

Remarks for CLAC Wrap-Up Session

Thanks to Tanya Kinsella and to the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, for inviting me to join in the discussion of Cultures and Languages Across the Curriculum.

I initially contacted Tanya to ask for help in publicizing a round-table session at the upcoming January meeting of the American Historical Association in New York focused on the importance of languages to the study and teaching of history. My reason for doing this is that I know from long experience at the annual AHA meeting that multiple sessions and outside activities vie for attention and that professional matters not bearing directly on a specific research interest do not always draw the audience they deserve. It occurred to me that your meeting here would be attended by at least a handful of historians who are already engaged in a professional dialogue with teachers of language and other disciplines. Perhaps even more important, those of you who are not historians are likely to be working with historians back on your home campuses and can urge them to take advantage of an opportunity to join in a discussion that may enhance the sort of efforts that are high on the agenda of this meeting.

The round-table session will take place from 9:30 to 11:30 Saturday morning, January 3, 2009, in the Carnegie Room West of the Sheraton New York hotel. Further information about the annual meeting can be found at: www.historians.org.

I should mention that any one who is not a historian can also attend the AHA meeting in one of two ways, either by registering as a non-member on the AHA website (and the requirement that registrants be members is waived for non-historians), or simply drop in on a single session (in which case you do not qualify for AHA meeting services such as entry to the book exhibit). An advantage of registering for AHA this year is fire-sale room rates as low as \$129 a night in midtown Manhattan (one hotel still has rooms as of November 3).

Some notes on the panelists at the round table:

Carol Klee you know from her plenary presentation at this meeting. A linguist expert in Quechua and more generally in the contact of Spanish with other languages, she has written extensively on curriculum and pedagogy and served frequently as a consultant. She has been in charge of Spanish language instruction at the University of Minnesota and has played a leading role in the LAC program there, as well as coordinating the University Immersion Project of the Language Resource Center in the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA). She currently directs the National Resource Center on Western European Studies at the University of Minnesota.

Volker Berghahn is a prolific German historian who specializes in German-American relations. Recently he has written a broad survey entitled *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars* (2006). His teaching experience includes work with American undergraduate students at the Free University of Berlin, in a program conducted entirely in German.

Alida Metcalf teaches the history of Brazil at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, and has co-directed a thriving LAC program there with her colleague Nanette Le Coat in the French Department. Metcalf has won prizes for her writings on Brazil, writings that include a recent study on *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500-1600*, and an earlier study entitled *Family and Frontier in Colonial Brazil*.

Nanette Le Coat teaches French language and literature at Trinity University, and has co-directed the LAC program there with historian Alida Metcalf. Her research interests relate to the intersection of history and literature from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. She has written about nineteenth century perspectives on Mme du Châtelet and about the institutionalization of history at the French teacher training institution, the École Normale.

Jonathan Spence is the Sterling Professor of History at Yale, where he has taught since 1965. His writings on Chinese history, including *The Death of Woman Wang*; *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds*, and a biography of Mao Zedong, have reached a large audience and have won him wide recognition, including a MacArthur fellowship. He has lectured and conducted research at Chinese universities, and served as President of the American Historical Association in for the year ending in January 2005.

I have prepared a handout and would be happy to send you an e-mail copy of it as well if you would contact me at adamspt@earthlink.net.

My fond hope is that this AHA session will stimulate some further professional activity leading to more extensive cooperation between language teachers and historians, drawing on the experience of the round-table participants and leading to some new initiatives. I welcome your thoughts in advance of the AHA session on any broad strategies or specific measures that might be fruitful to this end. The Organization of American Historians undertook a systematic effort to situate the study of US history globally. In support of that goal one measure they took was to institute prizes for the best book and article appearing each year on US history written in a language other than English. The winning article is republished in the *Journal of American History*.

What comparable measure could the AHA adopt? One idea that occurs to me is to involve the recently established History Center in the establishment of some professional development seminars that would serve to enhance historians' fluency in language beyond their reading knowledge—perhaps in seminars on topics suited for a specific language or languages led by historians who are native speakers. Another approach might be to recognize and encourage publishers' efforts to make available historical sources and interpretation in other languages. I note, for example, that Yale publishes a book that includes Russian language sources for the study of Russian history.

My thoughts on the process of building broader networks and alliances for languages include the notion that language teachers need not despair that historians and others

outside the ambit of MLA are insensitive to the constitutive nature of language study. True, those who are not experts in language and literature are bound to see language as an instrument serving primarily to advance the work of their own disciplines, but the very work they do incorporates a cultural dimension and expands the boundaries of what it means to consider languages as constitutive. I am hoping that the AHA session will help historians become more fully aware of the fact that language is not for us merely an ancillary skill, but foundational in a way that calls on us to seek a fuller partnership with colleagues in the fields of language. Language professional may in turn appreciate better the historical dimension of language learning through such partnership.

The need to see the constitutive and instrumental dimensions of language study as complementary is reflected in the slogan “content from the beginning, and language to the end.” As a result of her work in the application of proficiency standards, Dorothy James diagnosed a fatal disjuncture in what might be described as the lack of “instrumental” training in language beyond the typical two-year language sequence. As a student is called upon to interpret and respond to more complex materials, venturing ever deeper into the stream of academic discourse, the ability to speak and write at a progressively more demanding level requires continued effort and support.

I was fortunate to be exposed to a variety of languages at an early age. I imagine that it must be harder for those who have not such experiences to come to terms with the realities of language learning and all the challenges and rewards it entails. Many jump to the conclusion that their own inability to converse fluently in a language they once studied but have rarely if ever uses is ultimate proof that learning a language is impossibly difficult or that it requires some rare gift. Acquiring any level of language proficiency is most commonly a cumulative and gradual process, confirmed in use. Then, there are many who do not seem to appreciate the importance of building a cultural foundation for successful engagement with a language. Language teachers themselves have often been limited in their exploration of culture in their classes. Embedding language in appropriate locations throughout a curriculum can strengthen the teaching of culture, drawing on the “connections” standard to enlarge a constitutive notion of language as culture and, in the process, opening up opportunities to address the “comparisons” standard.

An instrumental reason for using a language--academic, practical, recreational, or a combination thereof—gives a healthy motive and focus for language learning. Such engagement, however it may begin, flourishes and gathers confidence from a broader, holistic understanding derived from reading and experience. Successful engagement also requires continued learning and exercise in the use of a language at successively higher levels, like the young violinist advancing in Suzuki classes from “twinkle, twinkle little star” to a lyrical Bach partita.