

From the Life of AUCA

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French Club: Initiative, Organization and Research

The purpose of this study is to analyze the process of students' involvement in the extra-curriculum activity during academic year 2008-2009 at the American University of Central Asia. I am a teacher of French at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA). We have 40-50 students learning French as an elective course. There are several students who know French from school or from the FLEX program. An educational process is very hard and students have only two French lessons a week, and it is a big problem to speak French without the language speaking environment.

I use different books in my teaching and try to diversify my teaching methods. One day I saw "La Carte de Tendre" (The tenderness' map) in a French novel and after its study, I suggested that my students should invent a "French language map". Every student worked at home independently. Next day I asked them to organize three groups and discuss the results. Then every group presented their common results on the flip-chart. Ultimately the groups presented their "French language map" to the audience.

On the board we saw maps with "mountains of exercises, lakes of reflections, forests of errors, deserts of speaking, tours of motivations," and etc. On every map I saw problems with different learning subjects, but there was one common difficulty – speaking and understanding.

A group of my students agree upon a common problem. How do they solve this? The French course is a 3 credit course. Students have a possibility to learn French from scratch. It means they have to work hard with grammar, phonetics, vocabulary, topics, texts, exercises, etc. The aim of the French courses is to develop the four major skills: reading, writing, understanding and speaking. Students don't have an opportunity to speak enough with francophones because we don't have really a French community and students cannot travel free to the French speaking countries.

As a teacher and researcher I have asked my students if they need a solution and what alternatives are possible. Students (10 persons) generated different solutions: speak more in

class, prepare presentations, visit French or European organizations and ask them to help us, write to the French speaking people, organize a French club. Presentations and speaking in class are the activities in course that are already planned in the Syllabus as well as in the e-mail correspondence.

After that discussion I suggested my students should to make a research and take an interview from other French learning students from different groups at the University. The interviews should collect information about French activities at AUCA. Every student of my group developed three questions for the interview. After that we made up a question list:

- Your name
- Your mail-address for sending the information
- How long have you been learning French?
- Would you like to participate in a French extra-curriculum organization at the AUCA?
- What kind of French speaking organization do you like to participate in?
- What kind of goals and objectives would you like to reach in that activity?
- Please, list three topics for the club agenda

During one week students interviewed their respondents and after receiving the results I organized a meeting to discuss them. We analyzed the questionnaires together. I agree with opinion of R. Tandom (4): "It is important that analysis and reflection are undertaken as the collective processes, not to be done by one person alone. This will help the group understand the causes of the problem and provide clues for possible solutions" (p.219). We analyzed the questionnaires and received a big table of results. It was a preparatory period for the research.

This academic year there were 43 students learning French at the AUCA, they have been learning this language from one semester to five years. Students preferred to organize a French club with one or two sessions a month. They proposed several purposes and we collectively arrived at the following:

- Develop speaking skills;
- Develop writing skills;
- Familiarize with culture, traditions, and customs of the Francophone countries;
- Develop the international contacts.

This process promoted our collective empowerment and transformed in some way a reality. I am sure that the opportunity to take an interview, to speak with people directly about an important problem, to collect information, and to make a decision on the organization of the French club is a very important part of the educational process. Students felt their ability to change the community. I think it was one of the important results of this collective work.

A decision is made, what do we do?

At the University we have diverse students' organizations and we must register our club in the Student Senate, present our program, elect the president, etc.

In the group of ten of my students there were several leaders who offered to compose an agenda for the club sessions using the results of the interviews, as well as to proceed to the registration and organization of the first session. I am a coordinator of the French club; and our initiative group suggested to elect the president of the club, and to organize a competition

between all of the AUCA students for the best name, the motto and the emblem of the club. They made a public announcement, indicated the time-frame, the objectives, and named the members of the commission. By that time some new participants joined them and helped to organize this work.

The educational process is tough. There are many courses and disciplines to learn, at the same time this lifetime is very important for the young people. The socialization is a difficult and long term process. New conditions of life, a new university community, new objectives and new rights, freedom and multicultural society, democracy and a new status of being a colleague of the professor, a real activity and a collective work in making decisions are important in our life. Young people develop and this activity will help them in the future. As R. Tandom (4) develops this idea: "The experience and knowledge presently possessed by ordinary citizens can themselves be a basis for more comprehensive and valid knowledge...Participatory research recognizes the value and the validity of people's experiences." (p.139)

This interesting activity took a long time. In a month we have done with the organizational process. The members of the commission picked up a name for the French club, offered by the majority of votes – "Ma douce France" (My tender France) and its motto "Il faut cultiver notre jardin" (It is necessary to cultivate our garden) by Voltaire. The garden is composed of knowledge, competitions, and skills. Developing we evaluate, became professional specialists and good members of society. The competition's result was the emblem of the French club.

