

## Links and the Teaching of Contemporary Issues in the Francophone World

*by Brian Gordon Kennelly*

**F**OLLOWING MY INSTITUTION'S big push several years ago for distance-learning initiatives, faculty members would be rewarded for designing courses to be taught simultaneously at our various campuses worldwide. For the first time, I integrated internet resources and embraced the concept of rhizomatic and easily adaptable hypersyllabi in the courses I teach in French language and literature at all levels. On the one hand, I saw this as a way ultimately to boost our enrollments by tapping distant, unconventional learners (Landow 228) studying at our extended campuses where courses in French are not typically offered. This would be a means for students studying out of state, or even overseas, to share in the resources of our home campus and engage in dialogue with people there. On the other hand, I viewed it as an opportunity to bring what seemed to me stodgily traditional language courses in line with the dawn of an age recently described by Nelly Furman in her article "French Studies: Back to the Future," where electronic communication will eclipse print (69).

Last spring I proposed a three-hour evening course that I would teach the following fall semester. I recast the SCOLA-driven "Contemporary Issues" course that the department had offered periodically in previous years using the resources of the Internet instead. I hoped to learn first-hand more about how technology might enhance the teaching of foreign languages while at the same time increasing cross-cultural communication and understanding. I also believed such a course was the one in our department most likely to benefit from a hypertextual format.

What were some of the highs and lows of last semester's experiment/experience? How to avoid some of the pitfalls I faced in teaching the course in contemporary issues last semester? And how might such Web-based instruction (as compared to instruction based on print media, for example) change teaching and learning practices, enhance the teaching of foreign languages, decenter authority, and encourage in innovative ways different styles of learning?

I had conceived of the course I was to teach as structured around digital, nonprint, resources. Still, I thought it fruitful to use as an initial framework

for the issues on which we would focus—in the first half of the semester, at least—the 1994 book by President Chirac, *Une Nouvelle France: réflexions 1*, in which he addresses the main concerns of France's youth, specifically those born after the events of *mai 68* and conveniently not much older than my typical students. As a point of departure, we would spend several weeks considering what Chirac saw to be the most pressing problems the new generation of the French would have to face as the new millenium approached and what, if anything, he had done as President to solve them since writing the book. Our main window onto France would be the computer screen, our main lens the internet.

Now to take advantage, as George Landow notes, of the potential educational effects of hypertext (independent, in-depth, self-empowered study and collaboration, for example), instructors must decide what role it will play and must consciously teach with it. Students unacquainted with this new information medium, Landow emphasizes, must use it from the beginning of the course. Teachers must make clear both the goals of the course and the role of the hypertext system in meeting them (231). Our first three-hour class thus served on the one hand as an introduction to what I hoped to accomplish (that we all better understand the sociohistorical and political events leading to contemporary issues in France by the end of the semester), how the myriad resources of the World Wide Web could help us in that goal and on the other, as a first exposure for some to the internet. Instead of chief lecturer, I explained to my students, I was to be a collaborator with them. Like my students, I wished to extend my own understanding of these issues within the francophone world.

For the first hour that first evening together we "attended" and then discussed a virtual lecture at the University of Toulouse<sup>1</sup> in which Professor Alain Lefebvre traced how culture was increasingly being merchandised. The signs of this "marchandisation croissante de la culture," Lefebvre argued, were the stagnation of the theater arts, the growing interpenetration of cultural spectacles, and the thriving worldwide market of cultural industries. From the start, I wanted my students to see by extension that the digital medium through which we would be studying unemployment and education in France, for example, had potentially enormous implications: the modification of the textual by the mediatic, the breakdown of national boundaries, and the disintegration or reshaping of culture and cultures, among other things. But on a more simple level, I also wanted them to recognize that unlike this very "French" teacher-centered exercise in disciplined note-taking, ours would be neither a *cours magistral* nor a glorified *cours de compréhension orale*. Having from the start of the course spent time as virtual students or distance-learners at a French university, we would perhaps be in a better position later on to understand the strong desire of many French for educational reforms.

