

Teaching Quebec in New York: A Freshman Experience at Home and Abroad

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Studying Quebec's culture is most valuable in any French program but there are many reasons and opportunities to include Quebec across the curriculum, particularly in freshman experience courses. At Saint John's University, the freshman transition course is based on a multifaceted exploration of New York City from the discipline lens of the professor teaching the course. A historian would, for example, use the lens of history while a professor of art would focus on art in the city. In response to a one or two week study abroad option which the University has recently made available for the course, this paper describes a French professor's approach to designing and proposing a freshman orientation-to-college course with two weeks in Quebec. It explores how applying L. Dee Fink's taxonomy of significant learning to the City of New York and the Province of Quebec can enhance the students' active engagement and academic performance in the subject as well as the requisite skills.

The perspective of the design is that of a professor who teaches the introduction-to-college course as well as French, who has conducted numerous study abroad groups to France and does volunteer work for a non-governmental organization at the United Nations. The outcomes or the changes I would like to see in the learners at the end of this course are initially much like those of the professor of Asian American Studies at California State University at Northridge, quoted in L. Dee Fink's *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*:

My dream is for my students to be able *to think critically*, to incorporate this thinking in their daily lives, and to *share that knowledge and compassion with others* in order to work towards a just world for all. [...]In order to have a fuller view of what is really happening in the world, one needs to step outside of one's biased cultural lens that limits one's view and to be reflective of this process of attempting to be "critical" as opposed to accepting authority without question. (10)

Since the proposed course has both study abroad and study at home components, I would like the students to get a deeper understanding of their own city, their own cultures and of themselves, by studying about and visiting Quebec and New York City. I would like them to step out of and back into their environment with fewer cultural biases or at least with a greater awareness of these biases. I would like them to become fluent in intercultural communication and understanding, successful lifelong learners and eventually problem solvers at the local, national and global levels.

Requirements for the Freshman Transition Course

The freshman transition course is composed of twenty hours of classroom instruction with the professor, three major lectures delivered often by renowned authors and speakers, a field trip to Ellis Island, and two field trips in New York City selected by each professor. Six hours of academic service learning are also an integral part of every course, and like the field trips, professors tailor this requirement to the theme of their courses. I teach two courses which deal with global and diversity aspects of New York City: Diversity, Democracy and Human Rights, and Multilingual New York. The service learning component for both courses is helping immigrants either to improve their English language skills or to learn the information they need to become citizens of the United States.

The trip to Ellis Island is pertinent to both courses. Field trips include visits to New York City Museums, the Tenement Museum and the African Burial Ground, for example, where both the human rights and the languages of immigrants who came to New York and of the Africans who were brought to New York are key topics. At the end of the course, students can select to study abroad for one to two weeks. Quebec is an excellent choice for both of my courses, but this design addresses the theme that deals with language, languages and multilingualism as students will be encountering another language and culture.

The complexity of the course requires careful design. L. Dee Fink's taxonomy of significant learning, which includes the human and caring categories, provides the theoretical guidelines (30-2). This paper deals with the design rather than the details of the course content.

Taxonomy of Significant Learning and Course Design

Briefly, the taxonomy of significant learning has six major categories and sixteen sub-categories. The major categories are: fundamental knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring and learning how to learn (30-33). The categories are "not hierarchical but rather relational and even interactive" (32). The New York/Quebec course is founded on the goal to achieve "significant learning" through the relational quality of the taxonomy for it is the inter-relatedness and interaction that transforms the course content and adds relevance to the skill areas. The course design is presented through the six categories.

Foundational Knowledge

The key objective in this area is to change the students' attitudes towards the course content and the way it is learned, to change their practices in acquiring information and conducting research, and to adjust teaching approaches to these changes. Foundational knowledge, "understanding and remembering information and ideas," (30) is "at the base of most other kinds of learning" (31) in Fink's taxonomy. As crucial as what students need to know about New York City and Quebec Province, is how they would acquire the knowledge. From the beginning, it is important to keep in mind, as Ken Bain points out in *What the Best College Teachers Do*, that "knowledge is constructed, not received," (26) and that it is questions that "help us construct knowledge" (31). The challenge is to engage the entire class in constructing the knowledge foundation around a question or questions (Bain 50) dealing with contemporary issues in New York City as they relate to Quebec: history, immigration, diversity, culture, language, human rights, lifestyles and employment. A possible format for the main question or questions students are asked to consider in the course can be: In what ways can understanding the Province of Quebec be significant to residents of New York City with respect to the issue of, for example, employment opportunities?