The symbol of the French club.



The eagle is a symbol of the AUCA; the name of club on the multicolor circle is a symbol of the "Francophony". This emblem is very simple and combines the important subjects like University, France, and Francophone world. Now every member of the club receives a badge with the emblem.

The members of the initiative group composed a project of the French club program, using students' proposals. Via the e-mail correspondence, all members of the University community knew the results of each step in that process. Then, the day of the presentation arrived.

The first session was very exciting for us. There were many students learning the French language from different courses and levels. During this session the members of the initiative commission announced the results of the competition. Winners and all participants received a certificate and presents. The members of the initiative group bought disks with French songs and DVD movies in French. These presents will motivate students to learn better and more about the French culture. The atmosphere of this French holiday was friendly, exciting and cordial.

The election process became a central point of that session: students had to elect the club's president, vice-president, members of the committee, photographer and chronicler. Three candidates for the president's election presented their programs and after the discussion the members of the election committee distributed ballots to the students. In few minutes we knew the result. Maisa Nepesova (from Turkmenistan) won and became the president of the French club. Two other applicants became vice-presidents. Two junior students became the photographer and the chronicler.

The procedure of that election demonstrated the open and the democratic atmosphere in the social life of the AUCA. Students participate in a very important social process as organizers, managers, electorate, and as applicants. Students who study in AUCA arrived from 17 countries of Asia, Europe, America and Africa. This experience will help them to develop their social skills and abilities. After the return to their native countries they will participate in the social life and this experience will be valid for their professional and social status from family to the government, from a small company to an international corporation.

The members of club should discuss the club program. At the previous interview they intended to study the culture of France and Francophone countries. The initiative group presented the program project related to:

- Meeting with a representative of the French Embassy, 'Alliance Française' (International organization for the French language development);
- Celebrating Christmas in France;
- French Comedy. Louis de Funes' jubilee;
- Participation of Kyrgyz people in French Resistance during the Second World War;
- Educational system in France and in Francophone countries;
- Week of the Francophony in Kyrgyzstan;
- Week of the Taste: Pancakes in Brittany;

This program was adopted by the members and realized during the 2008-2009 academic year. Below I would like to describe some activities.

For example, Week of the Taste: Pancakes in Brittany. This French holiday takes place in October, and every day of the week dedicated to the different culinary traditions. With my help students organized this holiday at the club's session. First, the president of the club wrote a letter to the Student Senate to apply for the financial assistance; second, we organized and gave assignments to every member. Two members searched information about the holiday and recipes of pancakes; four persons bought products, plates, glasses, paper napkins, and etc.; other four students made the pancakes; another three people prepared games and quizzes; two persons set the French music, and at last another two students decorated the classroom. The professor prepared a small movie about French culinary traditions.

As a professor at the University I try to organize participation of every person of the community in all activities. Every time I ask my students if they want to participate, collaborate or have individual work. Students feel free to select colleagues or topics, occupations, activities. This process makes them responsible. This responsibility in front of colleagues and friends is a very important educational method of a socialization process. Being responsible they become researchers and authors of each activity and select ways or technologies to realize it in the most creative ways. In every situation the professor is ready to help with a consultation, either in person or by e-mail. At the same time there is neither coercion nor violation, no exploitation on gender basis, no corruption between participants. I hope that students enjoyed the process when every member is equal even with the professor.

This pedagogical method is important because in our Asian society exist some traditions leading to exploit women, young persons, or pupils. And my objective is to demonstrate that the respect, understanding, tolerance and friendship should resolve a lot of problems and establish peace, as well as to contribute to the progress of every task. I am sure that errors and mistakes are accepted easily in this kind of activity because the results may be stated as significant; in this process of participatory research we apply to ethical aspects: make claims and establish research relationships with people, according Marge Reitsma-Street (3).

AUCA is a multicultural University and I prefer to teach my students common values like freedom, equality, respect, understanding, kindness, beauty, love, peace, and tolerance. I try to create the atmosphere of friendship and parity.

Agostino Portera, professor of the Centre for Intercultural Studies at the University of Verona, Italy, in his article (2) explains that in the context of globalization and increasing convergence of different languages, religions, cultural behavior and ways of thinking, intercultural education is regarded as a more appropriate response to the new situation. In this multicultural area at the AUCA the main educational aims are acknowledgment and respect of cultural diversity. The meeting with the "other", with an individual of a different cultural origin, is seen as a challenge and as a possibility to get together and to reflect on the realms of values, rules and behavioral standards. This opportunity to participate in the activities of the French club at the American University in Central Asia, to be a member of the multicultural area in the democratic system involves the pedagogical activity. As well as very important is the participatory research of the process to be able to consider differences and similarities, brought into contact, and introduce the interaction.

