In Memoriam: Duane Kight

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Duane Kight passed away unexpectedly on Sunday, April 30, 2012. He was a member of the Haverford College French Department since 1987. The excerpts below are drawn from the weekly entries Duane posted to a closed blog that he and other faculty members maintained as part of their participation in the TLI Faculty Pedagogy Seminar in the Spring-2010 semester. Each week all faculty participants responded to a prompt, the focus of which is indicated below after the date of the post. These excerpts embody Duane's commitment to thinking deeply about teaching and striving to facilitate engaged learning in his classroom and beyond — a commitment captured in the following words from one of Duane's posts, which provide a fitting frame for the selections from his reflections:

> *In Goethe's* Faust*, Faust tells Mephistopheles that the devil can take his soul when he says to the moment: "Stay, you are too beautiful." I never want to get to the point that I say that, since that is spiritual — and pedagogical — death. I never want to get to the point where I feel I have solved all the problems that occur in the classroom, that there's no more constructive work to do. But I would like to get to the point that I can say the pedagogical moment is beautiful enough, still without always aspiring to better my own efforts.*

February 1, 2010: Who you are as a faculty member

I'm someone who during the school year is almost entirely focused on what I teach; I rarely stop thinking of ways to present material, of exercises I could write, of materials I could introduce. This is essential, since I place a high value on spontaneity in my teaching, and am always trying out new strategies and new materials, in the interest of keeping the class interesting to me and therefore to the students. The French culture class I teach can't be the same two years running, since I'm committed to its reflecting contemporary France, in the sense of this week's France, as much as possible.

I also think of myself as a transparent professor — as much as possible, I let students know why I'm doing what I'm doing and what I expect. At the same time, I am proud of teaching in a way where the seams don't show, and where we move from topic to topic without students noticing (at least consciously) the underlying structure. I guess I do that so they can learn effortlessly, and enjoy discovering at the end of the semester how much they have unwittingly absorbed.

I am also committed to not underestimating the students' abilities; the ones who come from a limited French background have to be convinced that they can "do" French at a higher level, and the pure beginners have to be convinced that it's not as hard as it feels to get to the point where one can communicate in French about subjects that are personally relevant, and therefore matter.

February 8, 2010: Who your students are

My students are not me as a student…[and] while I necessarily interact with them and judge them in terms of who I am (was), I also have to be aware of, respect and value who they are as students, both individually and collectively. At the beginning of my teaching career I was

frequently frustrated that they weren't me; I found it hard to understand why they couldn't learn things I learned easily, why they insisted on approaching learning in ways which I found counterintuitive, why they weren't always interested in what I was. So I would say that my students are people I want to make like me, but in such a way that they can preserve their autonomy and what makes them them.

I try to remember not to judge one student against another, either; just because Emily masters a concept easily and takes it further in the way I envisage doesn't mean that Robert should be necessarily expected to do the same. They're both capable, but there are different routes to that capability. I guess, too, that I have to accept that some students will never even come close to the student I was, that there's a glass ceiling beyond which they can't, or don't want to, go. In that case, my task is to take them as far along the journey as they want to accompany me.

In terms of my particular discipline, the expectations that I have to communicate are that a student can always improve if she is willing to take risks and risk mistakes, no matter the level at which she starts; that her ideas, if adequately supported from carefully-considered evidence, are as valid as mine or anyone else's and worthy of articulation and examination; and that errors in language, if they are not so numerous that they get in the way of sense and if they are not persistent (I frequently say "don't make the same mistake, make different ones"), don't necessarily impede effective communication.

February 15, 2010: Pedagogical approaches

At the beginning of my training in graduate school, I became a fervent believer in the proficiency model for language teaching, its goal being to train students in skills rather than discrete bits of content, privileging reading, writing, speaking, listening and culture over — without abandoning, of course — more narrow concerns (formation of the past tenses, vocabulary used in the restaurant). Accordingly, my pedagogy emphasizes the practical and the performative: for example, I ask myself to what real-life use can the student put the past tenses, and how can I simulate that real-life situation in class? This is not to purely "tourist" ends (although it can be, in the case of ordering a meal in France, for instance), but to the ends of generating skills that can be used across a range of contexts — learning the past tenses in order to be able to recount memories of childhood, in order to read texts of all sorts that use the past tenses, and in order to explain what happened in the case of an mishap of any kind in any context (in a hotel, on the road, in France, in a francophone country …). It is also a way to make students feel more comfortable in making mistakes — I let them know that while their grammar and word choice may not be perfect, if they can master the skill, they are "speaking French," since even native speakers may not be grammar- and word-perfect in what they do.

