Experimental Pedagogy in a Course on International Business in French

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EXPERIENTIAL PEDAGOGY IN A COURSE ON INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS IN FRENCH

ABSTRACT
This article showcases “International Business in French,” a course developed at Drew University, with a special focus on ways in which students use their experience to construct knowledge of the world of business and economics in a variety of Francophone contexts. To illustrate the value experiential pedagogy can add to a business language course, it examines in particular the ways in which a trip to Quebec, the study abroad component embedded in the course, reinforces, challenges, and reveals ambiguities concerning the knowledge acquired in class prior to the trip. In conclusion, it outlines and discusses the challenges such a pedagogy might pose to the instructor and provides a provisional assessment of this approach.

KEYWORDS: Business French, experiential pedagogy, study abroad, Quebec

INTRODUCTION
Given its concrete ties and applicability to the real world, a course in Business French is the perfect venue to experiment with a variety of activities and projects that include experiential learning.1 Already an important and long-standing component of career and technical education (Threeton, Ewing, & Clark, 2010), this type of pedagogy seems especially relevant in an international business course that also strives to enhance students’ linguistic, cultural, and intercultural proficiency.

As an illustration of the value experiential pedagogy can add to a business language course, this article showcases “International Business in French,” a course developed at Drew University, with a special focus on ways in which students use their experience to construct knowledge of the world of business and economics in a variety of Francophone contexts. In particular, it examines the ways in which a trip to Quebec, the study abroad component embedded

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in the course, reinforces, challenges, and reveals ambiguities concerning the
knowledge acquired in class. To this end, after a brief overview of experi-
ential learning theory this study describes the material covered in class and
the general articulation of the course to demonstrate how direct contact
with the target culture reshaped students’ assumptions and general knowledge of
the Quèbeçois economy and business culture. Concluding remarks outline
and discuss the challenges such a pedagogy might pose to the instructor and
provide a provisional assessment of this approach.

“International Business in French” was developed to transform an old
section in Business French into a course that would be in line with the larger
mission of growing global awareness and enhancing the understanding of
the role that a proficiency in French might play in the professional world.
It aims to improve students’ cultural and linguistic proficiency in French
through the study of business and economics pertinent to the Francophone
world. Ultimately, however, it is also the goal of the course to make students
apply this enhanced competency in their further exploration of the field and,
where possible, to broaden their career possibilities once they graduate. It is
also important to note here that this course targets undergraduates who, in
the context of a small Liberal Arts education, are not necessarily Economics
or Business Studies majors, but usually have in common a strong interest in
French in addition to another area of specialization. Fourteen students regis-
tered for the class in Spring 2013, representing many different majors. The
common denominator among them was that they had either a French major
or a French minor in addition to their other major. As in many fourth- and
fifth- or sixth-semester courses, the language proficiency of these students
ranged from a very solid intermediate level to native speaker ability.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: QU’EST-CE QUE C’EST?
In their article “Learning Styles and Learning Spaces: Enhancing Experiential
Learning in Higher Education,” Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb (2005) pre-
sent the foundational concepts of experiential learning theory elaborated by

20th-century scholars who gave experience a central role in their theories of
human learning and development […] The theory is built on six propositions
that are shared by these scholars. 1. Learning is best conceived as a process,
not in terms of outcomes […] 2. All learning is relearning […] 3. Learning
requires the resolutions of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of
adaptation […] 4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world
[…] 5. Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person
and the environment […] 6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge […] (p. 194)

Instead of emphasizing cognition, experiential learning theory focuses on the individual’s “subjective experience in the learning process” and on how learning is affected by experience (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2000). A central element of experiential learning is thus the recognition that students have different learning styles and that this pedagogy is especially fruitful for those who tend, in a formal learning situation, to learn through hands-on experience or through practical applications of principles examined in a given course. Experiential pedagogy, however, promotes the possibility for all learners to integrate their experience into the learning process that takes place in and outside the classroom. Systematically and intentionally implemented, this teaching method is an efficient tool for students to process, retain, and create new knowledge based on their own subjective experience of a topic at hand. Furthermore, “the principles of experiential education can also be used to transform traditional classrooms and study abroad experiences” (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). Following these principles, the “International Business in French” at Drew includes a trip to Quebec as a central component of the experiential pedagogy implemented in the class. In addition, in-person and online contact that my students had with speakers throughout the course offered the multiplicity of perspectives that allowed students continuously to reprocess and reassess the knowledge acquired through class readings and discussions.