This is a good introductory question as it deals with a timely issue relevant to young people who are at the threshold of thinking about their future careers. Discussion begins with the exploration of the significant industries in New York City, examples of which are construction, trade, transportation and utilities, financial activities, professional and business services, educational services, health care and social services, leisure and hospitality (<http://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/PDFs/Significant-Industries-New-York-City.pdf> , 2-4). It continues with the comparison of New York State and Quebec trade information, as Quebec is a major trading partner. An examination of the New York State Web sites, (<http://www.esd.ny.gov/International/TradeMissions.html>) and (<http://www.esd.ny.gov/International/Data/GlobalMarkets.pdf>) as of September 2011, revealed that these sites have limited information and have not been updated recently, as David Patterson is still listed as Governor on one of them. On the Quebec Government site, information is organized differently. The Trade and Investment page includes the sectors of aerospace, agrifood, biotechnology, lumber and construction, energy and environment, information and communication technologies and transportation. Job information about each sector is available (http://www.gouv.qc.ca/portail/quebec/international/usa/commerce/secteurs_economiques/biotechnologies/). Even if the sites are eventually updated, the information will elicit questions from the students, particularly if they are asked how the information is presented before considering what it includes. Students eventually realize that employment or trade opportunities with Quebec are not well-known by most New Yorkers. Yet, on the Quebec Government site, students discover that the United States is Quebec's largest trading partner. Almost 75% of Quebec's goods are shipped to the United States and New York State is the number one destination as it receives 6.1 billion dollars worth of these goods a year. It is here that we discover as well that Quebec is in tenth place among New York States' trading partners (<http://www.gouv.qc.ca/portail/quebec/international/usa/quebec/quebec-etats-unis/?lang=en>).

For career-minded students, this type of information will trigger greater interest in the visit to the Province of Quebec at the end of the semester, especially as the trip includes visits to some major businesses and industries. Bombardier Inc. would be an excellent choice because of its aeronautics and rail industries. The company employs workers in the United States, including in

New York State, and manufactures New York City subway cars. Other possible topics which can introduce the course are music, film, literature, language, sports, as appropriate to the course setting.

Following a full class period introduction to the course, students are motivated to gain very rapid familiarity with New York City and the Province of Quebec. It is important to note that because of the population and nature of New York City, it is appropriate to study it along with a larger entity than an individual city in Quebec. For a quick historical background, *New York City, A Brief History* by Robert Tomes and “Part A: Memories” from *Quebec Questions: Quebec Studies for the Twenty-First Century* are very useful. The different nature of these works is a good start for the introduction of information literacy skills which will prepare students for their research. *Quebec Questions* introduces students to scholarly journal articles. In contrast, all citations were removed from Professor Tomes’ book by the publisher in order to make it more easily readable. In fact, an information literacy exercise I ask my students to do when reading Tomes is to have them put citations back into a short section of the text and even to add text, by using other history books, scholarly journals, primary sources and reliable Web sites. Different styles and types of citations, notes and footnotes are also examined at this point to help students understand the benefits of citations and scholarly work for their own research.

Once the students have had a quick historical look at New York City and Quebec Province, they are ready for a guided brainstorming session which will help explore the question or questions the course will answer. This engages them in the course materials from the start. The instructor participates in the brainstorming or acts as a facilitator, asking questions and making sure that key issues and course requirements are included. The instructor can also select several essential units and invite students to select the others. Results of the brainstorming are then organized into the “fundamental knowledge” modules of the course. The class is divided into groups. Each group assumes responsibility for a module and each group member identifies an individual research question within the module. Topics for the course could include:

1. the historical background of the establishment of each colony, New Amsterdam and Quebec
2. the explorers of both colonies and early accounts of their discoveries and descriptions

3. the population of the colonies, the languages and cultures represented and their place in the social order
4. the reaction of the colonies to the English takeover and the linguistic consequences; Quebec's Quiet Revolution and New York's persistent multilingualism
5. today's population, society and economy in New York City and Quebec

Students can define the details of each unit, propose other modules and certainly take complete responsibility for structuring unit five. The key is to have a dialogue about the fundamental knowledge rather than to define it completely before meeting the class. The hope is that this exploration will uncover the “logic or conceptual structure of the subject matter” as Jerome Bruner had envisioned (36).

Application

Defining fundamental knowledge with active student participation intersects and interacts with application. In significant learning, the application category includes skills, critical, creative and practical thinking, and managing projects (38-39). Information literacy skills were introduced when comparing the two books used for historical approaches. As students are about to start their research, it is beneficial to include a session with a librarian who guides them through the use of catalogs, data bases and searches. Students begin managing their modules or group projects and learn to use the professor and librarians as resources, facilitators, “consultants” to a successful execution of the task. They apply both their practical and critical thinking skills along with those of information literacy. They learn to manage a project through the use of shared work spaces on the Web, such as Wiki pages where the progress of each member of the group is available for tracking and comments by the professor and the students in the group. They use critical thinking skills not only in structuring their own research, but also in integrating it within the group module.

