Shared Course Initiative Enters its Second Year at Columbia, Yale, and Cornell

The Shared Course Initiative enters its second year, with eleven Less Commonly Taught Languages being shared at Columbia, Yale, and Cornell.

The LRC is pleased to announce that Columbia will be a participating institution in Berkeley’s Library of Foreign Language Film Clips (LFLFC).

A list of upcoming events of interest to language instructors, both on and beyond campus.

The LRC speaks with Classical Tibetan instructor Paul Hackett. We discussed his background, Tibetan studies, and his experiences in the Shared Course Initiative.

Berkeley’s Library of Foreign Language Clips available to Columbia Faculty for Spring 2014

In April of this year, Mark Kaiser from the Berkeley Language Center spoke at Columbia. He demonstrated the Library of Foreign Language Film Clips (LFLFC), and discussed the potential of film as a resource to develop students’ linguistic, communicative, cultural, semiotic and symbolic competencies, using examples from French, Russian, Japanese and Arabic films. The LFLFC is a searchable, annotatable database of 14,500 film clips drawn from 415 films in 23 languages. The database is available free to faculty at other institutions through institutional agreement. The LFLFC clips have been tagged for language (vocabulary tags in the L2) and English descriptors of the clip content (significant culture, linguistic forms, or speech acts).

The LRC has worked with Columbia administration to advocate for our inclusion as a participating institution. We are very pleased to announce that Columbia language faculty will now have access to the LFLFC for the Spring semester.

Interested faculty can contact Steve Welsh (steve.welsh@columbia.edu) to set up an appointment for learning about the LFLFC.

Watch Mark Kaiser’s April, 2013 presentation at: www.lrc.columbia.edu/Mark_Kaiser_LFLFC

You can view the piece at: bit.ly/SCI_BWOG
November 4th
Developing the Next Generation Vocabulary Test: Challenging Assumptions

On November 4th (5-6:30 PM) at Teachers College, Professor Norbert Schmitt (University of Nottingham) will discuss current issues and concerns with testing vocabulary acquisition. This event is produced by the TESOL & Applied Linguistics Programs.

November 7th
Teachers College Symposium: "Pedagogy of Social Imagination in Language Learning/Teaching"

Using the idea of internal contradictions as guiding principle of empirical research and the theory of expansive learning, the PSILLT project focuses on a multidimensional analysis of language learning and teaching.

The symposium aims to address a collective understanding of how to work effectively with emergent bilinguals in an elementary school context.

November 22nd
LRC Event: Language Learning Beyond the Classroom

In this presentation, we will explore possibilities of extending your student’s language learning beyond the classroom by engaging community resources and partnering with other institutions. We will demonstrate models of inter-institutional collaboration and discuss methods for engaging local communities in New York City for cultural and linguistic enrichment.

November 22nd-24th
ACTFL Convention “New Spaces New Realities: Learning Any Time, Any Place”

This year’s American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language’s convention is taking place in Orlando, Florida. The convention brings together over 6,000 language educators from all languages, levels and assignments within the profession.

www.actfl.org/convention-expo

December 14th
Penn Language Center Symposium “Fast Forward: Language Online”

Each year, Penn Language Center at the University of Pennsylvania organizes a Language Educator Symposium. As the title for this year’s symposium reflects, the organizers are seeking to bring together researchers and practitioners, who are critically engaging with the teaching of languages in an online environment. Fast Forward will feature face-to-face and virtual presentations by leaders in the field. Please join Penn’s lively and innovative community of language educators for this stimulating event. A pre-symposium workshop will take place on Penn’s campus on Friday, December 13th.

For more information on the Penn Language Center, visit their web site: plc.sas.upenn.edu

January 9th-12th, 2014
129th MLA Annual Convention: Vulnerable Times.