**RELEVANCE MAKES IMPLEMENTATION EASY**

Although it is true that English is the recognized lingua franca for international business, it is important to highlight the relevance of French in the business world for our American undergraduate students. France is the second largest economy in the euro-zone and the third economy in the European Union, which is the most important trading block of the United States. Canada is the single largest trading partner of the United States, and Quebec plays a large role in that economy. Additionally, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (IOF) provides benchmarks that are relevant to the presence of French in the business world: There are 220 million French speakers worldwide, and French is the ninth most widely spoken language on the planet and the only one, together with English, to be spoken on five continents. In most of the IOF member countries, 60% of the population is under 30 years old;
French is the third most widely used language on the Web with 5% of Internet pages, after English (45%) and German (7%) and ahead of Spanish (4.5%); Africa is the continent with the largest number of French speakers, with 96.2 million French speakers in the IOF member countries. With 18.9% of world exports and 19% of world imports, French-speaking countries account for 19% of world trade in goods and French is the second most widely spoken foreign language (19%) after English (41%) and ahead of German (10%) and Spanish (7%) in the European Union. TV5MONDE, the multilateral French-language television channel, has the third largest international television network and is broadcast in 202 countries (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, 2008–13).

These statistics demonstrate that proficiency in French can be a relevant skill for students to acquire as they prepare for an international career in business or some other field. The near ubiquity of French worldwide also shows that implementing experiential pedagogy in a course on international business conducted in French can be fairly easy to arrange and inexpensive to execute. That is, French-speaking communities can be found almost anywhere, with or without ties to a specific international business context. In this high-tech era of Skype and other low-cost communications, the world can be gathered in one room, although a videoconference can never quite replace face-to-face experience.

Learning Objectives, Textbook, and Articulation of the Course

The learning objectives for the students taking an International Business in French course are:

- To enhance oral and written French related to the world of business, economics, and finance (comprehension and production skills)
- To acquire a global perspective on business conducted in French and to get an appreciation for the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Francophone world of business
- To communicate effectively and interact appropriately with a variety of people from the French-speaking Canadian business community during the week of immersion in Quebec City during spring break
- To acquire practical skills for job/internship search, application letters, CV writing, and interviews conducted in French
- To use library resources to find relevant research materials and to discuss critically the articles assigned for the class
A la recherche d’un emploi: Business French in a Communicative Context is the textbook used for the class. Its author, Amy Hubbell, has ties to the Centers for International Business Education and Research (CIBER), which awarded her a scholarship that eventually allowed her to write this book. Clearly informed by innovative pedagogy and actual first-hand knowledge of Quebec, this textbook is an excellent support for the implementation of the learning objectives mentioned above. The book encourages both instructors and students to research and use authentic sources, and to integrate Web activities. The text also connects some of its topics to film, and offers governmental and private sector research resources and many hands-on projects for activities both in and out of the classroom.

The semester is divided into five main segments. The first two weeks provide a general introduction to the geography and administration of France and of other Francophone regions, and the study of the vocabulary and basic knowledge necessary to understand the way the economy and companies work in the Francophone world. The next four weeks prepare for a business-language practicum in Quebec City that aims to introduce students to its economic sectors, highlighting what Quebec promotes as important components of its success: research and innovation, renewable energy, and high technology. A one-week-long language practicum in Quebec (two nights in Montreal and four days in Quebec City) is followed by one week of debriefing activities. The remaining six weeks are dedicated to an introduction to the economy and business practices in Francophone Africa while also providing a practical focus on training for the job search, resume writing, cover letter strategies, networking, and interviews.

