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ABSTRACT

Because of recent educational trends, reliance on the language club as an instructional supplement is no longer sufficient. This paper discusses the general decline of language clubs and the changing philosophy behind extracurricular activities, such as department-wide festivals, weekend programs, and trips abroad. These activities are suggested as replacements for outdated language clubs and are intended to provide a more relevant and interesting cultural experience for today's student. (CM)

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EXTRACURRICULAR FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES

by Heidi Campbell

INTRODUCTION

The term "extracurricular activity" refers in its broadest sense to any educational activity which supplements the regular course of classroom instruction. The range of extracurricular activities on the high school level stretches across practically all subjects, encompassing, of course, foreign language clubs. Frequently, the foreign language club and its program become synonymous with extracurricular foreign language activity. Because of recent educational trends, however, reliance on the language club as an instructional supplement is no longer sufficient.

This paper will discuss the problem of extracurricular or supplementary language activity from the viewpoint of a foreign language supervisor in a suburban high school, but the implications of the discussion are not limited to a particular locale, socioeconomic level, or stage of instruction.

DECLINE OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

A comparison of administrative records on extracurricular offerings ten years ago with present lists of activities reveals a steady decrease in the number of activities offered. Many after-school clubs seem to vanish, and only extracurricular events for which teachers are financially compensated make a strong showing. Changing attitudes on the part of teachers and students have reduced participation in formerly attractive extracurricular events.

Foreign language clubs have not escaped this trend. Those involved with language clubs find that students tend to flock to them at the beginning of the year, so their names will appear on the club roster, and participate as long as there is a chance to gain nomination as a club officer. They are especially interested in these aspects of club work for their college transcript. Once these "goals" have been achieved, interest in the club is superseded by other obligations or involvements, and usually by the senior year the student's participation in language club activities has nearly dwindled away. Naturally, there are always responsible students who will continue to carry out projects and programs, but it grows increasingly difficult to find students who will remain after school for foreign language club activities.

THE CHANGING PHILOSOPHY BEHIND FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLUBS

In exploring the decline of language club activity after school, it is useful to look at the traditionally accepted philosophy that once placed extracurricular foreign language activities outside the weighty classroom routine. Foreign language classwork, according to this outlook, centered on linguistic aspects of language study. The intellectual emphasis was

generally on grammatical rules, memorization, translation, and composition. Culture had to be dealt with somehow, since certain linguistic idiosyncrasies only took on meaning against the background of the respective culture, but it was not very important. The New York State Education Department habitually allots only ten points for culture out of one hundred on the Level III Regents Exam. Culture was taught as a separate unit in class, and the elusive foreign cultural experience was pushed into the after-school club.

Administrators liked this arrangement because it permitted a smooth, disciplined procedure during the day, yet provided a degree of enrichment in the total school program. Foreign language teachers, too, accepted this philosophy for a long time, carrying the additional burden of club sponsorship as one of the unavoidable consequences of foreign language teaching.

Gradually a change appeared in the philosophy as language teachers became aware that language is an expression of culture and that the two cannot be separated. Culture had to become an integral part of the curriculum. This insight led to a transformation in the role of foreign language clubs. At the same time, foreign language teachers realized that the sponsors of music, drama, and sports were paid while sponsors of foreign language activities were not. This, together with the contractually fixed length of the faculty's school day, put an enormous damper on teacher enthusiasm. Teachers questioned the fairness and necessity of putting in extra hours without recognition or backing from school authorities. They became less inclined to devote their spare time to extracurricular activities, and, without wholehearted teacher support, any club activity is doomed.

The greatest single factor in the decline of foreign language clubs, however, was the changing attitude of the student. Never before have our young people had such sophisticated views on foreign cultures. The shrinking world has brought them closer to the cultures of the languages they study. These young people are used to expertly produced television programs and professional stage shows. They visit art exhibits at museums and galleries, and many travel abroad. In addition, many of them work after school to make money, receive private instruction, attend religious school, or become engaged in conflicting school activities. The foreign language club is not enough of a challenge. It is insufficiently glamorous, inconveniently timed, and requires too much work for a limited reward.

All this means that the concept which equates foreign language clubs with extracurricular foreign language activity has to be reexamined. Much of what was formerly carried out in an after-school club program should become an integral part of the regular school day. Included in the curriculum, cultural enrichment can bring language study to life, and the cultural experience can be shared by all instead of being limited to a few club members. The greater school community can become aware of the active contribution foreign languages have to make to the social and intellectual climate of educational offerings. The trend should be to incorporate all aspects of the study of foreign language and culture into the curriculum and to treat as extracurricular activities only such events as could not possibly become part of the school day.

