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COMMENT DIT-ON «STANDARD DEVIATION»?:
AN EFFORTLESS BUSINESS-LANGUAGE
CURRICULUM

The Robins School of Business (University of Richmond) has developed a successful, low-cost format for language immersion courses on business topics. To earn one credit-hour, students from a cluster of related courses form Language Across the Curriculum (LAC) sections in which they read foreign language articles on business, discuss them in a relatively informal setting, and write brief memos in the language studied. International students manage the sections, greatly lessening the burden on and resistance from professors. This article describes the course's novel structure.

«DÉVIATION STANDARD»? WRONG!

An observer once commented that a person is not truly fluent in a language until he knows the word for "mud." A corollary to this rule might be that a person is not truly fluent in a business context until she knows the word for "standard deviation." Students can acquire first-rate knowledge of business and of a foreign language and yet remain unable to combine the two.

American students do not routinely encounter foreign expressions for "standard deviation" or other technical terms used in business. But the same is true for many international students studying in the United States. Arriving in the U.S. at about age 18, they may not have had occasion to hear such terms in their native languages. Once in the U.S., like their American classmates, they may hear only the English expressions.

A University of Richmond student from South America recalled participating in a national Model United Nations event. She and other native-Spanish speakers represented Colombia and, in this capacity, spoke Spanish. When discussing business and economics, she recalled, the team was reduced to a halting Spanglish.

Through Language Across the Curriculum (LAC), this student learned that the Spanish term for standard deviation is "desviación típica." An LAC student from Côte d'Ivoire learned that the French expression is "écart type." Both discovered the uncertainty of reaching for cognates.

Global Business Languages (2004)

LAC: PROFESSOR-MANAGED FORMAT

In Autumn, 1999 the University of Richmond offered its first Language Across the Curriculum classes. Then, as now, any professor could add an optional one credit-hour LAC section to any course, with course requirements differing from professor to professor. Initially, all LAC sections were planned, managed, and run by the professors as small discussion groups.

This initial format yielded some general patterns. There were few LAC sections. Sections were always small and limited to one language. Individual professors' involvement in LAC tended to be transitory; burnout and time constraints dissuaded them from maintaining the courses over time. LAC sections appeared primarily in courses with obvious foreign language connections. Early LAC ventures, for example, included French History; Jazz, Music, and Poetry; Philosophy; International Studies; Political Science; and Modern Languages and Literature.

The patterns were not surprising. Faculty compensation for LAC was modest, and LAC conferred more personal satisfaction than professional recognition. Time requirements were sizable and detracted from research, other teaching, committee work, and leisure.

The existence of each LAC section depended upon the presence of a highly unlikely set of coincidences. The professor had to be relatively fluent in a foreign language and had to have the desire and the time to design and manage the section. The course to which the LAC section was attached had to have students who were competent in the particular foreign language spoken by the professor. Like the professor, the students had to have the desire and time to participate in the sessions. Finally, the professor and students had to find a mutually acceptable meeting time. The likelihood of all these conditions being met was minuscule. LAC remained an option for all and a reality for few.

LAC-2: STUDENT-MANAGED FORMAT

With encouragement from several divisions of the University of Richmond (the Robins School of Business, the Office of International Education, and the Modern Languages and Literatures Department), I developed a new LAC format designed to overcome these obstacles. For brevity, we will refer to this new format as "LAC-2" and the old format as "LAC-1." First, LAC-2 sections are attached to clusters of related courses, rather than to a

single course. Second, LAC-2 sections are managed by international students, fluent in the language of instruction.¹

Requirements: LAC-2 sections are worth one credit-hour and are graded pass-fail. To earn the credit, each student must attend 10–12 one-hour sessions and must speak at every session attended. Discussion revolves around a few Web-based articles, written in the foreign language and assigned prior to each session. During the semester, each student writes a few brief memos, in the foreign language, discussing aspects of the course material. Some instructors have students build personal resumé's, written in the standard formats of foreign countries.

Initially, students were guaranteed the right to drop the course at any time, making enrollment a no-risk proposition. The idea behind this feature was that many students might be unsure of their ability to handle the work or to fit the meetings into their schedules. At the insistence of our Deans and Registrar, the add-drop rules are now the same for LAC as for other courses. This change does not appear to have hampered LAC enrollments.