One of the aspects I particularly like in “significant learning” is the use of Robert Sternberg's “triarchic” view of thinking (39) for I find critical thinking insufficient to describe the type of thinking students are required to apply to a group project and to courses in general. Furthermore, group projects allow for peer learning and the integration of the strengths and

weaknesses of group members. While some group members may be very good practical thinkers, others may excel at analytic or creative thinking and the group project should incorporate all three. The advantage of working in small groups with the professor is that the professor could help guide and facilitate the use of different types of thinking for the project by asking appropriate questions at different times during its development.

The group project assignment is complicated as it requires learning to navigate two different cultures and preparing for the study abroad experience. The project includes research and suggestions of specific places to visit or perhaps people to interview in Quebec. The professor arranges a visit to the Quebec Government House in New York or a visit by the Education “Attaché(e)” to the class in order to help with this portion of the assignment. Visits or experiences can include interviews of historians or linguists at Laval University, for example, visits to companies and businesses, charitable organizations, and cultural events as appropriate. At this point, students are already involved and interacting with the next category of the taxonomy, integration.

Integration

Integration involves “connecting ideas, people, realms of life” (30). In studying the same issue in two different cultures, students deal with comparisons. They develop a critical view of the issue and the people in both places at different points in history. On the practical side, they learn to use more varied and powerful resources for their research. They learn the advantages of citing reputable sources rather than copying ideas and facts. They are more fluent with their use of information for “learning facts can occur only when students are simultaneously engaged in reasoning about those facts” (Bain 115).

By its very nature, the course is interdisciplinary and intercultural. Freshmen can use it to explore their major or a major they are considering. I propose virtual learning communities with a university class in Quebec prior to a face-to-face meeting during the study abroad component. Preferably, the face-to-face meeting is a joint service learning experience in Quebec for which the virtual sessions act as preparation. The course includes a minimum of six hours of service learning

in New York and six hours in Quebec. At this point in the design, the integration component is interacting with the human dimension.

Human Dimension and Caring

The human and caring dimensions are contained both in the study abroad and service learning components of the course. A successful service learning project at home and abroad will leave an indelible mark in the students' understanding of their own culture as well as the new culture. The goal in the human dimension and caring area would be to create a meaningful community/service project in Quebec which would inspire a significant learning experience equal in breadth and depth to the one of a former student who participated in a study abroad program in France. After having worked on restoring an eleventh century monastery wall in France, and in conjunction with a discussion about 9/11 with French program coordinators, this student offered the thought that she had left a part of herself in that wall in France, that she would always have an attachment to it, and would hate to even think of the possibility of anyone destroying it. This was, in my experience, among the best examples of not only developing new feelings, interests and values (Fink 48), but also of being able to share them with nationals of the host country. The student developed her ideas further by making connections to a human rights course she had taken the previous semester, and presented this significant learning moment to the Non-Governmental Organizations Committee on Education at the United Nations. She was an inspiration to the audience and to her professor.

Learning how to Learn

All of the above aspects of significant learning have a component of learning how to learn. In fact, teaching this course is mainly about creating an educational environment which makes it possible for students to learn to become "self-directing learners" for it is this goal which is instrumental in "enabling other kinds of learning [...] both during the course and after the course is over" (Fink 50). Fink's work is very helpful in distilling the literature in this field to three dimensions: "learning how to be a better student, learning how to inquire and construct knowledge, learning how to be a self-directing learner." (50)

Using all three approaches is best for a freshman transition class. John Gardner's study of improving reading, note taking, writing and test taking skills is necessary. (Fink 50) As we have seen with the group assignment, changing students' orientation in learning to arrive at what a number of researchers including G. P. Gibbs have called "deep learning" is essential. Above all, the course is designed to produce a "change in the meaning of experience," as described by Novak and Gowin (Fink 50-53).

The second major assignment in this course addresses all three areas. Students keep individual journals/blogs throughout the course. These include travel experiences in New York City which will become travel journals when they are studying abroad. To prepare for this, students will read excerpts of travel journals of explorers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century and study the "intertextuality" among them, the writings of the Jesuit priests, of Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, Gabriel Sagard, Samuel de Champlain, Jacques Cartier and others. In these, one can see ethnographic accounts, observation, a mixture of anthropology and imagination. Often, intertextuality or the preference for basing writings on earlier writers rather than relying on their own observations is evident as originality was not valued until the end of the eighteenth century. Comparing these writings to those of Adriaen van der Donck, Dutch settler in New Amsterdam, and to today's travel writings and attitudes towards originality will be helpful to students. They will have another opportunity to discuss information literacy, the importance of citations and the elimination of plagiarism. The journal is intended to bring about greater self-awareness in all of the skills and categories and particularly, in learning how to learn. It will serve to document this and the "change in the meaning of experience" in both New York and Quebec.

In conclusion, following the Conference, I took part in the tour of Quebec. Although it included only some of the places I would like my students to see, it was a major significant learning experience for me as I am sure it will be for them. I look forward to teaching the course and analyzing the outcomes.

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