
Planning to Meet a Learning Community's Needs

Francis J. Troyan, Casco Bay High School

Abstract

In the 2004 Annenberg video focusing on addressing the needs of diverse learners, Hall Haley and Donato conclude their discussion by emphasizing the vital role of planning in a successful modern language classroom. In order to better reach all students, essential components must be present: (1) a school-wide commitment to student success, (2) teachers who collaborate with one another across disciplines and know what happens in one another's classrooms, and (3) planning and assessment that allow "multiple pathways to learning... multiple pathways to knowing" (Donato, 2004). This article offers a vision for addressing the needs of all learners in a modern language program from the planning process to the implementation of integrated performance assessment.

A Home for a Vision

In July 2005, modern language teachers at Casco Bay High School arrived full of hope of developing a new integrated, performance-based curriculum. Their plans fit well within the scheme of expeditionary learning, an educational model that combines rigorous academics with active field work and real world experience. One staff member had been in several other language departments hoping to shift focus from text-driven, de-contextualized programs to a performance-based curriculum. In each setting, traditional assessments had been so institutionalized that change seemed years off. These language teachers had the vision, they just needed the environment to support and nurture it. There on that warm July day, they found the home for the vision as they set off in their caravan of canoes on the Presumpscot River—their first collaborative effort as a learning community.

In the context of Casco Bay High School for Expeditionary Learning, it is difficult to separate the experience of the modern language teacher from that of the other teachers in the school community. Therefore, a discussion of the first year of our modern language program and the efforts to create a highly integrated curriculum had to include the whole school, as modern language would not be as effective without the support of colleagues in math, science, humanities, and wellness. At Casco Bay High School, teachers know the learning styles of their students because they guide them through a two-week learning styles expedition in ninth grade. Once empow-

Francis J. Troyan, a 2006 NECTFL Mead Fellow, is a founding faculty member of Casco Bay HS where he teaches French and co-advises the school's Civil Rights Team Project. He earned a Master of Arts in Teaching French Language Literature, and Culture from the University of Pittsburgh. He has taught French, EFL, and ESL all levels K-16 in the US and France.

ered with that knowledge, students can tell teachers how they learn best. They are encouraged not only to advocate for their own learning styles but also to develop any areas of weakness. During these two weeks, modern language teachers work with Humanities teachers to explore ways of learning new vocabulary and how best to study those newly acquired terms. The French and Spanish teachers launch the study of second languages by analyzing how children learn a first language. As a result, students know exactly why *the teacher never speaks English in class*.

Planning with the Standards—A New Grading System

In inaugurating Casco Bay High School, the learning community created a new standards-based grading system (see Appendix A). The first challenge involved selling the system to students, parents, and ourselves. The work began during the weeks of August preceding the opening of school. There the principal presented his vision to the grading committee, composed of stakeholders from all groups of the school's community. The committee came to a consensus and brought its proposal to the whole group through a skit in which the principal rated the quality of various types of chocolate cookies. In a cookie-baking task, to *approach* the standard (a grade of two on Casco Bay High School's four point scale) means that the student submits cookie dough as the final product. To *meet* the standard (a three on the CBHS scale), a student may submit an ordinary chocolate chip cookie. The student who *exceeds* the standard (a grade of four) presents to the class a chocolate cookie flavored with cinnamon and nutmeg and the essence of hazelnut. The group accepted the new grading system and thus ended the first in a series of on-going conversations about what constitutes a standard, how one meets it, and how much time one must have in order to meet it. In this grading system, students no longer receive grades that average their performance across a grading period. Rather, they have multiple opportunities to meet each standard. Just like the baker who burns the first batch of cookies and prepares a second batch, students in this standard-based system have opportunities to improve their performance with practice and revision. Through this system, Casco Bay High School acknowledges that each individual reaches the standard at a different pace and in a different way.

Planning the Curriculum—Expeditions

In addition to implementing a new grading system, Casco Bay High School is innovative as one of twenty Expeditionary Learning (EL) High Schools recently started around the country. The EL curriculum revolves around learning expeditions—long-term, in-depth studies of a single topic that explore vital guiding questions, incorporate standards, involve fieldwork, and culminate in a project, product or performance. The culminating event for the 2005-2006 school year was a conference organized by students in which they presented belief statements to a panel of stakeholders from around the state. Their belief statements held their visions for the future of education and work in Maine. Students received immediate and direct feedback from the stakeholders. One of the stakeholders, impressed by the students' work, later presented the students with a \$10,000 grant to purchase laptops for the school.