Students had to prepare for each class by visiting and thinking about what they had seen and/or heard at the sites I had posted. How, for instance, was Lefebvre's lecture organized? Were it to be packaged differently, how might it allow for more dialogue with students? What about the Internet lends his and the other lectures accessible online to this form of delivery? And how in their lectures do Lefebvre and his virtual colleagues exemplify the Cartesian mindset? Furthermore, students needed to be aware as much as possible of events as they unfolded in the Francophone world, whether these events seemed directly related to the proposed topics of discussion in our course or not. As ideally I wanted the class to evolve from current events, I did not know that first week what we would discuss beyond our fall break. This would largely depend on them, on politics, and on fate.

To simplify our collective duty of cultural awareness, we spent time signing up to receive the free digital weekly *Newsletter de Libération*. This way, each Friday every student in the class would have at his or her disposal for weekend study a clearly organized and up-to-date summary of all the top news stories of the previous week published in a major national paper, with a wealth of links available for further study.<sup>2</sup> For those students who might have been unable, for example, to watch online the France 2 news, to listen online to France Info, France Culture, or Radio France Internationale, or to check the *grands quotidiens* daily for breaking stories that might have enriched or directed our class discussions—all activities I encouraged and for which I had given them the requisite universal resource locators<sup>3</sup>—here was a convenient guide to events of importance that invited extended inquiry. The English periodical *News from France* was also free and would no doubt satisfy their nostalgia for print-based materials, so I had each student subscribe to it too.<sup>4</sup> This way we could also benefit from a semi-monthly digest of the same events from the perspective of the French Embassy in the United States.

The first two major topics slated for discussion in the course, "la désintégration sociale" and "l'éducation", turned out to be hot topics in France at approximately the same time we were considering them stateside in our digital classroom. With Matthieu Kassovitz's film *La Haine* as a cinematic backdrop for the first, we went on to discuss, among other things, racism's roots in the rampant unemployment in France and the disturbing (for many) rise in popularity of (at that time Jean-Marie Le Pen's) Front National. Our collective effort at understanding took us to the city of Nancy's "Association pour l'emploi dans l'industrie et le commerce" site, the Ligue d'émancipation des citoyens's "Déclaration de guerre au chômage" site, *Le Monde's* "Où la folie rôde: 31 écrivains face à la haine" site, and *Libération's* "Réagir à la montée du FN" site, among others.<sup>5</sup> Students were asked to discuss in small groups how the mission of l'Assedic Nancy both fit with and differed from those of other Assedics around France. What, for example, about Meurthe and Moselle, Meuse

and Vosges, makes the response of this Assedic to unemployment, France's "tragédie" (Chirac 15), understandably unique?

With easy access to differing responses to France's unemployment crisis, students were encouraged to ask organizations such as the Ligue d'Émancipation des Citoyens<sup>6</sup> by e-mail to what extent criticism leveled against Assedics like the one in Nancy aggravated the problem of "tracasseries administratives," as outlined in their "Déclaration de Guerre au chômage."

Pushed to link problems with potential solutions and politics with literature, students considered the surge in popularity of the FN. To what extent has it been a reaction to unemployment, for French society "l'un des phénomènes les plus destructeurs" ("Du travail")? Moreover, they analyzed the FN's "Programme pour gouverner" and the poetic enactment of its arguably racist reactionism in Jacques Roubaud's short but provoking online poem, "Le Pen pollue."<sup>7</sup> When the Le Pen-Mégret struggle for control of the FN ensued in mid-autumn, we were well-positioned to appreciate the enormity of its consequences.

With several polemical articles from *Le Monde* about the rotten state of the educational system<sup>8</sup> as fuel for the fire of our debates, we went on to weigh the pros and cons of the desire made manifest in certain camps in France for the educational system more to resemble the American one, of the various projects aimed at reforming the French university structure, and of the way students went about preparing for the *baccalauréat* permitting them entry into university.<sup>9</sup> In simulated "Meet the Press" newsconferences, students took turns defending and criticizing the government's "Scénarios pour un nouveau bac," "Conférence sur les réformes universitaires," and "Charte pour bâtir l'école du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle."<sup>10</sup> The strikes that suddenly swept France, the demonstrations by high school students in all of its major cities, and the various reforms to which Minister of Education Claude Allègre was pushed all made for gripping real-life and real-time additions to our study. The contemporary issues we were discussing (whether French nationalism, difference, uniqueness, French feminism or feminisms, or France's role inside and outside Europe, in the departments and *territoires d'outre-mer*, indeed on the virtual world scene), mattered in a context that reached far beyond the classroom where we met for three hours per week.

