

Fostering of Less Commonly Taught Language Initiatives — The Minnesota Experience

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First, let me express my sincere gratitude to NCOLCTL for awarding me this prestigious recognition bearing the name of a man who was responsible for many important initiatives and contributions relating to the promotion of the interests of LCTLs.

Although for the past 36 years I have been teaching Russian and Polish, in my discussion today I will focus mainly on Polish, the less common of my less commonly taught languages.

We can view the future of LCTLs in two ways: paraphrasing Anton Chekhov—one is the view that everything passes and nothing matters; the other view is that nothing passes and everything matters.

If we are guided by the first outlook in assessing the present and future status of LCTLs we will conclude that despite all of our initiatives to promote and safeguard the interests of LCTLs, in the final analysis developments beyond our control will threaten the survival of LCTLs as part of institutionalized curriculum at many institutions. Thus, all of our efforts will prove to be in vain.

My survey entitled *PLASA Directory of U.S. Institutions of Higher Education and Faculty Offering Instruction in Polish Language, Literature, and Culture 1996-97*¹ showed an alarming trend during the previous twenty-five years (1968-1996). Forty-eight institutions discontinued offering instruction in the Polish language. Since the publication of this survey, that negative trend has continued. Several prestigious universities with a long history and tradition of teaching Polish have abandoned Polish in recent years. This has led to an increase in the number of Examiners—students who study the Polish language in Critical Languages Programs on an individual or self-instructional basis and, after mastering certain fixed material, are tested by an examiner who is a qualified instructor of Polish. It is worth noting that a good number of institutions continue to teach Polish because there is a genuine commitment to the language and culture at the faculty rather than at the administrative level. In fact, at some institutions,

Polish is offered only because the faculty teach it over and above their stipulated teaching duties. Common explanations given for discontinuing Polish language instruction are lack of student interest in Polish and budgetary considerations. Although this may indeed be true in the case of some institutions, it is hardly an accurate explanation for all of them. One suspects that, in actuality, at a good number of institutions Polish has been discontinued as a result of administrative policies of downsizing or restructuring and prioritizing in which Polish has been targeted as marginally relevant to the institution's academic mission. A number of departments were founded in the U.S. as primarily focusing on teaching Polish language, literature and culture. The Polish Department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison with its three prominent scholars, Zbigniew Folejewski, Edmund Zawacki and my dissertation adviser Xenia Gąsiorowska, is a case in point. Eventually, however, it became apparent that survival of Polish depended on working in combination with a Russian program, even if the latter assumed the leading role. This eventually became the paradigm for departments of Slavic Languages and Literatures in the U.S. During more recent years, this structure has begun changing and producing an adverse effect on Polish language and literature instruction. At some institutions, when a Polish instructor retires, he/she is not replaced. Instead, the Polish instructor's position is replaced by an instructor of Russian. Although such a move may be to the advantage of the Russian program, it is certainly to the detriment if not always the demise of Polish. The importance of a department's critical mass and enrollment-driven policies weigh heavily in these decisions. Despite this regrettable trend, Polish continues to maintain a presence at a significant number of institutions of higher education.

Initiatives Fostering Student Study in Poland and Russia

Personally I have been guided by the second outlook, i.e. that nothing passes, that all of our initiatives on behalf of LCTLs will have a positive impact. This has led me to creating initiatives fostering student study in Poland and eventually in Russia. Following laborious negotiations with the Polish authorities from 1981-1982 and extensive consultation with Al Balckum, director of the University of

Minnesota's Global Campus, in 1983 we established the program "Polish in Lublin Summer in Language and Culture" at Maria Curie Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland, for students of Polish language, literature and culture. To implement this program many obstacles had to be overcome. The most serious one was the Polish government's refusal to approve any new cultural ties between the United States and Poland as a result of sanctions imposed upon Poland by the United States in reaction to Poland's declaration of martial law in 1981. Thanks to the courage and commitment on the part of the then Rector of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Professor Józef Szymański, the program was implemented and was in operation from 1984—1989. As onsite director of a study-abroad program in a country like Poland, with its then radically different system and in the midst of its distress, the demands on me as advisor were complex and varied, and they went far beyond the providing of typical academic advice. More than 100 University of Minnesota students and nearly 20 students from other American universities have benefited from this program. One indicator of the program's success is the fact that a number of students participated in it more than once. In 1992 we created another study abroad opportunity, this time for students of Russian language literature and culture to study at Herzen Pedagogical University in St. Petersburg, Russia. Al Balckum and I designed the Russian in St. Petersburg Study Program which was in operation during 1992—1996 and had more than 60 participants. From 1996 to the present I have been personally assisting in designing individual study programs at Herzen University. Nearly 20 students to date have benefited from this unique opportunity—course of study designed to meet specific interests of individual students including advanced Russian, Russian phonetics, language of the Russian Press, environmental problems, political and judicial reform, economic transformation, mass communication, etc., in Russia—none of these courses are available at the University of Minnesota and no other program in Russia offers such academic breadth. These initiatives have contributed to the institutionalization of opportunities for students of Polish and Russian at the University of Minnesota.