Although I describe the class in terms of segments, it is important to note that threads of each segment appeared throughout the semester. For instance, while we were preparing for our business-language practicum in Quebec, my students attended a conference at Drew on a project led by a Senegalese entrepreneur and computer programmer, Amadou Daffe.2 His presentation resulted in the development of a research project in the second half of the semester regarding African software developers. Students tremendously appreciated Mr. Daffe’s presentation, as he was close to them in age and thus

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2 At that conference, Mr. Daffe presented the work of the company he has co-founded, Coders4Africa, which “provides African programmers and developers a gateway to free high quality training and certification in the main technologies and platforms that currently dominate the software development industry” (Daffe, www.coders4africa.org/). After the conference, he agreed to continue his interactions with the students, through both Skype and email.
their peer, and enthusiastically answered their questions. They were able to use the knowledge they gained from his presentation to formulate questions with speakers they met in Quebec. Specifically, this involved collaboration of African and Québécois entrepreneurs as well as the presence of numerous Francophone businesses from Africa in both Quebec and Ontario with representatives of the Centre de la Francophonie des Amériques. We widened the discovery of information technology with Web architects and programmers from Frima Studio, a leader in video game design in Quebec. This technique of introducing particular activities throughout the course, whether or not they connect directly with readings assigned for a particular week, actually allows the flexibility that is necessary to integrate activities or speakers according to their own schedules. In fact to transform these time constraints into an asset for the course, one can design short research assignments that students conduct and post online concerning speakers and topics of their presentations. Students may revisit these posts later in the semester, when the class has moved on to another topic. The experiential learning students gain through their contacts with different types of speakers and their study abroad experience continuously reshapes students’ understanding of topics examined in class.

IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES PREPARE STUDENTS FOR THE TRIP TO QUEBEC

Traditional classroom activities and assignments for the four weeks preparing for the trip to Quebec included readings, journal entries, and oral presentations on documents from the Ministry of Finance in Quebec and daily reading of the online newspaper *Les affaires*, to which students subscribed for free at the beginning of the semester. “The Financial and Economic Profile 2013” produced by the Ministry of Finance of Quebec is a short document that highlights the official governmental perspectives on the topic.

Each student was assigned a particular topic that they presented to the class based on these documents and their findings through online press articles. For instance, one student reported on “Plan Nord,” another on “High Technology,” and yet another on “Green Technology.” In addition, students made extensive use of the online portal of the government of Quebec to learn about the geography, politics, and culture of Quebec while they followed the news focused on the economy and business practices in Quebec. An entire week was also dedicated to the exploration of Québécois companies of all sizes, based on the classifications found in *Les affaires*.3 Students

3 See http://www.lesaffaires.com/classements.
chose an economic sector of interest to them, and all economic sectors were represented. The oral presentations on Québécois companies covered Hydro-Québec, Garda World (security), Le cirque du soleil, Bombardier, Cora (the restaurant chain), Aldo group (fashion and accessories), Garage (casual fashion for teen girls), and Couche-Tard (convenience stores operators). In their presentations, students were asked to provide a profile of the company (the location of its main offices, a short history, its revenues, its subsidiaries when it applied). They were also required to include the promotional material of the company whenever possible, and different perspectives on the company that might originate from governmental sources or recent news on the Web. Students were encouraged continuously to pay attention to the source and target of each type of information to recognize that information is never neutral. This systematic approach trained students to remain critical and receptive to the contradictions that surfaced when business representatives, economic players, and people from Quebec with no particular background in business or economics started discussing topics such as renewable energy or high technology.

Speakers whose expertise may enrich a class are useful for the implementation of experiential learning if students prepare adequately for these visits and interact actively with them. An important contact for obtaining background on the Quebec economy is Ms. Sophie Plante, Business Development Manager in the New York Office of the Délégation générale du Québec, responsible for Invest Quebec and in charge of business development in the Northeast. Her presentation made clear to the class that issues become complex when you explore an individual’s knowledge, understanding, and experience of these issues. The Délégation générale du Québec has offices in New York City, Washington DC, Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles, making it a regional resource for many institutions. An interview on Skype with a speaker provided by the Délégation could also conceivably replace a visit. The Délégation helped identify the important institutions to contact in Quebec to elaborate the trip: The Chamber of Commerce was important along with the Centre de la Francophonie des Amériques. The decision to spend more time in Quebec City than in Montreal, a truly bilingual urban center, stemmed from an objective to make this short trip as intensive as possible in terms of French language practice.