To earn credit, students had to turn in a long written project at the end of the semester. They also had to contribute to class discussions, which included short presentations on a related topic of their choice, such as the culture-specific problems facing females incarcerated in France and the educational challenges facing France's Internet generation. In addition, they had to pass weekly quizzes that tested primarily on vocabulary from the class before, but that sometimes also tested their understanding of what we had previously discussed and how events or experiences since our last meeting might have affected this understanding. What, in

light of Allègre's avowed wish for "un véritable dialogue" for example, was the significance of a march by teachers on the French capital ("Claude Allègre tend la main")? How did *Elles*, the bittersweet romantic comedy about the lives and loves of five women in their 40s we saw outside class as part of a local film festival, exemplify or shatter the images of women as "encore très minoritaires dans l'encadrement et dans toutes les fonctions les plus valorisantes," as they are described by the "Verts" ("Les Femmes") and which we had previously discussed in light of Gallic politics? How in the eye of the camera, an important agent of change within—and perhaps also beyond—the film, to understand sexual difference, disparity?

The two take-home midterm questions and one of the two final examination questions were fairly traditional in the sense that they required serious reflection and synthesis of much of the course and were print based.<sup>11</sup> I thought it fair to expect my students in the shorter of the questions I copied from *Libération* for their final exam not only to do all of these things but at the same time to test their ideas outside the classroom setting.

Selon vous, la monnaie unique est-elle une formidable opportunité pour les pays concernés, ou bien la perte de souveraineté en matière monétaire, la nécessité de concilier des économies différentes, l'abandon des instruments de base des politiques économiques nationales font-ils courir un risque élevé aux pays de l'U.E.? Votre opinion, vos arguments.

As I attempted further to decenter my own authority as teacher and dismantle the boundaries of the traditional classroom, my students might be forced to reexamine their ideas after being challenged by members of the larger francophone community who might have ideas different from their own. We had just considered the challenges facing France as a member of the European community by focusing on the Euro. Part of our materials included the ongoing debate weighing the pros and cons of the common currency hosted by *Libération*.<sup>12</sup> So for the final exam,<sup>13</sup> I had hoped my students would post their answers on the Web as part of this larger dialogue.

Vous aussi, en tant qu'étudiant/e dans le cours "Contemporary Issues" [...], contribuez au débat [et] donnez votre opinion et vos arguments à ce sujet.

It would, of course, be wonderful to report that they embraced this and all the other challenges I posed them in the course. As it happened, however, there was something about my having saved this last exercise for the end of the course—part of their final exam to boot—that ultimately scared them. Although willing and easily able to answer the question, they were less inclined to share, to test their points of view within the online francophone community, no matter how well-developed or rigorously argued.

Indeed, it would be a stretch to claim that this course was a success all

around. Were I to teach it again, I would do several things differently. The positive comments such as "course included current information on interesting topics and excellent films," "course content proved much more expansive than I had anticipated," "instructor was flexible with methods and designed the course for our needs," "much improved facility with Internet, valuable list of francophone sites, increased vocabulary, better grasp of contemporary issues in francophone world" written on student evaluations at the end of the semester are encouraging. But the recurrent complaint that I did not give my students enough directions or guidance revealed in comments such as ". . . it is unrealistic to post hundreds of websites . . . we cannot possibly look at them all. I needed more directions," and "Needed more guidance; e.g. if there are 75–100 web sites, please say which are the most important to visit" makes it clear that while in courses designed with a hypertextual bent students might have the advantage, as Landow underlines, of being able to explore individual topics in more depth, following their curiosity and inclination as far as they wish (227), they still need to be given and reminded of minimum expectations for success.