All activities were organized using different technology and skills. Students prepared diverse activities such as presentations (Christmas, Louis de Funes, French Resistance); role plays (Christmas); interviews; quantitative and qualitative analyses; contests, quizzes, games; reading with questions (French Resistance); friendly chats and discussions (meeting with Chargée d'Affaires of the French Embassy; as well as with Ms. Bÿranger Laglois, from Alliance Française (she spoke about the Educational system of France); with Professor Narynbek Alymkulov (he writes a book on Participation of Kyrgyz people at the French Resistance); Mr. David Gauzere, vice-president of the Kyrgyz-French Association.

There is another example. After the presentation on "Louis de Funes jubilee," the students asked the professor to organize a "cinema session" every week. We watched several movies in French like the musical "Notre-Dame de Paris", "Les parapluies de Cherbourg" (Cherbourg's umbrellas), and "Paris 2008". During the cinema sessions I interrupted the movie and organized a discussion using Critical Thinking methods. These methods provide participation of every person in the

discussion (oral or written), in pairs or small group (2-3 persons). Every group receives one task and the discussion helps to understand the whole problem. Mc Keachie (1) suggests that asking students to write a couple minutes their initial answers to a question posed beforehand can help. If a student has already written an answer, it is much easier for him than answering immediately. In this work the professor is a guide and every participant can approve and argue his position. The teacher's job is not to set students to a particular solution, but rather to listen and to teach them how to solve problems themselves. Each opinion is evaluated but can be discussed.

This possibility to speak French about the movie is so interesting for students that they began to collect DVDs with films in French and now the French club has a good collection, although it is very difficult in our country. The major part of the movies is in English, but students use the Internet, take opportunity with tourist trips, and other possibilities, and the movie collection is growing. This collection permits us to organize the circulating library, because we would love to spread books and magazines in French, and increase the number of members of our club. It will be a new activity for the next semester.

At the end of past semester we started to expand our club and invited students from other Universities of our city. The members prepared letters and invited friends, colleagues, professors and other interested persons to the meetings of the club. A lot of interested people arrived. First, the members of the club organized a game with a aim to introduce new participants and get acquaintance with them. Assignments to compose a French proverb, using a small piece of paper of different colors with parts of proverb, united the old and the new members. 15-20 minutes later there was a friendly atmosphere in the classroom of 50 persons. Those who composed first the proverb have won a prize. The new and the ancient members were sitting together with French speaking people and professors and smiled. Later we had a presentation of the Educational system of France and Francophone countries. At this session we had many guests from France and Canada. Guests speaking French informed about European, French and Canadian educational systems. They answered several questions about the grants, costs, and way of life in those countries. Students listened attentively and asked a lot of questions. I think that our club will stimulate students to learn French better, participate in the club's sessions, enlarge the multicultural area based on common values and create new challenges in the students' community. This opportunity to exchange our own experience is an important step in the world epistemology and construction of a new democratic society. The Internet site of the club will help to solve difficult problems of time frame, participation on-line, forum, using materials, communication, and etc.

In conclusion it is necessary to mention that the students' initiative to create the French speaking club helped to solve difficult epistemological, pedagogical, educational, and communicative problems. Participation in the club's sessions and activities

- helps to develop speaking, writing and understanding skills in French;
- permits to familiarize students with the culture, traditions, and customs of France and the Francophone countries;
- develops the international contacts with persons and organizations;
- helps the socialization process in a multicultural community;
- creates new ethical dimensions using the participatory research;
- helps to receive new skills and competences necessary to develop new action plans for the future.

The potential contribution of research consists of several issues:

1. The assignment on the process of creating French Club could be said to be a strategy to develop speaking, writing and understanding skills in French; to enable students to get familiar with the culture, traditions, and customs of France and the Francophone countries; to develop international contacts with persons and organizations; to help the socialization process in a multicultural community; to create new ethical dimensions using the participatory research; to receive new skills and competences necessary to develop new action plans for the future.
2. This topic reveals that the process adopts a community action research approach using participative qualitative methods.
3. Local priorities are the basis of selection of problem for research
4. Community members participate in research process in identifying the problem, generating the facts and utilizing the findings. Local concepts & frameworks are used while interpreting the data.
5. Methodology emphasizes collective approach.
6. This topic reveals that not only the professor has understood the concepts and perspective well and you can also apply them in varied problem situation. This analysis of participatory methodology reveals it.
7. This assignment also aimed to understand the professor's ability to apply concept. The students with the professor have rightly understood the importance of community involvement to enable them to participate collectively in research process. Accordingly throughout in this proposal the professor has emphasized on the need to involve all the stakeholders. This proposal raises the importance of partnership with key stakeholders to address the problem issue holistically.

References

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