Since many schools will not, and many teachers cannot, make arrangements for such an all-inclusive curriculum, here are some suggestions for the development of activity programs suitable both for the school day and for after-school clubs.

ORGANIZING SUPPLEMENTARY FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES

When setting up a schedule for foreign language events, one can begin by simply following the calendar of national holidays. The list of French legal holidays, for example, would include: January 1, le Jour de l'an; Easter or Pâques; May 1, le premier Mai or May Day; May 8, le huit Mai; the second Sunday in May, la fête de Ste. Jeanne d'Arc; July 14, le Quatorze Juillet or Independence Day; November 1, la Toussaint or All-Saints Day; November 11, la fête-anniversaire de la Victoire or Armistice Day; and December 25, Noël. Certain religious holidays, such as l'Ascension, la Pentecôte and l'Assomption, are also recognized legally in France. Mardi Gras, which is observed in other French-speaking areas like Canada or New Orleans, is another possibility. Any of these holidays could be considered as a basis for extracurricular activities, depending on its suitability for a particular student body.

Or, instead of following the calendar of national holidays, plans for foreign language activities can be grouped around a variety of cultural topics. Fashions, art, music, sports and recreation, foods, regional customs, historical events, famous people, theatrical and literary highlights, film, and popular songs can provide thematic material for supplementary programs. With a little imagination, the possibilities become nearly limitless.

A combination of holidays and cultural themes offers another option for a schedule of foreign language activities. Plans can be adjusted according to the dictates imposed by any given school situation.

If a comprehensive program of activities is created for each language taught, departmental offerings would be complimented by appealing cultural events. A word of warning is needed here. Care must be taken to keep a proper balance with other foreign language instructional objectives, and each enterprise should have qualitative substance.

Often supplementary activities are restricted to classes of the same language. This is not done to be exclusive, but to create a more meaningful experience for the students. The Oktoberfest with its beer songs and speeches means more to German students than to those studying Spanish. The latter, in turn, can derive greater benefit from a Pan-American Day than can youngsters learning Russian. If the advanced French classes prepare a play for la fête de Sainte Jeanne d'Arc, budding French scholars will appreciate the presentation more than students who do not understand a word of what is being said.

ORGANIZING JOINT ACTIVITIES

At times, however, it may be advisable to have youngsters from various language backgrounds join in foreign language activities. The goal may be to expose as many individuals as possible to special events, such as performances by outstanding cultural groups. Joint activities with peers from another class may stimulate students from a lethargic class. Working together with others from different language backgrounds also provides the student with an opportunity for personal cultural enrichment.

When planning intradepartmental affairs, it is wise to space them at sufficient intervals, so that they will not lose their novelty and appeal. In the fall, a harvest celebration affords ample opportunities for contributions from every language group. Foods, songs, dances, and special

ceremonies abound in all cultures at this season can be woven into a splendid, international display of the harvest theme.

Christmas is a more intimate holiday. It is probably the most widely observed holiday in the Western Hemisphere and is excellently suited for a party involving the entire language department. Chanukah customs may be included to expand the traditional Christmas party into an interfaith celebration.

Mardi Gras furnishes another occasion for a joint activity. This mid-February holiday which precedes Lent appears as Carnaval in Latin America and as Fasching in Germany. It is well suited for a masquerade ball at which students wear costumes representing a person or character from the country or culture they are studying. The idea of a dance may not interest today's students; they may prefer instead to wear their costumes during the school day or in class. As an incentive, prizes could be awarded for the most imaginative creations, and the local newspaper could be asked to photograph the winners.

The year's foreign language department affairs could culminate in an outdoor Spring Festival. Maypole dancing, a sports match, a picnic and games, a fair with booths by different language groups, and instrumental and vocal music might be included on the list of events.

Although joint extracurricular affairs are usually conducted after school in the school cafeteria, yard, or auditorium, it is feasible and advantageous to arrange them during the school day and involve nearly all foreign language classes. The Spring Festival mentioned above can be turned into an all-day function broken down by periods. During each period all foreign language students of that period gather and perform together or for one another. The organization of such events is simple. Teachers indicate in advance their class's desire to contribute. Let us say seven decide to take part. If there are forty-two minutes in a period, and seven minutes are allowed for the students to enter and leave, thirty-five minutes are left. Approximately five minutes can be allotted to each performance. The order of presentations could be determined alphabetically according to the first initial of each teacher's name.

In such a fashion, the Oceanside 1971 National Foreign Language Week was organized on a departmental level, involving all foreign language students each school day without intentionally interfering with classes outside the department. There were, however, activities to which the whole school was invited, and often other classes took advantage of the invitation. Each day had a theme, which was interpreted by different student or teacher groups, as well as individual presentations during each period of the day. The days focused on fashions, music, drama, and foods. The week started by giving the students a foreign language attitude questionnaire and showing them the filmstrip, Why Study Foreign Languages? No formal instruction was given, yet there was probably more foreign language absorbed during this week than under routine circumstances. The students evidently enjoyed the week, and the teachers found it a worthwhile educational tool.

