The following piece examines the idea of introducing a French writing institute to support the teachers and students of French language programs in southern Louisiana. The piece, written by Charles Larroque of the National Writing Project of Acadiana (AWP), with an introduction by AWP Director Ann Dobie, examines the thought behind initiating such an institute in French-speaking Louisiana, the history and cultural significance of the language in that region, and the effort expended in getting the project off the ground. Happily, AWP’s first French writing institute is now in progress, having kicked off in January of this year.

Telling the Louisiana Story

CHARLES LARROQUE

Off the banks of mainstream America, where the South ends and the West indies begin, there is a place of bayous and prairies where life is a gumbo pot of cultures cooked slowly in a Gallic roux. This is the land of Longfellow’s Evangeline, Ernest J. Gaines’s Jane Pittman, and James Lee Burke’s Dave Robicheaux. In this place we call Acadiana (a combination of “Acadian” and “Louisiana”), the National Writing Project (NWP) has been telling Louisiana stories for well over a decade at its Lafayette site.

When I first became involved with the writing project back in 1991, I was teaching English language arts and French as a second language in Lafayette Parish. At the time, my professional spark was starting to flicker dangerously low. On the English front, whole language versus phonics was taking its toll; and in foreign language affairs, lines were being drawn between the traditional structuralists and the advocates of a communicative approach to second-language learning. Those were trying times. But through the unflagging support and nourishment of the NWP, I came to view myself as a capable professional with new competencies, a bona fide writer, and even a leader.

But while south Louisiana was rapidly becoming more mainstream American, the younger generation was losing touch with its roots—roots anchored mainly in the French language of the Cajuns, Creoles, and the most culturally isolated, the Native Americans. The older generation, whose cultural identity was based on oral tradition, was not passing on its “voice.” They saw no need to. In a world of modern technology and postmodern values, they believed their voice had no place.

History of an Endangered Culture

From the establishment of the permanent French colony in 1699 until 1921 when the Louisiana state legislature forbade the

Writing, in French: A Little Background

ANN DOBIE

The idea for a French writing institute has been around for years. Sometimes referred to as Ecrire et Enseigner (“to write and to teach”), such an institute was a natural in French-speaking south Louisiana, but, like many good projects, its realization was delayed while people looked for the funding to put it in place. The money finally came when Nicole Boudreaux and Sandy LaBry, both teacher-consultants with the National Writing Project of Acadiana (AWP), secured a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Then, all they had to do was find a teacher-consultant who could (and would) serve as the instructor of record at the University of Louisiana, secure cooperation from the English Department, Modern Languages Department, and the College of Education, and get teacher tuition waivers from the State Department of Education to cover registration fees. None of it was easy.

It didn’t take long, however, to realize that all of the forms and letters were worth the effort. Twenty teachers, all of them involved in the French immersion and bilingual programs that operate in five Louisiana parishes, were selected to participate in AWP’s French writing institute. This institute follows the same model as the summer invitational institute. In fact, the two institutes differ only in that, since most of the fellows involved in the French writing institute are native French speakers from Quebec, New Brunswick, Belgium, Haiti, Niger, and France, the institute is conducted in their primary language. Beyond that, a writing project institute is a writing project institute. With Nicole Boudreaux (an émigré from Grenoble, France) serving as director, the fellows write, give demonstrations, and discuss classroom strategies. They

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speaking of French on public school grounds, the Louisiana story had been told in authentic voice: in New Orleans salons in the language of Molière, in the sugarcane fields in the dialect of West African Creoles, and along moss-draped bayous in the eighteenth-century French of the deported Acadiens (“Cajuns” to the English ear). At the turn of the last century, the winds of assimilation began to pick up with the discovery of oil and the tremendous influx of that industry’s interests. The inhabitants of Depression-era Louisiana needed little convincing that English was to be their economic ticket to the American dream. But then, as today, there was a quid pro quo.

Too many are the horror stories from this time of Francophone Cajun and Creole children punished and humiliated for speaking French on the school grounds—even to the extent of soiling themselves because they did not know how to ask permission in English to go to the restroom. The parents of these children sadly realized that English would invariably become the key to economic success for those struggling against great odds: the Cajuns who had been so traumatically deported from Nova Scotia; the African-Americans and their long quest for true freedom; and the Native Americans, who so often found themselves on the lowest rung of society.

After World War II, a national preoccupation with regional diversity emerged, resulting in a call to protect an endangered Louisiana French language and culture. In 1968, the state created the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). CODOFIL’s mission has been a daunting one: the council is charged with preserving a language whose function has increasingly become limited to plaintive songs, kitchen gossip, and secret codes to confound the likes of children and Texas shrimpers. Today, Louisiana French may be the main feature at folk-life festivals, but it is no longer the lingua franca that was once prevalent in commerce, communications, and wider social settings.

