The Tyranny of Culture: Modern Language Departments in the Australian University

If educationists are weary of being told, mostly by their colleagues, that Australian education is in crisis, this situation is by no means unique to Australian Universities in general, or to foreign language education in particular. Foregrounding the field of foreign language education is surely even wearier of the atmosphere pervading their field. Discussion of the problem often revolves around the difficulties of attracting learners in a society where monocultural attitudes predominate and where most importance is attached to the study of "cultural" subjects believed to provide a career. Thus the majority of contributions to the discussion understandably involve either methodological changes which will attract and hold learners, or efforts to demonstrate the cultural and vocational benefits of language, or both.

The following contribution proceeds from the view that the concept of culture which has dominated most university language departments has been biased, narrow and ultimately damaging to the study of languages at all levels, to the point where they no longer attract both the general and the academic communities. Whereas studies in university language departments were once viewed as being of broad general concern to all educated people they are now seen rather as being of interest only to a few very specialised students and scholars.

Two major and closely related changes, perhaps well known, but not always seen as being linked with the situation facing language and other "traditionally popular" departments are especially important. First, the democratisation of education has meant first, the democratisation of education has meant that the children of clerks, tradesmen and the like, and even, in view of the prospective continuing education, those same clerks, tradesmen and their wives! The abolition of fees undoubtedly gave this programme some impetus. Those students seeking entry to universities until the recent past have shared a common cultural consciousness, hence courses designed on traditional, indeed, what might be called post or even neo-classical models, posed no problem. The homogeneity no longer exists, but as a matter of democratic justice the five year high school and hence the university must be seen.

Language departments appear on the whole to have resisted acknowledging this kind of change and continuing making assumptions which are no longer valid, about the kind of students they are receiving. Second, the rise of the social sciences within the Faculties of Arts in Australian universities has set new norms for enrolment numbers, norms which most traditional Arts departments could never achieve. The pattern of distribution of funds has been both financially and morally debilitating for such departments, prompting the uncomfortable recognition on the part of both staff and students that departments which cannot meet these norms have, at best, somewhat dubious goods on offer.

It will not do to simply disparage the growth of social science departments on the grounds that because they are more applied they are somehow less academic. A glance at the publications list of those departments certainly shows some "applied" departments, French, Russian or German would show that if academic leadership is defined in terms of public importance and impact, to say nothing of sheer quantity, then the "traditional" departments have lost it. This is a crude and unfair assessment; the French language course is, after all, an obvious and usually quite obvious choice for undergraduate, postgraduate as well. In contrast, the translation course could possibly be a preparation. Certainly, interested in grammar-teaching, unless there exists a serious misunderstanding about what is being done in schools today. Yet it is the notion that such a course could lead to. Students taking language major courses are encouraged to believe that their language studies are relevant to the general community, however, for language departments to so structure their studies these matching beliefs begin to assume a semblance of truth. The bleak alternative is that such courses are to become "an intellectual foundings home", a refuge for orphaned ideas and facts no-one else wants to know. 4

The solution certainly does not lie in channelling the "pure" students into the universities and the "applied" students into the C.A.E.'s. The Martin Report on Higher Education has noted that if students might be better served in institutions offering courses of different orientation and academic discipline. 5 C.A.E. enrolments are still only about half of those in universities. And as long as tertiary institutions continue to be the filter for the filter will not be willing to send students to other institutions. The idea that the C.A.E.'s has proved a "solution" is precisely the opposite. For the "traditional" departments to become a very sorry state indeed, both financially and academically. Academically, because even the most brilliant research scholar must have library grants, research grants, conference grants, within an adequately financed and sufficiently staffed department. This point cannot be too strongly stressed for those who believe that "academic" departments would be better off with just sufficient staff and "applied" departments having to carry a larger number of less-than-scholarly, career-minded students. The latter pay for the former and no department can consider losing them. At the same time let us hasten to add that we are not advocating any abdication of academic responsibility on the part of language departments. We are certainly not suggesting that those departments concerned with the French, Russian or German tradition of teaching and research, as well as to the "pure" students, lie beyond the purview of studies they offer at present, and, of course, take account of the range of skills they can make available. Thus does not mean that the models of study of which this study programme is not to be followed by the current students or that the models of study must be imposed on students in the belief that these are the only models possible.

A major factor in the decline of language departments, according to the general community, but also from the academic community, is Bostock's pointed out that the concentration of language departments on the aesthetic aspects of imaginative literature has effectively shut out students from other disciplines. Such students may have an interest in French of German in relation to their own disciplines, but because language department programmes concentrate on literary scholarship, fact that their normative requirements are not even considered to come within the scope of the "proper" concerns of a language department. Bostock notes both scholarly abilities in some language departments are thus overwhelmingly unaware of foreign languages.