In their ideal form, Learning Expeditions involve a high level of integration of content areas. In her work with elementary content-based foreign language instruction, Met

(1991) asserts that teachers must know the school-wide curriculum and the sequence of instruction of the material. In the modern language department at Casco Bay High School, teachers struggled with how to participate in a highly integrated expedition and at the same time honor the process of language acquisition. Learning Expeditions assume that all teachers involve all students in learning activities whose themes cut across the curriculum. However, how can a student in a first year language course discuss the state of the fishing industry when s/he cannot yet say hello? The most pronounced issue in a content-based curriculum—one that became evident almost immediately after beginning planning work at Casco Bay HS—is that it “may sequence some language objectives according to the curriculum of other content areas” (Met, 293). The Expeditionary Learning model assumed a highly collaborative relationship between modern language and other content areas. The Expeditionary Learning model requires that teachers plan learning experiences that culminate in common synthesizing products, such as the above mentioned conference. In theory, it would have been an ideal setting for highly integrated, content-based instruction. However, combining the overarching theme of the *Working Waterfront* with a curriculum rooted in functional objectives guided by the ACTFL Scale for Oral Proficiency presented certain challenges early on. With modern language teachers committed to preparing students for success in proficiency-oriented assessments, an immediate theoretical conflict developed. Colleagues in Humanities encouraged modern language teachers to explore the vocabulary of the waterfront and the fishing industries. Such tasks would undermine the goals of the modern language program. The modern language teachers responded by inviting the Expeditionary Learning school designers and the rest of the high school staff to consider the language functions necessary in the proposed case studies. The *Working Waterfront*, the year’s first expedition, presented a context rich with vocabulary but the guiding question for the expedition (*How do we sustain a working waterfront?*) required language well beyond the novice level. Furthermore, modern language teachers would have struggled to find sufficient connections in that context to sustain a trimester’s worth of study. In the end, in consideration of the ACTFL Performance Guidelines Scale, and refocusing attention on *preparing students for the future*, the staff compromised that modern language would work independently until the expedition planning which focused more closely on the needs of modern language learning. In fact, during the first two expeditions, modern language teachers continued to work independent of the rest of the school. Modern language learning involved the fieldwork paramount to Expeditionary Learning (e.g., visits to local target-language speaking restaurants, target language community outreach, and presentations at other high schools in the city) and culminated in a final project. However, instead of exploring the *Working Waterfront* and Greek theater, French and Spanish students acquired essential survival skills in conversation through investigations into the French- and Spanish-speaking communities of the city and through a restaurant expedition. In the end, first-year language students couldn’t say much about the waterfront, but they could describe themselves, their families, and others; order food in a restaurant; and find their way through a marketplace. The collaborative EL ideal—full collaboration during all three expeditions in a school year—felt unmanageable. The work of the modern language teachers at this school was (and still is) to find the intersection between a proficiency-oriented model and a content-

based model. Bragger (1999) in her Developmental Model for Content-Oriented Instruction, proposes a system that expands Krashen's (1988) input hypothesis to account for the needs of content-based instruction. She asserts that "for learning to occur [in a content-based classroom], there must be familiarity with either the language needed to deal with the content or [with] the content itself" (379). In the context of a proficiency-oriented program which focuses on the three modes of communication identified by ACTFL, further development of Bragger's model is necessary. Not only must the modern language teacher consider the appropriateness of the content and the language according to Bragger's model, one has to consider the functional language objectives that can emerge from the content at the student's level. It is at that intersection of content and language function that we develop curriculum at Casco Bay High School.

Casco Bay High School Planning Model for Content-Based Modern Language Instruction

Planning for Assessment —The Integrated Performance Assessment

Donato (2004) asserts that knowing what we plan to do with learners and how each of them learn is vital to successful teaching. Modern language teachers at CBHS begin planning by developing the Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA) that students take at the end of the trimester. The EL planning template—developed using the work of Stiggins and Chappius (2006)—facilitates the process beginning with the guiding themes and questions that learners will address in the Expedition. From there, teachers plan backward to differentiated activities that lead to the desired outcome—meeting standards on the assessment. The IPA fits naturally in such a planning model, as it was developed considering the research of Wiggins who with McTighe (1998) proposes a backward planning model. The IPA highlighted in this paper was developed at that initial planning phase. After the teacher consulted with the 9th grade team on possible expedition topics, s/he confirmed that the theme woven throughout the three phases of the IPA (work) fit into the planning model (e.g., the context allowed for sufficient activity development at the proficiency level of the students). The stage set, development of the IPA began.