This year’s MLA Convention will be held in Chicago, Illinois. The theme is meant to introduce topics, concerns, provocations, and formats that will put divergent fields and historical periods in productive conversation, spawning a network of interconnected sessions during the convention and possibilities of continuing collaboration afterward.

www.mla.org/convention

January 23rd-26th, 2014
Fourth International Conference on the Development and Assessment of Intercultural Competence.

Organized by the Center for Educational Resources in Culture, Language and Literacy (CERCLL) at the University of Arizona, the fourth international conference on development and assessment of intercultural competence aims to bring researchers and practitioners across languages, levels, and settings to discuss and share research, theory, and best practices; to foster meaningful professional dialogue; and to enhance teacher effectiveness in teaching for intercultural competence in and beyond the classroom in order to support all students’ development of intercultural competence.

For more info, visit: cercll.arizona.edu/development/conferences/2014_icc

Faculty Spotlight

Paul Hackett, Classical Tibetan

Paul Hackett teaches Classical Tibetan at Columbia, and is a participating instructor in the Shared Course Initiative. While active in the field of applied computational linguistics, his research specializes in canonical Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan culture, as well as their influence on contemporary alternative religion in America. Among his diverse publications is a Tibetan verb lexicon. Steve Welsh interviewed him in October at the LRC.

LRC: I’d love to start with your biography. You have a wide array of research interests that span a number of academic fields. What is it that drew you to Classical Tibetan studies?

PH: Well, my main interest in high school was in the sciences. When I got to college, I pursued an undergraduate degree in the sciences (astronomy and physics). But I slowly came to the realization as I was nearing the end of that process that I was far more interested in philosophical issues connected with knowledge and the study of, for lack of a better word, “reality.” And that I found that these issues tended to be brushed aside in mainstream scientific inquiry, for obvious reasons - namely, that the empirical sciences are concerned with empirical data. Consequently, even though I did a bit of graduate work, I found that it really wasn’t speaking to what were actually my primary interests. And in terms of my interest in philosophy, I credit the liberal education of a university that had forced me at one point to take both Western and non-Western humanities courses. I found that I was spending more and more time reading books on Buddhist philosophy, a system of learning that posed very different sorts of questions from western philosophy. In particular, as I got deeper and deeper into Buddhist philosophy, I saw the Tibetan tradition as having an incredibly rich intellectual tradition. And yet, at the time that this was happening (in the late 1980s), there was very little in English. Or more to the point, you could exhaust all the literature written in English rather quickly, and I did. As I was looking for a new career, I was being drawn more and more into the study of Buddhism, and in particular, Tibetan philosophy, which necessitated that I learn the languages and the basic structure of their approach to theories of knowledge.
Faculty Spotlight (cont.)

Paul Hackett, Classical Tibetan

And in order to do that, I had to go to graduate school. So I thought, well, this is the career that I’m heading into, even though I had had a background in the sciences and computers as well since well into high school. Nonetheless, my avenue both through the sciences, and also the humanities remained somewhat computational. I ended up doing a masters in Tibetan Buddhism, in the "History of Religions," to be specific. I then went off and did another Masters degree in the field of computational linguistics and natural language processing through a newly emerging program in digital libraries and archives - that is, how to work with large quantities of text in a foreign language. When I came to Columbia to do my Ph.D., I had the opportunity to basically bring all of these together. As I say, my interest in the language and my interest in computing naturally merged, in terms of applying techniques of computational linguistics and natural language processing to Tibetan, it ended up having this interesting feedback effect, in that, in order for me to encapsulate the principles of Tibetan language - grammar - in computer code, I had to really know the language. And so as I would process texts, this would give me new insights to the language, and so it became this nice reinforcing loop in my own research. I had actually taken a year off between graduate school and taught elementary school in northern New Mexico, at a private school. And it gave me insights in how to teach at a comprehension-appropriate level, which also helped me in my teaching in general. A lot of the problems I experienced as an undergrad were with professors who were very well-versed in their subject matter, but couldn’t teach at an introductory level. And you can get away with talking above the heads of your students in college, but you can’t get away with that in elementary school! All of these things made me not just enjoy teaching, but value the art of doing it well. As I said, just the fact that in order to teach something, you have to really understand it, so it made me think even on the introductory level when I would present something like basic grammatical principles, "Do I really understand what this means? Am I really articulating this correctly? Are there exceptions to this rule?", these sorts of things. So, really, teaching the Tibetan language, especially the Classical language - because that’s the medium through which you can access the philosophy - really became part of my development as a scholar, and deepened my understanding of the language itself.

