

Professional Development, Cultural Immersion and Traveling at the Modern and Classical Languages Department

By Roberto Lazo

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Even before the 2007-08 academic year started, Blake's modern and classical languages faculty from the Lower, Middle and Upper Schools began a professional development journey like nothing I have ever experienced in my many years of teaching language and literature. Thanks to my colleagues' efforts and the magnanimous and strong support of Blake's administrators, the modern and classical languages (MCL) department has been able to actively participate and attend different local, state, national and international conferences and teacher training workshops during this past summer and throughout the course of this academic year.

This summer, Blake's Lower School Spanish teacher Andrea Sepulveda served as a teaching assistant and schedule coordinator for the All Language Intensive Summer Program at Dartmouth. While there, she familiarized herself with the fast oral pace language program offered by the Rassias Foundation, one of the leaders in oral language in the country. Andrea will also attend a conference on foreign languages at Blake's Lower School where one of the main speakers will be Helena Curtain, author of "Languages and Children: Making the Match." This is one of the books our department has used in its research regarding the future of the Lower School language program.



Middle School Spanish teacher Lynn Baete received a Hersey Sabbatical this summer to study at the University of Costa Rica. Her husband, Richard Venberg, and daughter accompanied her.

At the Middle School, Spanish teacher Lynn Baete was awarded a Hersey Summer Sabbatical to attend the University of Costa Rica. She and her husband and daughter were able to live with a family during the month of July while she successfully completed courses on modern language teaching theories and methodologies and cross-cultural understanding. In November, the Middle School MCL department (with the exception of the Latin teachers) attended the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages convention, which was held in San Antonio, Texas. By attending this conference my Middle School colleagues had the opportunity to meet and share ideas about language and language teaching with

participants from all over the country. They also got acquainted with the latest research and publications in the field of language teaching. It was an opportunity for them to look into the latest books and ancillary material for languages produced by different publishing houses throughout the country. Finally, our French and Spanish teachers

have taken several Middle School language students to the weekend language immersion programs at Concordia Language Villages. Middle School Mandarin teacher Shannon Young has created a Mandarin “buddy program” between seventh and eighth graders and Tami Butters’s first grade class. She will also serve as a chaperone on Blake’s trip to China this spring.

This past summer, our Latin Middle and Upper School teachers attended the University of Michigan conference on technology in the Latin classroom. In addition to talking about technology, my Latin colleagues also shared ideas about high school Latin expectations. This year they are cooperatively editing — with teachers from Michigan to New Jersey, high school and college — the text they have written and will attempt to have the text ready for publication in the near future. The Latin faculty are also planning to offer a two-week course to high school and junior high school teachers during July of 2008. This course will be offered either at the University of Michigan or Drew University in New Jersey. Additionally, they are planning a visit to the Carleton College Latin program in the near future.

At the Upper School, my colleagues have had a very active year. Spanish teacher JJ Kahle attended and held a workshop at the ISACS 2007 national convention in Indianapolis. The title of her workshop was, “The Urgency of Combating Homophobia in our Independent Schools.” This June, she also participated in grading the AP language exam at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Graders worked seven straight days grading 10,000 essays and spoken samples. Their evenings were spent attending workshops and taking in the Hispanic cultural offerings of the city. JJ was recently invited to participate again this year. She has also been asked by Carleton College to teach an AP course this coming summer. JJ is also currently enrolled in Advanced Italian at the Italian Cultural Center in Minneapolis. She has led intensive Advanced Italian independent studies at the Upper School for three years.

Upper School Spanish teachers Jon Dicus and JJ Kahle led the third summer study abroad experience to Cuernavaca for about five weeks this June and July. Twenty-two Blake students lived in family home stays and attended Spanish classes at the UNIVERSAL Language Center.