Language Function CBHS Content ML Program Phase One—Interpretive

For this task, students read an article from *Okapi*, a French magazine for youth. The article highlighted three different professions, indicating those personality traits that best suit the job and the education necessary to find employment in the profession. Depending on the student, they received a novice level or intermediate level comprehension guide. According to the level:

Novice Level

- Identify cognates
- Find important ideas in the text
- Identify the main idea of the text

Intermediate Level

In addition to the novice level tasks, students:

- Make meaning of words from context
- Make inferences about the author's intent

Phase Two—Interpersonal

In the next class, the students received the feedback sheets from the Interpretive Phase and began Phase Two, the Interpersonal Phase. In this part of the assessment, students received the following prompt:

You are studying in France and you decide to get a job to earn some spending money. You read about three professions in an article in Okapi. From there, you begin thinking about jobs that you may like to pursue. Now you are going to a job center. There, you will be interviewed by a person to find out what type of work best suits you. You will have to tell him/her about yourself (family, pastime activities, likes/dislikes). Tell him/her about what professions interest you.

To complete the task, students responded to a series of prompts intended to elicit spontaneous speech in which they show how they can use the vocabulary familiar to them in a slightly different context. As in the Interpretive Phase, the teacher rated the students' samples using the ACTFL IPA rubrics from the IPA manual and gave the feedback to the students before they began the next phase. One phase informs the next both in content and in language acquired.

Phase Three—Presentational

In the final portion of the IPA, students imagined that they worked for a French job agency. Their task was to put together a presentation on a particular job to a group of potential applicants. For the following class, they had to prepare a poster highlighting the career of their choice using the format presented in the Okapi article. The poster had to present: (1) the type of person that chooses this career, (2) the type of studies that one must complete, and (3) where one finds that type of work. The students presented the posters to the class the following day.

An Authentic Product for an Authentic Audience

The poster that students prepared for the final phase of the IPA also served as a rough draft for a presentation they gave at the end of the year to another French class at a different high school in the city. Students were not only motivated to complete phase three because it was the part of an assessment, but also because they wanted the feedback from the IPA to revise their work for the presentation to the other class. Having planned backward from the IPA, the teacher could identify the most appropriate pathways that students would follow to acquire the language skills necessary for the assessment. Learning activities ask students to:

- Find cognates and important ideas in texts
- Recall information from stories told to them
- Retell parts of those

- Speak spontaneously in scenarios
- Present information to others in the class

Student Experiences

In introducing any change into a system, students need time to adjust. Implementing a new system of assessment requires taking the time to accompany students through the new process. **It is a messy process and nothing is perfect in the beginning.** However, by the end of the trimester—after weeks of using the IPA terminology and raising students’ awareness about the Modes of Communication—students had phenomenal insight into their learning as they completed the IPA. Below are some of their reactions:

I think the IPA relates more to if we were actually going to a French-speaking country. It was better for me because it was the stuff we learned all year. This is very different—and a lot better—because you actually learn it and don’t forget it. You’re actually learning even during the test.

Students actively engage in the IPA and “actually learn” during an assessment. To engage students in the Interpretive mode, students read in the *Okapi* a passage in which Christian, an ambulance driver, says that one of the aspects of his job that he really likes is “the contact” (le contact). In reading this passage, a student asks the following question:

S1: What does this mean? It says that he says that “he likes contact” but the sentence stops there... What do I write??

T: What do you think he could be talking about based on the context of that statement?

The student can draw the conclusion that Christian can only be referring to “contact” with *people* or continue reading to find that Christian continues:

I not only drive people, I listen to them and reassure them during difficult experiences.

Another student questioned the cognates “to create” and “créer”:

S2: I don’t know if this (pointing to “créer”) is a cognate. It isn’t spelled exactly the same.

T: Think about what we said a cognate is and then check through the rest of the text.

In each instance, the teacher redirected students to access what they already know about cognates in order to determine whether or not the word in question is a cognate. According to Vygotsky (1978), these students’ problem was solved within their Zone of Proximal Development. The ultimate evidence of the value of IPA came from one student who struggled to see the purpose of the different phases. She exclaimed during the assessment, “I get it! The same theme goes throughout the different parts so that we don’t have waste time to change from one part to the next!”

Meeting Casco Bay High School Grading Standards = Meeting National Standards

The academic standards students must meet in French and Spanish at Casco Bay High School reflect the Maine State Learning Result and the *National Standards*. Students interact with the National Standards—the three modes of communication, the role of community and culture, the nature of comparisons—because they see them on their report cards. Connections to other content areas are a given because of the nature of the EL model. Students routinely reflect on how their learning in one content area connects with that of others. Students have multiple opportunities to meet the standards with our performance-based assessment system. When students see the Modes of Communication on the IPA, they recognize them because we refer to them often and these make up three of the seven academic standards that students must meet.