LRC: It sounds like the way you learned Classical Tibetan was somewhat self-guided. Can you speak to the differences between how you learned Classical Tibetan as an independent scholar versus the way your students are learning it in a classroom setting?

PH: Well, we talk about "less-commonly taught languages" a lot, but the thing that doesn’t occur to people is that, more often than not, less-commonly taught languages are also less-commonly studied languages, as well. And so when I began my study of Tibetan (in the early nineties), there really weren’t any good Tibetan grammars. Literally, most people were working off of Tibetan grammars written in the late 19th/early 20th centuries by missionaries. So most people who learn Tibetan, tend to learn it in a haphazard way: you’re given a basic overview of some components of the language, a rough idea of their function, and a dictionary, and then they’re told to look up the words, and basically guess what the sentence says, with no formal presentation of grammar. I was fortunate enough that at the time, that one of the previous graduates at the university I was in (University of Virginia) had just written a formal grammar of Tibetan for students, based, ironically, on principles that were coming to the fore in other fields of linguistics, but completely independently, which had to do with the notion of requisite grammar keyed to verbs. I ended up having to study his grammar because it wasn’t published until a couple of years after I had done introductory Tibetan, which at the time had presented a loose working version of that presentation of Tibetan grammar. So even though I graduated with that Master’s in 1994, I spent several years out of graduate school to try to bring my language skills up to speed. I took it upon myself to get a job between graduate schools, and engage in a lot of private study. So the fact of having to, on one level, teach myself advanced Tibetan, and through trial and error come up with an understanding of the language, it gave me the insights to essentially rework those principles in a pedagogical environment, and then with all these other opportunities, that’s fed into the experience I bring to teaching the language. Thankfully, I can spare some younger students, with the same interests that I have, the tedium and the difficulty of having to work these things out for themselves.

LRC: What is the current state of Classical Tibetan learning outside of Asia - in the West, or in America, specifically? How many centers of learning are there for Classical Tibetan, and how "healthy" is the state of the field?

PH: It seems to be one of those things that fluctuates over time. You can sort of chart the rise and fall of Tibetan Studies programs, and particularly the Classical Tibetan Buddhist programs, which, because it’s a less commonly taught language, and a less commonly studied discipline, tends to be keyed to the one, or if you’re lucky, two professors at any university that are there. And when that professor’s gone, usually, the program goes with him or her. For example, I started off at Virginia. The fellow that ran the program retired, and the new faculty have pushed the program in a much more historical, anthropological direction, even though they’re in the Religion Department. So, that program for all intents and purposes has, ceased to exist as a formal Buddhist Studies program. Back in the day, the first major Tibetan Studies program was funded by the CIA at the University of Washington. So, at any given time, there’s probably never more than a dozen or so places in the world, in an academic environment, that you can study Tibetan. Usually you can just name them off the top of your head: Tokyo, Rome, Bonn, Hamburg, London, New York, Oxford, Harvard, UC Santa Barbara, Berkeley, and others, and at one point, Virginia and Indiana, but now those two are both much more cultural or historical research programs. Wisconsin, and Seattle used to be on the list, but once again they’ve sort of faded away. A dozen, maybe a dozen and a half, tops.

LRC: Given that modern colloquial Tibetan is spoken by 6-8 million people, Tibetan can hardly be considered a “dead language”, but it’s a given that we don’t teach Ancient Greek the same way we teach Modern Greek. What competencies do you emphasize in teaching Classical Tibetan, given that the field of study is primarily textual?