In association with this, my pedagogy is firmly rooted in the principle of circumlocution, again emphasizing a skill over pure right/wrong content: if a student doesn't know a word or a grammar principle, as long as she can communicate the idea successfully, she is "speaking French" in much the same way as a native speaker, who finds synonyms or alternative ways of expression when blocked, does.

My pedagogy recognizes that while a simulation of immersion in the Haverford French classroom is the general rule, there are rare times when translation or the use of English make sense in a roomful of mostly English speakers; some concepts, particularly cultural or idiomatic, cannot always be efficiently expressed by relying on French alone. I learned this early on while trying to explain food, where defining the item only in French took forever and didn't work in communicating the sense of the dish to folks who had never tasted it. This is another area where the role of the fluent non-native speaker becomes apparent; I think there is pedagogical value in recognizing that I, like the students, am an English speaker pretending to be a speaker of French; I think it's important for them to realize that even though I am fluent, there are limits to my knowledge, that I too have to occasionally look up unfamiliar words (or in the case of French 105, unfamiliar cultural references), to circumlocute when I don't know a word off the top of my head, and that there are some language structures — puns and idioms, for example — that I am more comfortable expressing in my native language. This does not preclude, of course, needing to use certain French structures in preference to English ones because they seem to me to better express an idea — my pedagogy insists that one language is not a code for the other, and that one is a different person, in both thought and gesture, in either language.

Finally, I am firmly committed to the idea of "no pain, no gain" — without taking chances and risking error, no progress is possible, and therefore, that while it's desirable to purge errors, and certainly imperative to try not to make the same error twice, errors in themselves don't invalidate the ability to communicate effectively in the foreign language.

February 22, 2010: Assessment and evaluation

Assessment and evaluation are the aspect of teaching that I have the most difficulty with. My initial impulse in general is to expect from my students what I expected from myself as a student. I recognize that this is an unrealistic expectation, both because my own standards for myself have always been verging on the perfectionist and because the current generation of students is very different from my own in terms of the skills and acquired knowledge they come to Haverford with. So I am constantly asking myself if my standards are realistic or not.

Second, I'm all too aware of the deeply subjective nature of grading; no matter how much I strive for objectivity, no matter how carefully I erect a structure of percentages to measure achievement in different aspects of the course, I have to acknowledge that, at bottom, assessment and evaluation in a language class are ultimately based on intuitive and unmeasurable judgements on my part and fundamentally can't achieve the objectivity to which I aspire. Ultimately, I measure student performance in French according to my own performance in French, and as the encounter of two people — since language study involves the whole person — evaluation and assessment cannot help but be subjective. That doesn't mean that one can't strive for some facsimile of objectivity, that one shouldn't struggle to discover the bases of one's interpretation of student performance and to communicate those interpretations to students in a clear, acceptable way (and figure out how to manage the intersection of one's interpretations with students' so that both sides of the equation understand, however subjectively and intuitively), but assessment and evaluation for me can never be scientific because of the nature of the discipline in which I work.

I try to bring my pedagogy and course goals in line with assignments through transparency. I labor hours over compositions, extensively annotating them with explanations and suggestions, so that students can have as little doubt as possible as to why they got the grade they did, and I articulate what I'm looking for and what I hope for them to achieve beforehand so that they know what standards to work to. I do the same with participation, through the use of rubrics, and on quizzes, where I likewise annotate errors and suggest the reasons for them. Students are — I hope — never unsure as to what I'm expecting, and to how well I judge they have met those expectations.

March 15, 2010: Engaging pedagogical strategies

• I always use different kinds of activities — lecture, discussion, group work in pairs, group work in larger groups.