Students are told in advance that grammar and syntax are de-emphasized; the primary focus is on communicating the subject matter. This is not to denigrate grammar and syntax, but rather to offer a rare and pleasant respite from the usual emphasis on language structure found in language classes. Students face the unusual chance to converse—even poorly—without fear of harming their GPAs and without constantly anticipating corrections.

Importantly, students are free to repeat LAC-2 courses in multiple semesters.

Clusters of courses: In a departure from LAC-1, each LAC-2 section draws from clusters of courses, rather than from a single class. One section, for example, was open to students in all business statistics sections—both introductory and advanced. One professor oversaw the section and awarded the grades, based in part on objective information provided by the student instructors (e.g., attendance by each student).

Clusters create a larger critical mass from which to draw. Even if there are only a few interested students per class, they can combine to form a

¹University of Richmond courses are almost all taught by faculty members, and not TAs. Student-managed LAC sections are somewhat of a departure from this norm. Similarly, drill sections associated with language courses are also often conducted by international students.

viable LAC-2 section. Allowing students from different course levels creates unexpected synergies. An Advanced Statistics student with modest language skills might learn much from an Introductory Statistics student who is fully bilingual—and vice versa. Almost by accident, students tutor one another in their own strengths. Clustering also makes it possible for LAC-2 responsibilities to rotate among professors.

Student Management: The other major change from LAC-1 is that LAC-2 sections are managed by students. Generally, they are international students whose native language is the focus of the LAC-2 section.² Instructors must have taken, or must currently be taking, the primary course of instruction (e.g., statistics). Student instructors are paid for their instruction and preparation time, and they also receive one credit-hour under a separate course number for student instructors. Student instructors provide a long list of advantages, compared with the earlier, professor-run model:

- With LAC-2, a student's participation in LAC is no longer contingent upon having a bilingual professor for the primary course.
- A given cluster of classes can support LAC-2 sections in multiple languages. The Statistics cluster, for example, offers sections in French and Spanish. One Economics cluster offered a Russian section, primarily populated by Bulgarians wishing to practice Russian. Future offerings may include other languages of instruction at the University of Richmond (German, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese). The LAC-2 format also makes it possible to arrange sections in languages that are not taught at the University but which are spoken by significant numbers of students (e.g., Turkish, Dutch).
- Instructors can be hired in pairs. This permits them to hold more sessions than the number required for credit. The extra sessions give students the flexibility to miss some classes without jeopardizing their credit—a highly attractive feature for busy students. Pairing also gives the instructors the ability to arrange for a substitute when necessary or to work for only a portion of the semester.

²One student instructor in French was a Romanian who had studied in French immersion schools. Another was an English-speaking, but fully bilingual, Canadian. Heritage speakers—children of immigrants who use the language at home—are another possible source of student instructors.

- Student instructors' schedules are relatively synchronized with other students' schedules. For example, instructors sometimes hold sessions on weekend afternoons or weekday evenings when it is convenient for students but not for professors. Because they live on campus, the student instructors can easily vary the meeting times to accommodate students' special needs.
- Rotating through our stable of international students permits a given LAC-2 section to continue indefinitely without the prospect of instructor burnout. Experienced instructors train the next group of instructors.
- As native-speakers, international students' command of the language matches or, more likely, exceeds the capabilities of most faculty members (except, of course, foreign-born professors and *perhaps* a few language specialists). The LAC-2 experience suggests that the international students exhibit a high degree of patience and empathy for the other students. Anecdotes suggest they are less intimidating than language faculty. For some student instructors, their own struggles with English are recent enough to make them especially sympathetic and supportive.
- Different instructors bring varying techniques, formats, and accents to LAC-2. Some instructors devise games revolving around articles and even around individual statistical tables. Others employ a modified Socratic method. Others prefer to get the conversation moving and then step back.
- For the University, the student-run format has a significant financial virtue. The students provide many more hours of instruction for far less money than professors would require—with no loss of quality.
- The burden of marketing LAC shifts to students. Potential students and potential student instructors can initiate sections, and there is little reason for a professor to refuse, as the faculty member's administrative burden is minimal.
- The prospect of LAC-2 work becomes a recruiting tool for potential international students. LAC-2 is also ideal for American students planning to study or work abroad and who wish to practice communicating before departing.
- The burden of LAC-2 on faculty members is minimal. Attending sessions is optional and, most likely, occasional. The faculty member

responsible for the section meets occasionally with the instructors to offer advice, review students' progress, and to perform a modest amount of quality control. Of course, professors who wish to be more deeply involved in LAC still retain that option.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The University of Richmond's experience with LAC-2 is limited and recent, so evidence on the experience is sparse. Several observations are worth noting.