The IPA, the CBHS Grading System, and Individual Differences

The Integrated Performance Assessment assumes that if a student does not meet the standard in the Interpretive Phase for example, the student does not continue to the next phase as there is important information in that phase that the student needs to understand before moving on. If the student does not have the proficiency skills necessary to access that information at a given level, the student must continue to practice at that level until s/he can meet the standard on the IPA. Different students will reach the standard at different rates. The CBHS grading system allows the IPA to truly rate student performance as opposed to traditional grading systems, which would insist that the IPA convert to a letter grade.

Implications for the Profession

As a startup school, Casco Bay High School has a unique opportunity that other schools do not have. All teachers, however, can employ some of the strategies of this school. They can look beyond their classrooms to plan collaboratively. Teachers must talk to other teachers to help students determine their preferred learning styles. They can incorporate grading systems that provide diverse student populations multiple opportunities to meet standards. Not all schools have the same opportunity for collaboration; however, all schools can, to some degree, have

- a school-wide commitment to student success
- teachers who collaborate with one another across disciplines and know what happens in one another's classrooms,
- planning and assessment that allow “multiple pathways to learning [and] knowing”

References

- Annenberg/Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), (2004). *Teaching foreign languages K-12: valuing diversity in learners*. Retrieved May 18, 2006 from <http://www.learner.org/resources/series201.html>.
- Bragger, J. & Rice, D. (1999). The message is the Medium: a new paradigm for content oriented instruction. *Foreign Language Annals*, 32, 373-391.

- Krashen, S. (1988). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. New York: Prentice Hall International.
- Met, M. (1991). Learning language through content: learning content through language. *Foreign Language Annals*, 24, 281-295.
- National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project. (1999). *Standards for foreign language learning in the 21st century*. Lawrence, KS: Allen Press, Inc.
- Stiggins, R. & Chappuis, J. (2006). What a difference a word makes: assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning helps students succeed. *Journal of Staff Development*, 27, 10-14.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The development of high psychological processes*. (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds. & Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wiggins G., & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding By Design*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Notes

1. The reader should consult the *ACTFL Integrated Performance Assessment Manual* (Glisan, Adair-Hauck, Koda, Sandrock, & Swender, 2003) for the entire set of Interpretive, Interpersonal, and Presentational rubrics.

Appendix A

Casco Bay HS Grading Language and Scale

Each Casco Bay High School course will be built around ten to fifteen *course standards*. A course standard is a description of a learning target that can be achieved during a particular course; they represent the essential things all students must know or be able to do in a course. Our standards based grading language and scale is consistent with the scale that the state uses for the MEA's and mandates for the Local Assessment System.

1 = Does Not Meet the Standards

2 = Partially Meets the Standards

3 = Meets the Standards

4 = Exceeds the Standards

For each major assessment, teachers will develop *rubrics* (often with student input) that make clear the criteria that a student will have to meet in order to receive a 2, 3 or 4.

What specifically do these grades say about student achievement on a particular assessment of a course standard?

1 = Does Not Meet the Standards: A "1" is given when, in the absence of extenuating circumstances (e.g. an excused absence), a student does not demonstrate substantive progress towards meeting the standards or criteria of a given assessment by an established deadline. This may mean that a student has not met the majority of

performance indicators or criteria for that assessment, or they have not genuinely attempted to meet the rubric criteria. ***This is not a passing grade.***

2 = Partially Meets the Standards: A “2” is given when a student has demonstrated a substantive attempt to meet the standards of a given assessment by the established deadline, but needs more time to achieve competency. This may mean a student has met the majority (51%) of the performance indicators or criteria for that assessment or genuinely attempts to meet the rubric criteria. ***This is not a passing grade.***

3 = Meets the Standards: The student’s work fundamentally meets the standard being assessed and the assessment requirements. It is competent work that demonstrates the essential skills and knowledge for that grade level or course. *All* of the criteria for Meets the Standard (e.g., in the rubric) are demonstrated in the work. ***This is a rigorous standard and a passing grade.***

4 = Exceeds the Standards: The student’s work goes substantially above and beyond the course standards in quality. The work may not be perfect, but it includes complexity, sophistication, originality, depth, synthesis and/or application that clearly exceeds what would be expected to meet the standards in this assessment. Sometimes, a student will have to opt to complete a particular task(s) or prompt(s), not required of all, in order to be eligible for an Exceeds. *All* of the criteria for Exceeds the Standard (e.g.: in the rubric) are demonstrated in the work.