• Group work often involves creativity in acting out situations or completing open-ended sentences relevant to a situation; these are often fanciful ("Use the subjunctive to discuss a friend who is turning into a werewolf") but also often realistic ("You've decided to become a vegetarian. What might your parents say if they support you? if they're opposed to the idea? Use the subjunctive). I don't often let students do presentations, except informally (talking about one of 5 music videos that they saw that they particularly liked, telling us why), since formal presentations in French at the level I teach are major time-wasters, so impractical despite the learning that can go on. I do vary the media — a Web syllabus helps, since one can include videos, texts, images, and alternative presentations of grammar material, along with self-correcting exercises — which feedback indicates engages my students to a high degree. I have invited guest speakers to class, along with non-native speakers of French whom students can interview (so that they see that foreign language skills are wider-spread than they might suspect). This is a good way to broaden the rather limited perspective on French offered by textbooks.

• I always conceptualize and use concrete examples. This is particularly true in the culture class, where I provide anecdotes from my own experience in illustration — thus bringing myself into the classroom — and make parallels with American experience of the same topics. The readings in that class, and particularly the videos, are pointed towards real-world examples of what we read about in the textbook. I often ask students to unpack real examples — here's a video; what do you have to say about what you observe in it? what are you puzzled about? what strikes you as particularly French?

• Besides offering anecdotes from personal experience, I often bring myself into the classroom by mentioning new discoveries I've made, films I can recommend, confusions I have about aspects of French or French culture, difficulties I've experienced in speaking and understanding French myself. Frequently, this takes the form of "trivia," but students seem to be interested, provided they understand that it's not the main material of the course and that they're not responsible for reproducing it.

• Practicing French requires making a space for getting to know students. From the beginning — introductions, where they live, what their leisure activities are — through the culture level — where I often ask students who have been to France to share their experiences, ask where

students would like to go in coverage of material, and invite them to bring their experiences of American or homeland culture into discussion — there are very few classes where they aren't brought into the classroom space. I often try to learn myself — I had a student from Malawi last year, and I learned a tremendous amount about her culture and experiences, and the students did as well. I always try to implicate non-American students in the discussion, again to counter the bias of textbooks and offer French as a factor in a global, not just francophone, experience. Another way I bring students into the equation is by using their names, and usually what I know about them, in quizzes, often in amusing ways.

• I am enthusiastic — genuinely — about student contributions of any sort, ranging from complimenting someone on mastering a difficult grammar point or remembering new vocabulary to acknowledging student insights that complement my own or make me question them in productive ways. I don't think my students ever feel invisible.

March 29, 2010: Inclusive pedagogical strategies

– the use of silence. I've experimented with this already, and it has been very fruitful to apply the principle. Hard as hell to not leap into the gaps, though!

– not making assumptions. This is the big one, and I'm very conscious of it, although not always successful in observing it. I try very much to see my students as individuals and learn exactly who they are. This is an area where language teaching is helpful — there are plenty of occasions to learn information about students that can then be put to use in writing exercises, making grammar relevant, etc. I try to tell my students that I'm an equal-opportunity cynic and, if anything, see things from far too many perspectives to assume anything is "normal" and to be left unquestioned.

April 5, 2010: Work with a student consultant

It's been very rewarding to work with [my student consultant]. First of all, she's very perceptive about what it is I'm trying to do in class. So her comments both about what works and what doesn't seem to are very valuable. She quite often figures out the intention behind the way I work in the classroom; it's gratifying to see that someone notices the care and attention I pay to my planning and execution, rather than just taking it for granted. (I don't blame the students for taking it for granted; I think it's hard for a student to grasp how a class is being shaped when he or she is trying to absorb what's going on and respond to it). Having an objective observer who approves what I myself think is effective pedagogy is very valuable in combating the feeling of working in a void that I've spoken about before. It's also been very useful to hear her critiques of what has not been so successful; while I'm usually aware that something has not gone the way I wanted it to, I can't stop and figure out as I'm teaching why something has not gone as I anticipated, and the opportunity for analysis is lost as soon as the class is over.

