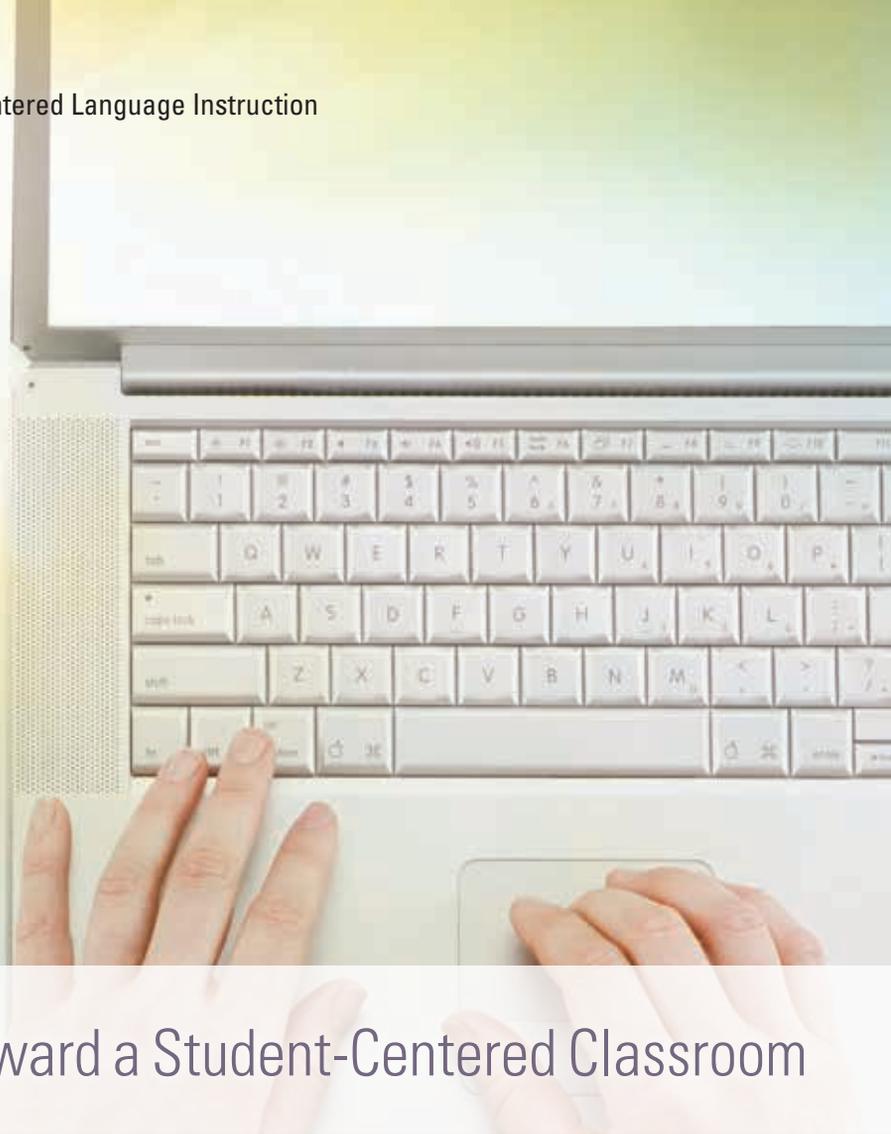


# Focusing on Performance



## Reinvigorating Teaching Toward a Student-Centered Classroom

BY REBECCA BLOUWOLFF

I will admit it: I'm an old dog. Since 1998, I have been teaching the same two classes (French 7 and 8) with the same textbook (*Discovering French*), in the same building (Wellesley Middle School), during the same five periods of the school day. Just as I like knowing where I'll be at 8:52 a.m. every day (dismissing period 1 with a reminder to *poussez les chaises sous les tables*), I like knowing what I'm going to teach . . . inside and out. There is a comfort in knowing the gender of every noun in your textbook, the exact moment when students will start sweating during a *dictée*, and which two video clips on that great pop music website we are not going to watch, ever.

This does not mean that I'm not always trying to get better. I rewrite creative projects, change rubrics, and add new activities all the time. I love tweaking my lessons, polishing my solid foundation until it shines. But would I ever throw the whole thing out the window and start again? Or teach Lesson 4A before Lesson 1B? *Non, merci. Absolument pas.*

Or that's what I thought.