What specifically do these grades say about student achievement when used for an overall course grade?

1 = Does Not Meet the Standards: A student’s work has not met the majority of the standards assessed.

2 = Partially Meets the Standards: A student’s work has met a majority of the standards assessed, but the student’s work has partially met one or more. This is *not* a passing grade.

3 = Meets the Standards: A student’s work has met (earned a 3) on each and every one of the course standards assessed up to that point. This does *not* mean that a student has to pass each and every assessment. It does mean that a student has to pass at least one assessment (and sometimes more) of each and every course standard. At the end of a trimester, this grade and above earns course credit.

4 = Exceeds the Standards: A student’s work has consistently and/or lately Exceeded the Standard in each and every course standard assessed up to that point.

Between 3 and 4 On many assessments, especially those that are less complex (e.g.: a quiz), only the grades listed above are possible. (On occasion, on assessments of crucial factual knowledge (e.g.: safety) only grades 1-3 may be possible.) On more complex assessments that include rubrics with multiple criteria for a standard, a grade between 3 and 4 is possible. On a given assessment of a course standard, this means that in addition to meeting the criteria for a 3...

LEARNING IN A DIVERSE SETTING

3.25 A student's work meets about 25% of the Exceeds criteria.

3.5 A student's work meets about 50% of the Exceeds criteria.

3.75 A student's work meets about 75% of the Exceeds criteria.

For overall grades, students may receive grades between 3 and 4. What does this say about student achievement?

3.25 Consistently or lately, the student's work has exceeded the standard about 25% of the time and/or met about 25% of the "Exceeds" criteria.

3.5 Consistently or lately, the student's work has exceeded the standard about a 50% of the time and/or consistently met about 50% of the "Exceeds" criteria.

3.75 Consistently or lately, the student's work has exceeded the standard about 75% of the time and/or consistently met about 75% of the "Exceeds" criteria.

Between 2 and 3 On a given assessment, a teacher may opt to give 2+ to indicate that a student is very close to meeting the standard. This grade is only for communication purposes on assessments. It will not be used on a trimester report card or to reflect overall standing on a course standard. Teachers may use narrative comments or other means on a report card to indicate what a student needs to do in order to move from a "2" to a "3" on a given standard.

In exceptional circumstances, an "Incomplete" grade may be granted at the end of trimester (e.g.; in the event of an extended, excused absence). In this circumstance, an Incomplete Contract will be developed that details the standards and assessments still to be completed and a timeline for completion.

Academic Honors

Honor Roll

Meeting the Standards in a course is a significant accomplishment. Although a direct translation to a non-standards-based grading system is not possible or advisable, the GPA translation of 3.0 fairly reflects our rigor. All students who Meet the Standards in all of their classes by the final day of the trimester will:

- 1) Be eligible for an Elective Intensive
- 2) Be recognized for achieving Honor Roll
- 3) Have a GPA of at least 3.0

With Honors

Doing work that consistently Exceeds the Standards is an exceptional achievement. It often requires completing not just more work, but different, more sophisticated and rigorous work. Any student who completes the trimester with an overall grade of 3.75 or higher will be said to have completed the trimester "**With Honors**" in that course. This will be designated on their transcripts with an "H."

High Honors

Students with a GPA of 3.75 or higher for a trimester achieve the High Honor Roll.

Course Credit

Partial course credit (.66) is awarded at the end of each trimester.

Assessing Habits of Work (HOW)

Our Habits of Work checklist assesses how you interact with others, how you approach learning challenges and how you participate in class

Habits of Work are assessed in each course, each marking period, using the same grading scale (1-4).

A universal checklist defines quality Habits of Work. The number of checks from a teacher will determine the grade received. Space is provided on the checklist for teachers to provide comments as necessary.

There will be a HOW Honor Roll for all students who earn a 3 or higher for a HOW grade in every class.

Reflecting on Character: The Pathways to Success

In September 2005, students created “The Pathways to Success.” The Pathways identify what students will need to do in order for them to become the people they dream to be and the citizens we need them to be.

1. *Persevere when things are hard.*
2. *Learn from our failures.*
3. *Be willing to learn and try new things.*
4. *Have wonderful ideas and use them without fear.*
5. *Discover yourself. Overcome your fears and find your strengths, values, passions and responsibilities.*
6. *Be community. Build, encourage and share.*
7. *Be supportive and make sure people feel safe and comfortable.*
8. *Be a good role model.*
9. *Question.*
10. *Seek positive change.*

The Pathways will *not* be graded, but they will be routinely reflected on (e.g.: as a part of expeditions, portfolios and/or conferences).