PH: The class is primarily textual, that is the focus of the class. The class is very much oriented towards being able to access 1200 years of Tibetan literature - literature that is both translated from Sanskrit and in a few instances Chinese or some Silk Road languages, as well as 1000 years, plus or minus, of indigenous commentary. Nonetheless, proper pronunciation, the ability to ascertain basic vocabulary - if, for example, you were interested in studying a text, one of the ways that you would do this
Faculty Spotlight (cont.)
Paul Hackett, Classical Tibetan

is in conjunction with the oral tradition. The Tibetan culture maintains a living tradition of the Buddhist philosophy, so the ability to know how to correctly pronounce a word, to be able to articulate an idea in a text, is necessary. Part of that is just learning how to read the text out loud, and frame the text. It would be as if you were to make the analogy of a student of classical Christian thought, but the only thing you’d ever read was the Bible in Latin. You could speak to someone using Biblical Latin, and they would understand you, and if they were a scholar, they would have no problem. That’s a different thing from walking into an Italian restaurant and ordering spaghetti. So, I’m not teaching you how to walk into a Tibetan restaurant and order a bowl of noodle soup. But, by the same token, we read these texts out loud, we discuss the grammar. Composition isn’t really an issue, but the ability to read, to hear, is, so I will read the text out loud to reinforce comprehension. These are all skills that will play into this, but acquisition of colloquial Tibetan, even with classical vocabulary is still a very different sort of classroom experience.

LRC: How has your experience been teaching in the Shared Course initiative? Do you see it as a good model for extending the scope of Classical Tibetan?

PH: In a word, it’s been great. It’s been really enjoyable! It was a lot of work in the beginning, because it requires really reconceptualizing the classroom environment, and really formalizing the language teaching materials. When you’re in a traditional classroom setting, it can be very informal. You’ve got a whiteboard, you’ve got a textbook. You can sit down, chit-chat, do things spontaneously. Now you can certainly do that in the digital classroom as well, but I found that it made far more sense to structure the class much more rigidly, to be able to present well-formed, well-illustrated lessons. A lot of that was very low-level and tedious, but it was giving a concise presentation in a very structured manner, which I had always done informally, but never formally. It was a great experience for me, and I’m glad I realistically only had to design it once, in terms of putting that material together in a formal presentation. It allowed me to know what I was presenting on any given day, in terms of very precise lesson plan. Language classes tend to be somewhat more loose. This is one thing that I’ve had the good fortune to learn from the Japanese program here at Columbia. I was really struck by the rigorous nature of their teaching style, and deeply impressed, actually. I thought: “this is how I should be teaching Tibetan.” So that was part of my inspiration. As I said, it worked very well, it gave students a clear understanding of the principles, it forced me to make sure I was giving a very clear presentation of it, and I didn’t find the technology interfered with developing a rapport with my students in the least. I thought it was seamless, I think it’s a fantastic setup.

Et Cetera

General announcements for the language instructor community.

The LRC’s Blog is live!

The LRC is launching a blog, “Language Matters”, that will feature interesting articles and web resources for language instructors. If you are interested in contributing to the blog, reach out to Steve Welsh (steve.welsh@columbia.edu).

Visit the LRC’s Language Matters blog at www.lrc.columbia.edu/blog.

Faculty Survey: Dictionaries in Second Language Instruction

Spanish Lecturer Mercedes Perez is seeking the participation of all Columbia language faculty in her survey on the use of dictionaries in second language instruction. The survey is very brief, and should take about 2-3 minutes to complete.

To access the survey online, visit: bit.ly/DictionarySurvey.

Would you like an Announcement listed?

Any announcements you would like listed on our site, our newsletter, or delivered to the LRC’s listserv, kindly send to Steve Welsh at steve.welsh@columbia.edu.

As we try to minimize our messages to faculty, please allow at least a week advance notice before your announcement will be delivered.

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