As PK–12 MCL department chair, I have been an active member of the study group to implement languages at the Lower School. I am proud to announce that as of the next academic year, the MCL program will expand in this division. We will be offering languages starting in kindergarten. After a lot of research and several meetings that started in January 2007, the Lower School MCL study group will propose a Foreign Language Exposure (FLEX) French in kindergarten and first grade and a FLEX Japanese program in second and third grade. We will keep our Spanish Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) in fourth and fifth grade, as is currently offered.

As I have since 1989, this summer I taught at the Rassias Intensive Language Program at Dartmouth College. This past November, I presented a paper in Boston at the NAIS

People of Color Conference entitled “Longing for a Sense of Identity: Where do Foreign National Teachers of Color Belong?” The purpose of the presentation was to bring awareness to the independent schools at large about the adjustment processes international teachers have to go through to integrate themselves to the American teaching system and structure. Along with other Blake PK-12 chairs, this January I attended a workshop in Chicago on “Cultivating Leadership in Schools: Leading as a Dean or Department Chair.”

Several other of my Upper School colleagues have participated in international, national, state and local workshops. Spanish teacher Gina Housman attended a weeklong institute on curriculum assessment at the University of Minnesota. Robynne Runyon, along with other Spanish colleagues, attended the Frida Khalo Educators Program at the Walker Art Center. Jon Dicus (pictured right) spent two weeks in the Galapagos, Ecuador, through a Toyota grant. While there, Jon



immersed himself in the social life, culture and language of the island. Spanish teacher Santiago Carreño will be applying for funds to participate in a conference about learning and the brain to be held in San Francisco. Our newly hired Mandarin Chinese teacher, Shirley Johnson, who is also the vice-president of the Minnesota Chinese Language Teacher Association, went to China, where she attended a Chinese AP training course. Shirley also attended the ACTFL conference to get ideas to restructure Blake’s Mandarin curriculum. One of our French teachers, Nancy Rodman, attended a weeklong session in North Carolina on Schools Attuned. The purpose of this workshop is to become a School Attuned certified teacher and prepare participants to understand the neurological demands of the curriculum. Upper School French teacher Michèle Cassavante has applied to present at an international conference for French teachers to be held in 2008 in Liege, Belgium. The session is entitled “Podcasting: A Technological Wonder for Proficiency.” Michèle has participated in many local, national and international conferences. Finally, French teacher Silvana Dessi-Olive is taking the year off to pursue her master’s degree.



Blake Spanish teachers (L to R) Robynne Runyon, Andrea Sepúlveda, JJ Kahle, Jon Dicus and Roberto Lazo arrive at the airport in Chile, where they visited several schools and universities and observed

I cannot finish this account without devoting some lines to an incredible MCL cross-divisional trip to Chile. Five of my Spanish colleagues and I were in Valparaiso, Vina del Mar and Santiago, Chile, during this past Thanksgiving week. We arrived in Santiago on a Saturday and went directly to Valparaiso and Vina del Mar where we immersed ourselves in Chilean culture. We visited several sites of interest including a visit to one of Pablo Neruda’s houses. On Monday morning, we went back to Santiago. During the first part of the

week we visited several schools and universities and observed language classes. We spent a whole day visiting Nido de Aguila, an international high school in Santiago. We met with several administrators, talked to many language teachers, observed classes, interviewed Chilean students and even had the chance to eat in the cafeteria. During our last two days in Santiago, we attended an international conference on multimodal language teaching and learning where there were participants from Latin American and Europe. It was a great opportunity for all of us to learn about the latest language trends in other parts of the world when it comes to language teaching and learning. This trip was a great opportunity for my colleagues to get acquainted with the Chilean culture, go to museums, and see different sites and collect teaching material for our classes, but most importantly it was a great opportunity to bond and get to know each other.

Professional development, knowledge of your craft and getting to know each other personally and professionally are key elements to a successful department, and ours is definitely doing the right thing. I am extremely proud to lead a department where colleagues are eager to better themselves professionally and are passionate to bring the latest pedagogical ideas into the classroom and share them with students. I also want to thank the administration for their support and help in our professional endeavors.