My weekly debriefings with [my student consultant] have been invaluable in recollecting and analyzing what I've done, both successful and less successful, after the fact. Her criticism is always constructive, and couched in such a way as to encourage me to reflect rather than to react defensively. Moreover, it's been good to be able to explain myself and for her to sometimes

come over to my point of view when she hasn't initially approved a particular strategy. I think that at bottom, what I have gotten the most out of in my interactions with [my student consultant] has been an insight into the student point of view, one that is hard to get when students are actually enrolled in the class and fearful of saying what they really think because I'm holding grades over their heads. Because of our relationship, they also want to please me — they're reluctant to say things that they fear will hurt my feelings because they understand that I am invested in them and care about their learning. I have always wished that students would be more forthcoming about what works and what doesn't so that I can either be more sure that it's moving in the right direction or have the time to change what isn't valuable to a particular cohort; [my student consultant] has provided the next best thing to that wished-for transparency on the student side of the desk.

So, going forward, what I would like to do is create a classroom atmosphere that's more conducive to that kind of fruitful dialogue, as opposed to what often seems to me what the French call "un dialogue de sourds" — dialogue between deaf people. Key to that is, of course, modeling transparency and showing my own commitment to transparency more consistently than I already do. But more than that, I want to find ways to encourage student transparency by decentering the classroom, inviting students to make more of the choices involved so as to make them more responsible for their own learning. The prospect of doing so, while intimidating, is also liberating…

I intend in future to be much more committed to — the admittedly frightening — "just ask" principle that we have much talked about, a commitment which I hope will have been facilitated by being able to ask [my student consultant]. I have spoken about my profound conviction that the classroom should be a learning community, from which I derive as much as the students do in my own way, and I hope that what I have learned from my interactions with [my student consultant] will help me combat the feeling I have at the end of each semester that I haven't met my goals or done as well as I could have in transmitting what I have to offer to my students.

In Goethe's *Faust*, Faust tells Mephistopheles that the devil can take his soul when he says to the moment: "Stay, you are too beautiful." I never want to get to the point that I say that, since that is spiritual — and pedagogical — death. I never want to get to the point where I feel I have solved all the problems that occur in the classroom, that there's no more constructive work to do. But I would like to get to the point that I can say the pedagogical moment is beautiful enough, still without always aspiring to better my own efforts.

April 12, 2010: Revisiting useful pedagogical strategies

Response to a draft of an article that was later published as "Lessons in Higher Education: Five Pedagogical Practices that Promote Active Learning for Faculty and Students." Journal of Faculty Development, 26, 1 (September 2012).

– Reflecting on practice

Being by nature a self-critical (in both positive and negative senses) person, I have always done this to a great extent in my pedagogy. Although the principles I base my pedagogy on have been

honed over long experience, rarely, if ever, have I ever taught a class twice the same way; because I am a different person with each semester, since my reading and thinking offer new topics for incorporation and new approaches, and since I respond differently to each cohort of students, much is different every time, or the constants are at least organized, presented, and implemented differently. That said, I have found the blog writing very useful in separating out my thoughts, normally interrelated, about pedagogy according to specific topics; it has given a different structure to my self-reflection.

As I have said, what has always been lacking in supporting my self-reflection has been interaction with other faculty members around pedagogy, rather than the nuts-and-bolts of practical suggestions…Our discussions in the seminar have given me a much greater sense of security and a more affirmative approach to my teaching; I have a better sense of my authority to think and act as I do. And it's been useful to see that the questions and doubts that I feel are shared. I think teachers tend to present themselves to colleagues as having gotten teaching "down"; since questioning makes one admit vulnerability, and since our lives are so busy and we have to get the job done, we can't generally afford to be vulnerable, and being visibly vulnerable brings the threat to someone in my position of suggesting to those responsible for my reappointment that I don't really know what I'm doing. It's been great to have a safe space in which to consider pedagogy.