Initiatives Fostering Program Development

Other initiatives that contributed to the institutionalization and continuing vitality of Polish and Russian at the University of Minnesota were initiatives that fostered program development. Some years ago it could have been said that while there was considerable interest among students at the University of Minnesota for information and instruction about the countries of Eastern Europe, there were but a few actual course offerings available to satisfy that interest. Such courses as there were, were available, for the most part, on an irregular and piecemeal basis. In the late 1980's I developed an undergraduate major program in East European Studies with primary emphasis on Polish studies. Through an aggressive and highly successful pursuit of external grant monies, we found a way to encourage 35 interested faculty from 20 University of Minnesota departments to develop and teach 40 new courses for the East European studies curriculum. This extremely rich curriculum was subsequently utilized in creating the Central-East European Track in the European Studies Major. Through a major U.S. Department of Education grant (1988-91), the Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad for Poland (1989), and two major grants from the U.S. Information Agency (University Linkage Program for Poland and College and University Affiliation Program, 1989—1993 and 1995—2000) we found a way to introduce University faculty to the Polish situation on the spot and to give those who would teach the courses in East European Studies an intimate familiarity with the region. At the same time, and most importantly to our students, we brought academic specialists from Poland to our campus and made it possible to enrich their programs with a variety of courses relating to Poland in such diverse areas as art history, geography, sociology, and advanced Polish language, literature, and culture. Without enormous efforts, these courses, and therefore unique academic opportunities for students, particularly students of Polish, would simply not have been available on our campus. I recall going to Washington to confer with Dr. Ralph Hines regarding our plans to submit a grant proposal. To this day, I remember how helpful he was and I am sure his advice was responsible in no small way for the success of our proposal. I am also grateful to Maria Urbina who guided me through all of the USIA

grant years. As principal investigator for these grants, I managed the implementation of the proposed programs, including selecting faculty participants, assisting with travel documentation, arranging accommodations, managing the budget, and filing progress and final reports to the federal agencies. Our initiatives and accomplishments in program development required dedication, diplomacy and determination that, most importantly, have benefited students of Polish studies, particularly students of the less commonly taught language of Polish. Federal funding has been of critical importance in fostering our initiatives relating to the less commonly taught language of Polish. The new “national security language initiative” offers much-needed assistance in fostering the study of LCTLs. It is an excellent initiative, which will require long-term support to achieve the desired goals. Although I am happy that Russian is one of the LCTLs earmarked for support, I am disappointed that Polish is not on the list. However, I realize that present security needs differ from those of the cold war period.

Initiatives Fostering Faculty Development

A highly successful faculty exchange agreement between the University of Minnesota and Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (MCSU) in Lublin, Poland was implemented in 1983. Most recently renewed in 1995, it remains one of the longest active and highly beneficial University of Minnesota exchanges. In 1993 the agreement of cooperation and faculty-student exchange between the University of Minnesota and Herzen Pedagogical University in St. Petersburg, Russia was signed. The agreement was renewed in 2001. I have served as director of the Polish exchange for more than 20 years and of the Russian exchange for more than 10 years. The existence and functioning of these highly successful exchanges has been made possible due to our securing of federal funds and our commitment to the quality of the exchange. As part of my oversight of these exchanges, I made more than 40 trips to Poland and more than 10 trips to Russia.

One of the outstanding features of the various exchange grants that we obtained and administered has been their provision of the opportunity for University of Minnesota faculty to reside and

teach in Polish universities for significant periods of time. The latest USIA grant made possible a four-way exchange involving faculty from the University of Minnesota, the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, and The Catholic University of Lublin. The results have been impressive: 20 American faculty have taught at the two Polish universities and 20 Polish faculty have taught at the two American universities. This exchange has contributed in a major way to faculty development and also constitutes a good example of outreach. Having faculty from other disciplines involved in initiatives relating to Polish, has contributed to a very positive atmosphere of cooperation and recognition on their part of the significance of Polish studies. This relationship with faculty from other disciplines has been instrumental in maintaining a high campus profile for Polish, and, most importantly, has generated strong support for initiatives relating to Polish.