As teachers we might be passionate about the online resources we find and want to share with them, but the typical student is not necessarily as passionate about the subject as we might be and prefers always to know the bottom line: what is the least amount of work I can do to get the best possible grade? In other words one of the chief effects of electronic hypertext described by Landow, "the way it challenges now conventional assumptions about teachers, learners, and the institutions they inhabit," "its emphasis upon the active, empowered reader" (219), is wonderful only if the learners in question are willing (and able) to accept the open-ended challenge of empowerment, which assumes self-discipline, motivation, curiosity, and the ability to make connections themselves between the bits and bytes of francophilia they encounter.

But we can assume that as more and more instructors integrate Web-based teaching into their courses, the way learning occurs inside and outside the classroom will change. We should gradually see a shift from teacher-centered to student/reader-centered encounters with resources and with these changing roles changing expectations and standards from all sides in the adventure of learning. With access to a far wider range of materials than ever before (sound, image, text—simple and sophisticated) and the ability easily to explore topics to any degree of depth they might find useful (even after the course is over) students and teachers of French will surely see that the benefits of such instruction (increased cross-cultural understanding and collaborations, for example) promise to outweigh its possible disadvantages in this virtual world that in recent years has been made smaller.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup><<http://audiosup.net.u-paris10.fr>>.

<sup>2</sup><<http://www.liberation.fr/newsletter/index.html>>.

<sup>3</sup><<http://www.comfm.fr>> (for radio); <<http://www.AFO.com.francais/liens>> (for press).

<sup>4</sup>This publication is available upon request from the French Embassy Press and Information Service, 4101 Reservoir Road Northwest, Washington, DC 20007-2182.

<sup>5</sup><<http://www.assedic-nancy.asso.fr>>;

<<http://www.unimedia.fr/homepage/art8/guerreauchomage.html>>;

<<http://www.lemonde.fr/dossiers/lafolierode>>;

<<http://www.liberation.fr/forums/fn/forumlist.html>>.

<sup>6</sup>Ligue d'Émancipation des Citoyens, 5, rue Abel Cahour, 53200 Château-Gontier. Tel: 02 43 70 12 12. Fax: 02 43 70 12 07. E-mail: <[art8@unimedia.fr](mailto:art8@unimedia.fr)>.

<sup>7</sup><<http://www.front-nat.fr/program.html>>;

<<http://www.lemonde.fr/dossiers/lafolierode/1269htm>>.

<sup>8</sup><<http://www.lemonde.fr/education/rentree98/articles>>.

<sup>9</sup><<http://www.lemonde.fr/dossiers/bac>>.

<sup>10</sup><<http://www.lemonde.fr/dossiers/bac/1201.htm>>;

<<http://www.education.gouv.fr/sup/refumb.htm>>;

<<http://www.education.gouv.fr/actu/chartecolb.htm>>.

<sup>11</sup>The midterm exam questions can be found at <<http://www.webster.edu/~kennelbr/contissuesexam1.htm>>; the final exam questions can be found at <<http://www.webster.edu/~kennelbr/contissfinal.htm>>.

<sup>12</sup><<http://www.liberation.fr/euro/lavie/debats>>.

<sup>13</sup>The longer of the two questions required more synthesis and was, more traditionally, to be answered on paper. It read: "Dans 'From the Editor's Desk: Editor's Report for the *French Review*, 1997-98,' Ronald Tobin écrit:

Most see France as "archaïque, affablie [sic] et inquiète," but I would insist that the true French character, the one that attracted us to the study of French and the French, is decidedly "novateur, différent et dérangeant." In fact, what exasperates many francophiles is the growing tendency of the French to accept American values and, therefore, to renounce that individuality and that "attitude" that distinguished them. What does it say about France today that it is no longer possible to comprehend articles in *L'Express* without knowledge of English to help in deciphering the idioms that have been adopted from American usage?

La France de nos jours est-elle selon vous 'novatrice, différente et dérangeante' ou 'archaïque, affaiblie et inquiète'? Expliquez (en vous référant à ce que nous avons étudié ce semestre)."

<sup>14</sup>An earlier version of this article was presented at the Northeast Modern Language Association (Pittsburgh) in April 1999.

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