social justice awareness is raised
- c) critical and reflexive thinking is encouraged
- d) understandings of power dynamics, power struggles and social hierarchies are discussed
- e) perceptions are changed

If we want to be true to our mission, which is to prepare young adults to enter into an extremely nuanced, multi-layered geo-political arena, filled with individuals carrying different ideological banners and socialized to different norms and conventions, and which our students will have to recognize, accept, and understand, I believe we have an ethical responsibility to raise awareness around social and political issues. We do not teach in a value free environment. Students don’t enter our classrooms as blank slates—they bring their own histories and sets of values and beliefs, and some of them will already have engaged in such discussions in other courses or joined activist groups for this or that cause.

Language classrooms are sites to contribute to the development of students’ social responsibility. In order to foster that responsibility, we have to help them connect with the social reality outside of the classroom by not picking and choosing the most attractive aspect of the culture we are teaching nor by presenting a sanitized version of the facts.

How do we implement such a pedagogy, in particular with respect to the teaching of conflicts in the language classroom? How do we engage undergraduates?

We engage them with topics that are *relevant* and *challenging*, topics that they might feel strongly about and that are important in today’s public discourse, but that they never had a chance to reflect on in a critical way.

Two fields in particular have helped me find ways to engage students with form and content: **Performance Studies**ⁱ, which has informed my approach, and **Critical Language Pedagogy**ⁱⁱ (CLP), which has informed the content of my syllabi. The first provided a frame, a medium, a lens, a perspective, while the second one provided the actual script, so to speak.

A *Critical Performative Pedagogy* (CPP), which combines affective, aesthetic, and reflexive dimensions, has always been central to my teaching.

My journey *performing language* with my students in a critical and reflexive way has been extraordinary. Everyone has a story to tell, and everyone loves to hear a good story. Storytelling, whether it is narrated orally or in writing, in first person or third, in prose, in verse, in songs, or in scripts, is a powerful way to touch students, have them reflect on issues, and make them empathize with the conflicts presented.

While experimenting with different pedagogical interventions in my classes (such as images, art, film clips, videos, maps), it was through creative writing, storytelling and performance that I was able to reach students and engage them at a deeper level. Having students embody conflicts in a multisensory and multimodal experience gave them the freedom to un-censor themselves to express their feelings through newly constructed identitiesⁱⁱⁱ. In the current Spring of 2021, I am teaching a course titled *Italian through the Arts: Race, Gender, and Class in Performance*, in which we read, analyze and discuss provocative texts by Italian playwrights in order to encourage students to reflect on their own values, beliefs, and identities, and to critically think about race, gender, and class in the context of the multicultural communities in which we are living and in the context of our recent, unprecedented historical times in American politics. Students will then create their own scripts, based on issues that are particularly meaningful to them, focusing on the power struggles and power dynamics manifested in a variety of contexts—all of which I hope to present in a future article.

Learning how to maneuver sensitive conversations in today's multicultural learning spaces has become, undoubtedly, a more challenging but highly rewarding experience, and I look forward to more discoveries, surprises, and memorable teachable moments in all my future classes, whether virtual or in person.

My gratitude to the entire BLC family for the unwavering support and encouragement they have so generously offered throughout my eighteen years at Berkeley.

NOTES

ⁱ **Performance Studies** is an interdisciplinary field of research that draws from the social sciences, the humanities, and the arts. It focuses on the pervasiveness of performance as a central element of social and cultural life, including not only theater and dance, but also such forms as practices of everyday life, storytelling and public speaking, avant-garde performance art, popular entertainment, micro-constructions of ethnicity, race, class, sex, and gender, non-verbal communication, and political demonstrations — potentially any instance of expressive behavior or cultural enactmen. (McKenzie, 2005).

ⁱⁱ **Critical Language Pedagogy** is defined as an “approach to language pedagogy where language teaching is a tool for developing learners who are 1) critically aware of social problems that emanate from oppression and injustice and 2) able to argue and counter-argue, hence triggering critical discourse in the classroom” (Piosang, 2018, p. 104).

ⁱⁱⁱ For a more in-depth discussion on the pedagogical choices and the theoretical considerations when teaching the conflicts in the foreign language classroom, watch for an upcoming chapter titled *Teaching the Conflicts in Foreign Language Education* (Adler et al, forthcoming).

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