It is hard to say what started me thinking in a new direction. Maybe it was watching my new, inexperienced colleague happily teach French 7 totally "out of order" while I lumbered methodically through Lesson

1A, then 1B, then 1C, spending a significant part of my class time administering lesson quizzes when I could have been teaching. Her students came to me the next year for French 8 and they were sharp. They even knew some words that mine didn't! I was impressed.

Maybe it was hearing a department head friend talk on and on about thematic units she was developing with her teachers and how much I would love them. When I told her I could never let go of my ordered ways, she asked what I was afraid of.

Where to begin? I feared leaving out important points; being unable to find accessible resources for young, first-year students; redesigning every assessment, study guide, project, and interactive whiteboard slide. Even when naming these reasons, I felt I was holding onto a cliff by my fingernails. Change was coming, as inevitably as gravity.

That change presented itself during the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NECTFL) in Boston last March when I signed up for a one-day workshop called "Planning for Student Learning" with Laura Terrill from ACTFL. Almost as soon as she began to speak, I was enthralled. She reminded us that our time is limited and we can either spend it planning or grading—not both. This resonated deeply with me, because I love planning new lessons yet resent most grading. For me, planning a new lesson is full of hope and optimism about what

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is to come—and grading is the harsh post-mortem of what has actually been internalized. Hearing Terrill speak, I realized that I had to make the shift toward spending my time on the part of my job that I love. How else could I sustain this work for my next 15 years in the profession? This shift would not only get me focused on the creative and novel aspects of my work, but it would force me to be more economic in my use of assessments.

For the rest of the spring, Terrill's book written with Donna Clementi, *The Keys to Planning for Learning* (2013), sat on my school desk taunting me. As I began to grade a mountain of 70 quizzes on verb conjugation, I would glance over to the book and seriously consider tossing the quizzes out the window next to me. What did these silly exercises really tell me about my students' ability to use their French, anyway? Why was I burdening myself with these endless assessments when I had so many other ways to track students' knowledge and growth? Even if they could conjugate all the forms of *achever* and *amener* today, what were the chances they would remember any of it by June, much less next year? Did anyone benefit from all these papers?

I felt stuck. It was too late in the year to make a radical change. What exactly would I use to replace those fill-in-the-blanks if I did not have something better waiting in the pipeline?

In June, I learned that I would be teaching an additional section of French 8 the following year. That mountain of 70 quizzes would soon be an Everest of 90 or more. I knew that I could not allow myself to get stuck in my routines for another whole year.

So I made a big decision. I decided to rewrite my entire French 8 curriculum during the summer. Here were my goals:

- Create five thematic units with essential questions
- Identify relevant, authentic texts for each unit to “hook” students' interest
- Write “can-do” statements for each unit
- Generate a battery of formative assessments to use regularly
- Develop one interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational assessment for each unit—because, as Terrill cautioned us, that is how many we would realistically be able to grade
- Pace out daily lesson plans for every teaching day of the school year

Even having begun with a unit based heavily on others' work, I still found that it took me nearly 2 weeks to complete my first unit. Writing essential questions, creating listening exercises

for authentic texts, and designing interpersonal assessments were all new to me. My method was to read over others' work, try to borrow and combine as much as I could, and then track which topics from my textbook fit naturally into the unit. Since I was working alone and was still responsible for sending my students to the high school with the same level of preparation, I was constantly going back through my old curriculum to make sure I had not left any big gaps.

The work was truly thrilling. I found it hard to stop at the end of the day because I wanted to keep mining the Internet for great blogs and images to use, to add more to an interpretive assessment I had devised, or to find one more children's story about a topic. While I had been collecting cool articles and songs for years, and had sprinkled them through my curriculum, now these gems became the backbone of my units.

With much borrowing from *The Keys to Planning for Learning*, my unit on the city took shape as I focused it on the qualities of one's ideal city and preparing students for their annual trip to Quebec City. The shopping unit now went beyond merely describing clothing; it included exploring Swiss teens' style “tribes” and international responses to the *ateliers de misère* [sweatshops] in developing countries where cheap clothing is mass-produced. Vacation activities morphed into an analysis of a balanced lifestyle; food evolved into culturally specific ideas about eating well. I was learning so much as I worked: content, resources for student learning, ways to focus in on vocabulary and grammar, and how to create novel assessments. This, I believe, is how people teach the same level of the same subject for their entire lives and never get bored.