Finally, my student consultant has been invaluable in giving me a much greater sense of authority, in that she manages to detect and approve the principles behind what I do in the classroom she observes. More than that, she has been invaluable in helping me ask myself some really hard questions about what I could do better and how — something I'm willing to do most of the time, but not in such a sustained, and therefore efficient, way. I'm firmly committed to doing what I already do well, or less well, better, but the effort is daunting, and my student consultant has helped me have the courage to do it. Giving me access to a student perspective, and in many ways, the student perspective on teaching and learning, has been very rewarding. Before this semester, I had never realized before how much the answer to "What do students want and need?" has been hit-or-miss (admittedly, with a greater number of hits over time, but the misses still frustrate me), and working with the student consultant has given me the simple answer: "Ask." I anticipate approaching classes with less frustration and resentment and more confidence in the future as a consequence.

Reflecting with the consultant and the students rather than on my own has shown me how to better implement the value of community endeavor that I think is fundamental to education. Self-reflection is not as useful unless the process and the results are shared between faculty and students; the model I've been using has kept me until now largely on my side of the seminar table.

– Thinking about thinking

I have always asked myself why I was doing something and what I wanted to accomplish. Before the seminar, I had also started more frequently to ask students the same questions, but only sporadically. The seminar work has helped me to see how important this is to do consistently with students, so that they get a better sense of what I hope they will accomplish and

why, giving them greater control over their own learning and making it more effective. I had been aware of how students must often feel that what goes on in a class is arbitrary, and had tried to dispel that feeling, but by articulating my goals and purposes as a done deal, without finding out what their goals and purposes, and their perception of mine, might be. Doing this in a community, I have come to see that it's more effective for all concerned; merely articulating my goals and purposes to students only imperfectly lifts the veil that separates the professor's side of the table from theirs. Since education is about learning to think, it's important to add metacognition to absorption of pedagogical material; it makes the students' educational life richer and keeps them from going through my class on autopilot.

– Modeling

I've always done this. Part of the teacher's function, to my mind, is not just to provide information, practice, and correction; it's also to model what an educated person might be (I emphasize "might," since there are many ways to be an educated person, and a teacher shouldn't just model his own way if different learning styles and personalities are to benefit). And to model how one might learn, based on my own example, but also on examples I've observed that work. Finally, it's important to model an enthusiasm for learning: I try to make it clear that I don't teach the same way two times running because there are always new things I'm excited about incorporating or new methods to try, that I don't stand still in my own acquisition of knowledge, that the present moment is always on the way from and the way to new horizons of knowledge. I share my appetite for knowledge in all areas, and in my specialty, with students so that they will hopefully never lose the desire to learn more and differently, over and above their majors or their professional work. This enthusiasm for learning is also meant to show the interconnectedness of scholarly endeavor which should be at the heart of a liberal-arts education, and which often is lost in the pressure to specialize. I also try to model an appetite for trivia and the quirky, in an effort to show that acquiring knowledge can be ludic, and that seriousness does not preclude humorous enjoyment of knowing the bits of knowledge that energize learning, something which many approach in too-deadly earnest. Finally, I try to model the joy in knowledge that my mentor modeled for me in college, as a way of passing on a legacy.

Oh, and I think it's important to model various ways of knowing and learning, that it's not "my way or the highway," to offer a variety of models among which students can find their own comfortable place rather than trying to shoehorn themselves into what I think, or they perceive I think, they should be. In the past, I've reverted too often to judging students in terms of who I was as a student, and I've increasingly become aware — an awareness heightened by the seminar — that this is unfair, at least as an exclusive model. It's important for students to be able to find the common ground between their models of themselves as learners and a number of other possibilities, from which they can take as they choose. It's also important to model for them that one doesn't have to stick with a model — I come back to the idea that I'm never precisely the same person two semesters running, and that my own model for myself is always changing as I encounter different possibilities, assess and, if judged valuable, accommodate them.

– Pedagogical transparency

Much of my effort in this area is, I think, transparent <grin> from what I've already said. However, I would add that I have increasingly become convinced that however vulnerable transparency makes one feel, it is essential if the student-professor relationship is not to contain unhealthy elements of "guess what the teacher wants," resulting in a kind of antagonism where students are battling the teacher to learn, playing the game without knowing what the rules are. If one is to be an advocate for students, one needs to be clearly on their side, and that's not possible if one doesn't articulate the rules. I've also learned the valuable lesson that you have to reiterate transparency; hearing what's behind a given pedagogical exercise once is not enough, particularly for students who are used to viewing teachers as the enemy from whom they must extract competence for a good grade. The problem here, I think, is getting students to be equally transparent; when the power relation is in play, it's hard for them to say what's on their minds without fearing antagonizing the teacher, so it's easier to just go along and grouse to their roommates or on final evaluations. That's maybe something we can discuss in the seminar — how do we get students to communicate with us. And how do we get them to communicate to each other? Overcoming the invisible competitiveness and the masking of who one is in the BiCo classroom is a real challenge. That's another value of modeling transparency — if I can be transparent, perhaps they can learn to respond in kind.