BUSINESS LANGUAGE PRACTICUM IN QUEBEC
Transportation to and from Quebec, lodging, and activities on site were all influenced by an extremely tight budget. The week cost about $750 per
student, all expenses included, and because of funding I received from Drew University, students only paid $350 for the trip. Amtrak’s “Adirondack line” runs from New York to Montreal’s central train station, and the Orléans Bus Express provides the Montreal–Quebec City connection. Students had to complete a number of reading and writing assignments on the eleven-hour train ride from New York City to Montreal and fortunately, the train was equipped with wifi for most of the trip. One assignment, for example, was for students to formulate questions for speakers, another to conduct research on companies and organizations. During the trip, one journal entry required them to talk about their experience of public transportation and involved interviewing people. Then they had to compare their findings on the train with the information they collected from the more local travelers they encountered on the bus between Montreal and Quebec. If their interlocutors were Québécois, students had to note new words and expressions they were learning, material that would feed into another journal entry dedicated to acquired language on the trip.

Our guide from the International Youth Hostel in Montreal focused the visit of the city on sites and monuments that illustrated its importance as a center of commerce, aerospace industry, finance, and world affairs. Although this guided visit lasted about three hours, it set the tone and immediately showed how this visit would help students develop “emotional awareness,” which in turn provides the basis for the “learner’s discovery and ownership of her or his role in the learning process itself” (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2000). One example of this interplay between experience and emotional intelligence came when we were on our way to Vieux Montréal with our guide. As all students were required to interact with speakers and guides during our stay in Quebec, one student who had extensively studied Hydro-Québec praised alternative energy in Canada and stated that Canada’s policies and investment in research and innovation were by far superior to those in the United States. Our guide immediately dismissed this positive perspective on the policies that Quebec helps promote for clean energy, saying that since water was in abundant supply as a natural resource, Canadians should not get so much credit for using it. Moreover, our guide continued, if climate change affected these natural resources, Canada would be the first to change its policies and perhaps even go to nuclear energy. He also pointed out that

4 For more details on journal entries, see the section on assessment.
5 The HI-Montréal Youth Hostel is centrally located at 1030, Mackay Street, Montréal, Québec, Canada H3G 2H1, and five blocks from the Musée des Beaux Arts that the students interested in art may visit as well.
Canada was also suffering from the global economic crisis and that much of its social safety net and infrastructure, such as its universal healthcare coverage and higher education, were under threat and could disappear one day. This position completely contradicted both the governmental and private sector documents we had read about the choice of clean energy and social choices as well as the more complex position presented in class by the representative of the Délégation générale du Québec. Because the Youth Hostel guide was close in age to the students and presented his opinions in a matter-of-fact manner, he engaged them on a more emotional level and made them reassess the readings reflecting governmental perspectives.

Another important moment with the same guide in downtown Montreal came when he explained why the City of Berlin had offered a piece of its wall to Quebec and its symbolic significance in the Centre de Commerce Mondial in downtown Montreal. The guide discussed the film *Bon Cop, Bad Cop* that focuses on an odd bond formed between a French-speaking cop from Quebec and an English-speaking cop from Ontario. Although a comedy, this film raises the very important concern about cultural and political divisions of Canada. The guide concluded his explanation with an emotional statement about the fact that Germany, after its reunification, had tried to warn Canada about the political, cultural, and human difficulties that such divisions create. What we had covered in class was necessary for students to understand what the guide was saying, but it was the direct experiencing of knowledge and opinions in the target culture that really enhanced the learning in the traditional classroom activities. Students were “relearning” the material covered in class but in a more complex way. This experience allowed them to be empowered as independent learners to recognize and resolve the new and contradictory perspectives.