This situation is surely a distortion of the very idea of a university, which should be constantly striving to open its studies to and forge new links with the whole of the academic community. Students in other disciplines should be able to take a course of study which enlightens them about the requirements. The narrowness of interests mentioned above and the role of the extra-departmental language departments, and it is this, rather than the alleged monoculturalism of Australians which is thrusting language departments into an increasingly anachronistic and weakening position. A broadening of studies could help to meet the demand for career relevance, a demand which usually emerges from the whole body of rediscovered classical writings, including medicine, law, philosophy, natural science and imaginative literature. With the advent of the scientific and technical writings gradually lost their validity. Although the classical languages are still immediately the classical model of education, and hence they should be followed by the education of the modern world, students are familiar with the range of skills they can make available and the need for which this study programme is not to be followed by the current students or that the models of study must be imposed on students in the belief that these are the only models possible.

Our universities, modern language departments appear to have derived their models from the earlier studies in classical languages at leading institutions such as Oxford. At the time of the early Renaissance, the study of classes was an essential part of the whole body of rediscovered classical writings, including medicine, law, philosophy, natural science and imaginative literature. With the advent of the scientific and technical writings gradually lost their validity. Although the classical languages are still immediately the classical model of education, and hence they should be followed by the education of the modern world, students are familiar with the range of skills they can make available and the need for which this study programme is not to be followed by the current students or that the models of study must be imposed on students in the belief that these are the only models possible.

Our point, then, is to suggest that modern language departments did not at some earlier stage consciously commence the study of literature, but rather, in many cases, this is a recent event. This is not to say that literary studies are somehow illegitimate or that literary studies are somehow illegitimate or that literary studies are somehow illegitimate or that literary studies are somehow illegitimate or that literary studies are somehow illegitimate or that literary studies are somehow illegitimate or that literary studies are somehow illegitimate or that literary studies are somehow illegitimate or that literary studies are somehow illegitimate or that literary studies are somehow illegitimate or that literary studies are somehow illegitimate.
only other possible avenue in these departments is an inclination to literary study is philological/linguistic studies.

A healthy survival instinct might lead modern language departments to become more client-conscious in an increasingly cost-and-accountability age. They might begin to identify and realistically monitor their functions in relation to other departments and potential, and instead of assuming that all students benefit from courses intended for literary/philological specialists. Language department staffs are in danger of being regarded as irresponsible high priests of an inaccessible cult, rather than as necessary. Language teachers must be able to perceive their own motivés in this situation and recognise the extent to which their vested interests colour their decisions. Will they see that language courses are of such fundamental importance apart from their instrumental value, has there been no need for centuries to be learned? Latin and Greek, especially in schools? One has the uncomfortable feeling that while teachers of modern language departments may pay lip-service to the importance of classical languages, they are privately prepared to let them languish, as long as their own languages are supported.

Foreign language studies will be able to regain their proper place in the academic community only when the "Cultural History" and "Civilization" courses cease more to be course-holding. Teachers may agree to subside the kind of course present in language departments at a cautionary rate. If this is to be rectified, language teachers need to begin constructing models of courses not only radically different in content, but also in intent, from the present courses, and language departments in universities will need to begin to employ staff who can teach within these models. Modern studies of other overall are at this stage of interdisciplinary nature and the failure of language departments to acknowledge this has resulted in seemingly "unpredictable" developments overtaking departments at a cautionary rate.

An exemplary case study is that of the German Department in the University of Queensland, following the changes from the term to the semester system. The Department converted its standard monocentric first, second and third year courses into multiple, optional single-semester units. Significantly, when student choice is allowed free expression it is being found that although overall courses at study levels, literature courses are coming dangerously close to extinction because of negligible enrolments, whereas courses in modern, more accessible and unusual strands seem to be working. The discrepancy is most unexpected, manageable because of their size. In the light of this experience traditionally-oriented language departments may or may not) care to contemplate what their fate would be, if they suddenly made the literature component of their courses completely optional.

In the face of the well-documented and painfully familiar decline of interest in foreign-language studies it must be concluded that either attractive material is not being provided, or that the material is not uninteresting, or that the pauses in between. Language teachers must be able to perceive their own motivés in this situation and recognise the extent to which their vested interests colour their decisions. Will they see that language courses are of such fundamental importance apart from their instrumental value, has there been no need for centuries to be learned? Latin and Greek, especially in schools? One has the uncomfortable feeling that while teachers of modern language departments may pay lip-service to the importance of classical languages, they are privately prepared to let them languish, as long as their own languages are supported.

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Let us stress that we are in no way suggesting that the university abandon its cultural role for a purely instrumental role. The university remains for the foreseeable future perhaps the last resort where pure inquiry may take place in a spirit of independence, and the "philosophically" based departments must continue to educate towards a liberal culture, free of economic, political and social demands. At the same time, they are doing everyone a grave disservice by attempting to ignore or disparage the students' own desires and interests. Accountability and flexibility, realistically based on current and projected staff levels are vital to the future of all "traditional" university departments but not more so than departments of modern languages.

REFERENCES

11. P.H. Farruthe, loc. cit.

Changes to the regulations of various educational institutions have probably had less impact on the composition of the university student population than the major social changes occurring outside them. The average family size has fallen and child-bearing is completed by a younger age now than it was twenty years ago. As women are more often single mothers, and that the average age at which people first become parents has fallen.

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