– Inviting students to engage

I think I've already talked enough about this in terms of the other points. I would add that I concur with the faculty members mentioned in the article, that working with a student consultant has helped me enormously in figuring out how to do this better. I've always been able to do this to some extent with students individually, but my consultant has showed me how to point those individual encounters better, and has helped me figure out how to better do this with the class.

April 19, 2010: Pedagogical insights to take forward

The three pedagogical strategies that I think are the most useful for others to be reminded of are:

1)   Sharing the responsibility for learning and teaching that goes on in a classroom and in a class with students in various ways. For example, in my culture class, it has proved invaluable to formulate class discussion in terms of what the students want to talk about and finding the intersection of that with what I want to talk about, rather than seeing discussion in terms of what I think they should know or what I surmise they want to know. Doing so has promoted truly active participation for the first time in my teaching career, much more so than the more conventional Socratic technique I have always relied on of asking leading questions, which in turn, I have come to realize, produces an atmosphere inimical to discussion in that students are forced to try and discover what the professor wants, with a corresponding sense of frustration and discouragement and, ultimately, disengagement, when they can't discover it. Giving the students the choice as to which way a discussion might go, as to whether a discussion should continue longer than the time allotted, and in fact as to what should be discussed at all, has given me a new freedom to enjoy what I'm teaching in company with them, and a confidence that when I make a decision about the direction, the length, or the subject of a discussion, it's at least in consultation with the students, rather than undertaken independently, and that the

responsibility for how the class goes is shared with the students rather than my entire responsibility.

2)   Transparency. I have always been fairly transparent about what I do in the classroom and why, but I have become more sensitive to areas where I need to be more transparent — in articulating the rationale behind a specific assignment or a particular approach to subject matter, for example, or in explaining my expectations more thoroughly. I think this strategy goes hand in hand with the previous one, since transparency on my part should dictate transparency on the part of the students as to what they hope to get out of an assignment, or as to what they got out of a particular approach to subject matter, and the intersection of those transparencies should be the area where the most effective teaching is negotiated. I would link the principle of repetition as well to transparency: I have been content in the past to consider one articulation of my goals and approaches to be sufficient, and I know now that it's most emphatically not.

3)   A greater awareness of who my students are and are not. While I was working towards this awareness before the seminar, it has become crystal clear to me that expecting my students to be like I was as a student or like I am as a teacher is unfair; I have become more and more aware that I need to evaluate where they are coming from and what they need without reference to where I came from or what I needed. The principle of asking what students want and need is so simple, yet it never occurred to me to implement it except sporadically before; somehow, in my care to not let the inmates run the asylum, I lost sight of the fact that figuring out their needs and wants is a better way to run it in the first place! I have also become more and more aware over the course of the seminar to what extent students really live in a completely different academic world from the one I knew as an undergraduate, and that I need to be more sensitive to the gap between us in figuring out how to bridge the gap more effectively between what I have to offer in the way of knowledge and what they want to gain.

In the course of my discussion above, I think I've indicated how these principles are likely to inform my future classes, at least theoretically, so I won't repeat myself. In more practical terms, I want to take the specific kinds of exercises — read-around, concept mapping, and even the "what's not clear to you?" as opposed to the "what questions do you have?" and the "is there anyone who hasn't spoken who wants to?" as opposed to the "let's hear from some of you who have been quiet" articulations — that we've discussed forward and continue to exploit them, and exercises like them, more consistently. Even though my discomfort and skepticism each time I try one of these persists — change is very slow in coming for me! — I have seen each of them work very effectively and interestingly every time I've tried them, so however painful the experience may be for me, I am committed to keep undergoing it!