In the case of joint supplementary activities, it is wise to arrange events so that classes may attend if they wish and if the teacher deems it advisable. This may eliminate some of the behavior problems which arise as soon as several classes meet in a larger room and students know that they can expect a week with a minimum of work, a treat which some use as

an excuse to misbehave. If class participation in the activities is optional, greater enthusiasm and better decorum are assured.

Such details serve as a reminder that successful departmental foreign language activities require considerable planning. Conflicts with other school activities have to be avoided. All reservations for room and audio-visual equipment have to be anticipated, especially when these items may be demanded by other classes. Joint efforts with colleagues and interdisciplinary cooperation between the language departments, as well as perhaps, the music, home economics, or art departments, can be advantageous. The type of student comprising individual classes should be taken into consideration along with the teachers' limitations and talents. The prospect of these potential obstacles may be discouraging, but, allowing plenty of time, patience, stamina, and enthusiasm, things can usually be worked out to create a most rewarding experience. When a foreign language song festival, originally restricted to foreign language students, suddenly turns into a miniature Woodstock with practically the whole student body present, it is an experience thrilling and delightful enough to repay the efforts of any foreign language teacher.

WEEKEND ACTIVITIES

Extracurricular activities need not be limited to weekdays. A foreign language teacher may undertake a variety of things with students on weekends, though it is sometimes difficult to get students to attend. Weekend excursions combine enjoyment with concentrated exposure to the language. In good weather, for instance, the German students could go for an extended bicycling trip and meet at a predetermined point with German students from a neighboring district for games, songs, and a picnic. An overnight foreign language seminar may be conducted with a carefully planned program of study, amusements, and meals derived from the target culture. Field trips to a nearby city may be undertaken. Sometimes weekend performances by foreign companies are the only ones available, and students may be interested in attending. Theatrical troupes, and ballet and dance groups from abroad appear periodically, and special exhibits, lectures, and folk festivals are frequently scheduled on weekends. It is wise to be on the mailing list of the consular offices that send out notices of coming events.

Foreign Language Fun Festivals may be planned for weekends. This type of festival can develop into a pleasant and meaningful language experience for all the students and teachers of a county or given geographic region. The program may include a soccer game, plays, skits, dances, poetry readings, song fests, puppet shows, costume judging, films in all languages, guest entertainers, rap sessions, and a gala dance at the host school.

If there are foreign students anywhere in the district or region, a student exchange may be timed for the weekend. Students from Latin America or Europe can spend a day in school visiting foreign language classes as well as other classes. During the weekend, their host families and exchange friends may hold a festive breakfast, attend a sports event, engage in recreational activities, tour the area, and go to dinners and parties. The foreign language department, while assisting with many of the events, will benefit from the presence of these young people.

TRIPS ABROAD

Vacations and the summer recess offer still more occasion for supplementary language activities. The current trend among young people is to travel abroad. In view of this, many trips are being conducted during spring break and the summer by foreign language organizations. These activities are extremely significant in terms of language and culture studies. Foreign language departments should join forces to convince local school boards to authorize trips arranged and planned by foreign language teachers as an extension of the foreign language department offerings. School trustees should consider granting academic credit to participating students, and compensating teachers and chaperones by giving them in-service credit. The boards could arrange insurance coverage similar to that provided for competing sports teams, travelling concert bands and choirs, and class trips. For trips of real cultural value, foreign language departments should make arrangements themselves rather than rely solely on commercial travel agencies which have vastly different objectives in mind than that of creating a meaningful language study experience.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

There are many occasions on which it is feasible to invite public attendance at foreign language events. This is advantageous from two standpoints. First, there are often people in town with foreign language backgrounds who can enjoy student presentations in their native tongue. Secondly, inclusion of the public enhances community relations. Senior Citizens will gladly share the joy of a foreign language Christmas Party. Parents always like to see their children perform. Moreover, some resourceful community members may even be willing to make a contribution to highlight the foreign language festivities. Such events have a good chance of attracting publicity and a favorable write-up in the local newspaper.

CONCLUSION

By adopting a new approach toward supplementary language activity, secondary school educators should be able to reawaken student interest in extracurricular language programs. With renewed interest on the part of students, support from administrators and school board trustees will follow. Creative, successful programs call for planning and hard work, but are fairly inexpensive to institute, and, depending on the flexibility of a particular school system, supplementary language activities have the added advantage of making a cultural experience available to the entire student body. Most important, imaginative extracurricular events bring a new excitement to language study for both student and teacher.

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