In Quebec City, students visited the Observatory, the Parliament, and the Citadelle, which brought to life class readings on the geography and the history of Quebec. After their visit to the Musée de l’Amérique française, they met M. Magny, Director of Communication at the Centre de la Francophonie des Amériques, and M. Couttet, Director of International Business and Immigration at the Chamber of Commerce of Quebec City. They each gave their perspectives on Quebec’s economy, its successes and its challenges; and

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6 *Bon Cop, Bad Cop*, a film made in 2006 by Erik Canuel, was cited by several speakers we met and should be studied in any course that examines Francophone culture in Canada.

7 In Quebec City, we stayed at the Auberge de la Paix, 31, rue Couillard, Québec, (Québec), Canada G1R 3T4.
then through questions at the end of this presentation, students were able to discover the opinions of these two speakers, most notably on the particular political and cultural position of the province of Quebec in comparison with the rest of Canada. Speakers’ hesitations and slight contradictions again made what we had learned prior to departure richer and more complex, bringing emotional and subjective nuances that would not appear in textbooks, official interviews, or readings assigned for the class. We then toured the video game design company Frima Studio for a presentation of their products, a visit of their offices and a discussion with a representative of HR in that company. Students loved this visit that allowed them to talk to younger people, artists, designers, developer, and programmers who contribute to a very successful industry in an important sector of Quebec’s economy.

At the Parc Technologique (Quebec Metro High-Tech Park) students heard a presentation by its director, Ms. Natalie Quirion, who portrayed the park “as a force behind the region’s thriving economy, … [that has] developed an expertise catering to high-tech businesses […] and that provides innovative services for its clients.” The promotional material found on the Web says that the Parc prides itself in “bringing ever-expanding, customized services to the companies located on its territory,” both online and offline, a great place to do business and work. At the end of her thorough presentation, Ms. Quirion engaged students in a discussion on ways to continue to make the Parc an attractive option for young entrepreneurs. Students enthusiastically responded with ideas, in particular, on creating internships for international students that would enhance the visibility of the Parc on an international level in the academic world. Students were also able to ask questions they had prepared about the latest economic trends of this park, but were especially interested, as they had been earlier at their visit to Frima Studio, in all employee benefits offered by the company, such as paternity and maternity leave, on-site childcare, and flexible work hours. This side of the Québécois business culture and social benefits in the work life fascinated students and really enriched their perspective of the priorities of the economic system in Quebec.

A guided visit of Laval University to discover Quebec’s educational system was followed by an exploration of the Place Laurier, the largest shopping mall in Quebec, where students had to complete a journal entry comparing shopping malls they knew in the United States with this one in Quebec. Through interviews they conducted with vendors and visitors, students were able to discuss the impact of the economic crisis in the Quebec region; all local business people and consumers interviewed said they felt very affected by it and
that their purchasing power was reduced. Students noted that, unlike their counterparts in the United States (in the regions where most of these students came from, the Tri-State area, the West Coast and the Midwest), customers in Quebec went more often to the mall to do research and compare prices, rather than shop. Students found out that return policies were more rigid and complicated than in the US, which explained the absence of impulse buying. Overall, students got the sense that people were less conditioned to make purchases and very critical in making their purchasing decisions.

The trip to Quebec City ended with a language presentation from Dr. Gabrielle Saint-Yves, Professor of French and Linguistics at the Université du Québec in Chicoutimi. She discussed the history of “québécismes” and the current status of French in Canada. She ended her talk by inviting students to join her and sing with her the song “Dégénérations” (Mes Aïeux), a critical commentary on economic, cultural, and social changes in Quebec through its generations and “degenerations.” This final experience made students briefly connect with another facet of Québécois culture and enabled them to develop a type of solidarity, or at least understanding, for a sentiment or point of view that was still foreign to them at the beginning of the semester.