September arrived and I was ready, more or less. I can't say that I slept well during the first weeks of school. Each lesson was untested. Authentic texts took far more time to delve into than I had expected—unlike the textbooks on which I had been relying before, these texts were extremely rich and deserved to be mined. As a result, I had no idea how far we would get into an activity on a particular day. That may not sound like a big deal, but for someone who had been able to assign a month's worth of homework at a time, it was quite an adjustment. No longer could I know with any certainty that we would really stay on track day after day. After teaching my first two sections in the morning, I would spend my lunch break frantically rewriting the lesson for the afternoon classes. Even now, months into this experiment, I spend time each evening trying to record the best version of my lesson plan and editing all my associated documents so that I will have them ready for next year.

It is amazing how much teaching time I have freed up by abandoning my lesson quizzes—weeks, not days. These changes have created a cascade of gains for my students.

These students, most of whom I taught the year before in French 7, have been fascinated by all the changes. “Is this how it’s going to be all year?” was the most-asked question in their first journal entries. As I read the feedback they gave, I gained confidence that my changes had been made for the better. “I am learning to have a real French conversation,” and “I loved having a creative project with no limits,” they wrote about an interpersonal assessment and an ideal home presentational project, respectively. Again and again, they restated their preferences for creative projects and learning from pop culture examples. Some of my weaker students, whom I had feared would have the hardest time transitioning to a less structured program, have indeed expressed intimidation when faced with authentic texts. They too, however, benefited from the focus on understanding in context and are learning many tools to apply to their studies. I am finding that they are no more lost in this course than they were before in my traditional French 8, and are considerably more engaged.

One of the best parts of this journey has been watching my (very patient and tolerant) department head nod and smile knowingly as I begin to “get” ideas that he’d caught onto long before me. Now I finally appreciate why he has spent considerable time and effort trying to win our department members over to communicative goals, essential questions, and formative assessments. For me as a learner, I needed a full-day workshop and a well-written workbook in order to feel like I could really do this work on my own. Even then, my units are all solidly based on others’ work—mostly that of Terrill and Clementi. If you are considering a journey like this yourself, here are the resources I found essential:



## Planning Resources for All Instructors

- *The Keys to Planning for Learning* website with its sample units, sample lessons, and templates for unit and lesson design: [www.actfl.org/publications/books-and-brochures/the-keys-planning-learning](http://www.actfl.org/publications/books-and-brochures/the-keys-planning-learning)
- Laura Terrill’s wiki with content-rich units and online resources for creating thematic units: [lauraterrill.wikispaces.com](http://lauraterrill.wikispaces.com)
- Laura Terrill and Toni Theisen’s wiki with more content-rich units: [terril-theisen2011.wikispaces.com](http://terril-theisen2011.wikispaces.com)
- Creative Language Class blog with thoughtful suggestions for routines and assessments: [creativelanguageclass.com/about](http://creativelanguageclass.com/about)

## Authentic Materials for Middle School French Students

- Pinterest ([www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)) for finding relevant infographics, articles from the young adult press, video clips, pop songs, and images. Search by topic and add “FLE” (français langue étrangère) to find non-U.S. sources. Be sure to create boards with descriptive, specific titles so that you can find everything later. I found it best to name each board for one thematic unit.
- TV5 for short French films and exercises: [apprendre.tv5monde.com](http://apprendre.tv5monde.com)
- TV5’s Canadian site for videos about Quebec including Quebecois folktales: [francolab.ca](http://francolab.ca)
- 1jour1actu for short French articles on relevant topics: [1jour1actu.com](http://1jour1actu.com)
- Our Africa website for short videos of francophone African young people speaking about their lives, searchable by country and topic: [www.our-africa.org](http://www.our-africa.org)
- Okapi magazine (Bayard Presse) with relevant articles written for young people age 11–15: [www.okapi.fr](http://www.okapi.fr)
- Ads of the World website with search field for country: [adsoftheworld.com](http://adsoftheworld.com)
- Madame’s Musings, a site for proficiency-based language instruction that features detailed descriptions of thematic French units with links to authentic materials, accompanying student packets and IPAs (integrated performance assessments): [madameshepard.com](http://madameshepard.com)

*Rebecca Blouwoff is a French teacher at Wellesley Middle School, Wellesley, Massachusetts.*