At the time of this transition, it was believed that if the school system was responsible for eliminating French, then this institution should redeem itself by bringing about a renewal of that language. Toward that end, the state implemented what came to be considered the nation’s preeminent second-language program, and today over 100,000 students are enrolled in a French language program (including over 2,000 students of French immersion). But this reversal was not an easy one. Many French-speaking parents, traumatized by their own school experiences, openly resisted a movement that asked them to simply forget the stigmatization of the past and embrace the idea that it was again acceptable to speak French. Their confusion over these conflicting messages was exceeded only by their profound suspicion of the educational system.

In spite of its precarious start, the state’s second-language program has become a popular one. Its success, however, has been limited primarily to the classroom. A bridge has yet to be built between the schools and the larger community where French once thrived. So far, no one has presented a plan for taking French language learning to the next level. No one has stepped forward with a vision of how to give function to the linguistic notions or how to make connections between culturally disenfranchised children and an older generation just now recovering from the cultural shaming they endured in the past. No one yet has been able to galvanize teachers, empower students, and show—not tell—a community of survivors how to put its voice in the first person.

Did somebody say National Writing Project?

Pourquoi pas? Why not the National Writing Project? Who better to foster leadership among the ranks of teachers frustrated with an exemplary program that seems, so to speak, all dressed up with no place to go? Who better to help schools address issues of reform such as standards, strategies of change, sharing of knowledge, and building mutual respect between colleagues who share the same vision but maybe aren’t “speaking the same language”? The NWP is about awareness. The NWP is about dialogue.

To paraphrase Voltaire, you’ve got to cultivate your own garden. As a writing project fellow, I have seen firsthand how the summer institute provides teachers with not only the tools but indeed the seeds. Applied to a French writing institute, NWP’s reliable techniques and approaches offer opportunities for growth heretofore unimaginined in second-language instruction.

The NWP has been a champion for celebrating local voices. At our own Acadia site at the University of Louisiana (which is also the site of the nation’s only doctoral program in Francophone studies), teachers and their students have become enthusiastic ethnographers, uncovering the untold and giving voice to the fading. Invariably, however, research often falls short when the trail leads to a story told in French and the urge to translate becomes the first yank of cultural disconnect. The NWP offers second-language teachers a
who have been living in exquisite exile for more than two centuries. Cultural isolation offered a sense of security to those traumatized by slavery and deportation; however, "isolation" is often equated with "marginalization," which invariably spawns cultural identity crisis.

Another element essential in any model to genuinely revive the French language in Louisiana is the school-to-work concept. For example, if the current phenomenon of Louisiana as a popular cultural tourist destination can be justly attributed to its still-living French heritage, then it makes sense to do whatever is necessary to preserve and enhance that culture's special character. A good starting point would be the formation of a bilingual workforce in the hospitality field. The education system would ensure linguistic competency in the work language and, more importantly, the accurate interpretation of the French Louisiana experience. French as a second language would then become the language of the workforce. Here is the payoff for the student who says, "French is okay for me and Grandma on Sundays, but, excusez-moi, is that all there is?"

Finally, networking—especially with Hispanic programs/writing institutes within the NWP—is crucial to any reform in a second-language program. The French and Spanish interests share much common ground, and dialogue can only enhance the development of teaching philosophies, strategies, and community development.

NWP outreach to French Louisiana (and why not French New England as well?) could contribute a whole new dimension to a new whole language by validating a vanishing linguistic tradition, creating a renaissance of cultural identity and pride, and reconciling a banished community to the schools, now true partners in education. The community would become intertwined with the classroom where students could find real answers to their inquiries such as, "What is the difference between Cajun and Creole?" and "What was so wrong about speaking French?" And in responding to these student-based inquiries, the older generation Francophones would implicitly receive permission to honor and to speak their mother tongue.

We no longer need to present culture to students as an "exquisite corpse." As writers, we no longer need to preoccupy ourselves with only the pathos of fading voices, fading folks. The time is right for the NWP and its network of sites to collaborate with those who will observe, question, and respond in ways that will continue bringing people together. Who is to say that the National Writing Project would not be the essential ingredient to a promising future for the thousands of students in Louisiana and beyond? C'est naturel.

CHARLES LARBOUE, a native of Jeanerette, Louisiana, has spent over twenty years as an educator (foreign languages and social studies) and is currently teaching in Lafayette Parish's alternative program, "Continuing Academic Program for Students." He is a teacher-consultant with the National Writing Project of Acadia in Lafayette, Louisiana, and a presenter for the French Writing Institute there.