Cross-cultural experience was an important component of this trip since students were able to directly interact with Québécois people with diverse backgrounds during the official program as well as during their free time. They exchanged ideas with official representatives whose perspectives we had studied prior to the trip (Chamber of Commerce, Centre de la Francophonie), with students (on the train, at Laval, and at the Youth Hostels), with a scholar (Professor Saint-Yves), with guides, and with a large variety of people they met through interviews or random encounters in the stores, restaurants, and both youth hostels. Men and women of different ages, levels of education, and social and ethnic origins provided their views and also offered a rich cultural background for topics covered in class. This aspect of the program is also what brought to light the logic and the coherence of the Québécois economic and social system. While students were informed everywhere about Canada’s great natural resources, highly skilled labor force, and its current concerns with the economic crisis, what they perhaps retained the most was what they heard repeatedly throughout our week in Quebec, when Québécois people talked about the advantages of an economic system with strong regulations and supported by a wide-ranging strong social infrastructure, or safety net. These interlocutors kept stressing as well that they were happy to be taxed 40–50% of their income to insure that everyone gets the same access
to medical care, education, or retirement. It was hearing people make these points that resonated with the students, who could not believe that people found it normal to pay so much in taxes.

CHALLENGES AND ASSESSMENT

Experiential pedagogy, particularly in the context of study abroad, poses certain challenges, especially with regard to logistics. There are the transportation, lodging, and program issues to coordinate. Nevertheless, compared to organizing a program to study in France, this trip was fairly easy to manage. This is in large part due to the fact that Quebec is eager to develop bilateral economic and cultural exchanges with the United States. In fact, the Délégation générale du Québec in New York enthusiastically supported this project prior to our departure, and Drew University found the funding necessary to make this trip very affordable for all students.

Assessment of student learning through these experiences was in the form of journal entries during the trip and two three-page papers they wrote upon their return. The purpose of the journal entries was mostly to have students be sharp observers of their environment. These are the guidelines provided for the journal entries:

1. **Found Language**: Collect interesting, striking, odd, unusual, or puzzling examples of languages. Signs, graffiti, menus, words imported from another culture, newspaper headlines, overheard comments.

2. **Public space**: Sit for at least an hour in a public space (park, square, café, train station, bench by the river) and simply observe and log what happens around you.

3. **Built environment**: Choose any built environment (a single building or square, plaza, etc., a park, or monument, or just a single street). What can you learn about the meaning and purpose of the space simply by looking at the physical qualities of the space? Are people meant to linger here or leave? Are they meant to stroll or hurry on? Does this place send a political, cultural, or historical message? Is the space gendered? Is it national?

4. **Train/Bus**: What have you learned on Montreal and Quebec by traveling by Amtrak or Orléans Bus Express?

5. **Describe in detail a visit that you have made**. It can be a visit organized by the program or a visit you initiate. If it’s a monument or a museum, pay attention to where it’s located in Quebec (what type of neighborhood, the surroundings of the place), the first impression this place gives. Inside this
place, look carefully at its configuration. Is it what you were expecting? Why? If it’s a museum or a monument, how does this place/space/building represent what it is supposed to represent, celebrate, commemorate, etc.

It is very important that you write these entries shortly after you experience the moment or the space, as it forces you to become analytical about your exploration of Quebec.

The two short paper assignments were about: (1) comparing a company they had visited with what the class had learned about the company before departure, and (2) talking about their expectations of what Quebec’s economy and businesses would be like and what they found. Both journal entries and papers showed a more sophisticated and nuanced vision of Quebec’s culture and economy than what appeared in the reports and oral presentations in the first half of the semester.

This excursion to Quebec also heightened students’ cross-cultural competencies, including interpersonal skills, valuing cultural differences, and the capacity to listen and observe while on site. This growth of cross-cultural knowledge connected with the linguistic abilities they were already developing prior to departure, enabled the students to better cope with ambiguities and become more adaptable and analytical. These are all acquired attributes that will transfer very well into any type of work situation. In conclusion, the benefits of this pedagogy largely outweighed the possible challenges it could pose. Students returned from Quebec with enhanced language proficiency, broader global perspectives, and a personal experience of what global, intercultural issues really entail. Student evaluations at the end of the semester emphasized how much they learned through their trip to Quebec, especially as the study abroad experience was embedded in the course, which allowed for debriefing and re-entry activities that helped them synthesize the knowledge acquired on site. Overall, students described their experience as transformative both as learners in the class and on a personal level.

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Bon Cop, Bad Cop. 2006. Film. Director: Erik Canuel. Canada.