The University of Minnesota—Herzen Pedagogical University faculty exchange has also been very fruitful. To date, 12 Herzen faculty have taught in the Russian program at the University of Minnesota. They have greatly enriched our curriculum in Russian, broadened our students' knowledge of present-day Russia, and collaborated with our faculty on scholarly projects. Several of our faculty have participated in scholarly conferences organized by Herzen University and have had their papers published as conference proceedings. In many respects, this exchange has been of great mutual benefit. It has contributed both to the Russian and our faculty's development. A great deal of gratitude goes to administrators and colleagues at the University of Minnesota who have provided strong support of our initiatives. These include former Vice-President Robert Kvavik, Deans Fred Lukermann and Craig Swan, Thomas Noonan, chair of Russian and East European Studies, and of the Russian faculty in our department, most notably, Professor Gary Jahn. Without their support, we would not have been able to realize our dreams.

Teaching and Scholarship Contributions to the Fostering of Polish Language, Literature and Culture Initiatives

The paucity of good instructional materials for Polish has been a long-standing problem facing instructors of Polish. This became glaringly apparent when I conducted research for an article entitled “Polish Language Textbooks and Readers currently used in the United States” which was published in 2000.² I have personally tried to help fill this lacuna by preparing extensive sets of print and audio materials for use in the teaching of Polish language at various levels. Specifically, I have authored three textbooks: *Supplemental Materials for First Year Polish* (1991), *Supplemental Materials for Fifteen Modern Polish Short Stories* (1994), and *Intermediate Polish: A Cultural Reader with Exercises* (1999). The quality of these materials can be measured not only by the response of my students, but also by the fact that they have been adopted by other programs across the nation. In 1994 at the invitation of Professor Ray Parrott, then President of AATSEEL, I organized and chaired the National Committee on Language Learning Framework for Polish sponsored by NCOLCTL. The completed project was published by NCOLCTL on its website www.councilnet.org/papers/PLLF.doc. Many thanks go out to NCOLCTL, and Richard Brecht in particular, for their support of this project. A revised and expanded version of *Polish Language Learning Framework* by Professor Joanna Radwańska Williams, Waldemar Walczyński, and myself was published by the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in 2002. My experience as a LCTL instructor has shown me that it is very important to make one’s LCTL visible at one’s university, and at the national and international levels. Thus, I have published a number of scholarly articles relating to Polish language instruction, presented more than 30 papers and lectures on Polish literature, culture, and language at national and international conferences, and organized and chaired more than 40 panels at regional, national and international conferences on Polish literature, culture, and “Teaching of Polish: Methods and Materials.” I have tried to maintain a consistent commitment to the interrelationship and mutuality of the various dimensions of my service to the fostering of initiatives with respect to Polish as a less commonly taught language.

At times we may become discouraged in our efforts to foster LCTL initiatives and we may think they are impossible to realize yet we need to keep trying, otherwise we will never know whether we could have succeeded. As teachers of LCTLs we need to strive to become model teachers, strive to contribute to our scholarly field, and strive to contribute in the area of service. The latter is much more vague than the other two—it can consume much of our energy unless we succeed in finding an appropriate balance for our activities. The balancing act is perhaps our most difficult task and our greatest challenge.

What initiatives need to be undertaken or how can we help ourselves to ensure the survival of LCTLs? Let me use Polish as an example:

1. provide interesting and engaging instruction
2. focus on using the most current teaching materials and pedagogical tools
3. be informed about the most recent developments in the LCTL field
4. seek funding—federal, college, and community or fraternal
5. organize your own or promote existing study abroad programs
6. create collaborative projects such as faculty exchanges
7. maintain good relations with administrators at your institution and other instructors of LCTLs as well as the more commonly taught languages. As Laurel Rasplica Rodd has so aptly stated, we LCTL instructors “need each other”³
8. popularize your program and the language by getting others involved
9. maintain good relations with your local ethnic community

It is clear more than ever that all institutions cannot offer all LCTLs; however, as many LCTLs as possible should be offered nationwide. American education will benefit greatly from the increased variety of LCTLs taught. In this age of globalization and emphasis on cultural diversity, administration officials need to think carefully

before deciding to eliminate a given LCTL. University officials must be persuaded of the significance of maintaining less commonly taught languages as an integral part of a commitment to the study and understanding of global cultural diversity.

In closing, I wish to note that each LCTL may be viewed as constituting a link in the overall LCTL chain. Programs here and there may be weakened or even eliminated but the existence of the LCTL chain, which includes the Polish language, will continue to exist. As for us LCTL instructors, let us continue to be inspired by Ron Walton's significant initiatives relating to the less commonly taught languages by developing new initiatives and pursuing them vigorously to fruition.

References

- ¹ Published by The Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America, Inc., New York, 1997, 44 pp.
- ² *The Learning and Teaching of Slavic Languages and Cultures*, Olga Kagan and Benjamin Rifkin, eds. (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, Indiana University, 2000), pp. 563-588.
- ³ "2004 NCOLCTL Walton Award Acceptance Speech," *Journal of National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages*, Vol. 2, Spring 2005, pp. 135-146.