LAC-2 can work with the most unlikely of courses. Presently, the most successful cluster, because it was the first, is LAC for Statistics. In four semesters, dozens of students per semester have spent Sunday afternoons and weekday evenings discussing standard deviation, variance, probabilities, regressions, and so forth. One motive for organizing this section was that statistics seemed the least amenable course in the University for LAC. The challenge of proving this wrong seemed worth doing, and it was.

The LAC-2 format works well for students who are highly conversant in the language, since they naturally take on a mentoring role. The format also works well for those who are struggling the most. One student in the French section began classes barely able to say "bonjour." By the end, he was chatting—not eloquently, but enthusiastically and understandably. In a presentation to the business faculty, this student commented that LAC was his first foreign language experience where he was not constantly fearful of making mistakes. He also noted that, "This is the first time I've ever used French to discuss something I'm interested in, rather than textbook phrases like, 'Why did Jacques' sister go to the store?'"

Students in the LAC-2 sections pick up business concepts and institutional knowledge that their classmates do not. The Bolivian instructor in a macroeconomics LAC-2 section spent considerable time discussing South American free trade areas, monetary authorities, and governmental structures to which most macroeconomics students are not exposed.

Students acquire insights into foreign cultures. At the University of Richmond, student instructors thus far have been from Côte d'Ivoire, Bolívia, Sénégal, Canada (including one who is Vietnamese-Canadian), România, Ecuador, and Curaçao—each making his or her perspective central for a group of willing students.

No doubt, LAC-2 at the University of Richmond will evolve with experience. More formal readings might be assigned. The required hours might

increase. More rigorous writing requirements might be imposed. The University of Richmond's small size and strong honor code makes monitoring and quality control relatively easy. At larger universities, where students are less known to professors, a similar program would likely require greater controls.

CONCLUSION

It is too early to ascertain the program's long-term success. But several early trends can be noted. Some students are returning semester-after-semester. Some who begin as students are becoming instructors in later semesters. The student-run, LAC-2 model has spread beyond the Business School and has become the dominant model university-wide.

One final anecdote is worth mentioning: Several students said LAC had re-ignited their interest in foreign languages and that they were contemplating resuming formal language studies.

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APPENDIX: REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Readings on the LAC concept can be found in the following conference proceedings: *Languages Across the Curriculum: Interdisciplinary Structures and Internationalized Education*, Maria-Regina Kecht and Katharina von Hammerstein (editors), National East Asian Languages Resource Center, The Ohio State University, 2000. The book contains thirteen articles, plus an extensive bibliography on LAC.

A CD-ROM introduction to LAC accompanies the Kecht-von Hammerstein book. It is *A Languages Across the Curriculum Resource*

Primer, Hans J. Rindisbacher and Roswitha Burwick (editors), Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Foreign Language Publications, 2002.

For a foreign language statistics curriculum, see “Comprension y uso de la estadística,” Fernando Valdes, Universidad Romulo Gallegos at SUNY–Cortland’s site <http://www.cortland.edu/flteach/stats/>. This site contains a glossary, in French and Spanish, of statistical terminology.

The following Websites detail LAC programs at selected colleges:

Birmingham-Southern College www.bsc.edu/catalog/flac.htm

Rice University www.rice.edu/projects/courses/2001spring/FLAC.html

State University of New York–Cortland www.cortland.edu/flteach/lac/

State University of New York–Oswego www.oswego.edu/Acad_Dept/a_and_s/lac/index.html

Trinity University www.trinity.edu/departments/int_studies/languagesacross/lac.htm

University of Connecticut www.sp.uconn.edu/~wwwmcl/Programs/SpecialInterest/Linkage/linkage.htm

University of Connecticut, International Engineering Program
www.eng2.uconn.edu/EUROTECH/

University of Florida web.clas.ufl.edu/users/moreland/flacwebpage.htm

University of Michigan www.lsa.umich.edu/saa/publications/bulletin/lac/

University of North Carolina www.unc.edu/depts/europe/lac/main.html

University of Rhode Island, International Engineering Program www.uri.edu/iep/

University of Tennessee www.utm.edu/departments/french/french.html#french