

Curb-cuts in the classroom: French language instruction at Dawson College

By Alice Havel and Susie Wileman

You may be asking yourself “what is the relationship between sidewalk curb-cuts and French language instruction?” Keep reading and you’ll find out. First, let’s talk about curb-cuts. These are often used to describe the concept of Universal Design for Learning; the notion that something specifically designed for users with a disability can benefit others. Sidewalk curb-cuts were built to accommodate wheelchair users, but the benefits have extended to baby carriage pushers, children on tricycles, etc.

Now let’s discuss French. As it is important to be fluent in French, students in English CEGEPS are required to complete two French courses in order to graduate. However, in spite of intensive tutoring, high academic potential and motivation, some capable students with learning disabilities repeatedly fail these courses.

Dawson College’s AccessAbility Centre, responsible for services and accommodations for students with documented disabilities, has long been concerned with the challenges that many students with learning disabilities face in achieving French proficiency. Eligible students receive traditional accommodations and are encouraged to access tutoring through the college’s Centre de Langue Écrite et Orale.

Several years ago, in a collaborative effort between the AccessAbility Centre and the French Department, a further step was taken when a French learning strategist was employed. Through individual sessions, students not only review French course material, but are introduced to cognitive strategies in order to become more efficient and autonomous learners. This support is available to any student referred by their French teacher, based on the student’s identified needs. The outcome is that help is no longer restricted to students with diagnosed learning disabilities. The learning strategist also

facilitates an exchange among French teachers regarding effective strategies.

So where do curb-cuts fit in? That’s where two French teachers, Laure Galipeau and Catherine Soleil, enter the picture with their application of Universal Design for Learning. Working alongside the AccessAbility Centre’s pedagogical counsellor, Effie Konstantinopoulos, they have put a range of pedagogical practices into the classroom that benefit not only students with learning disabilities, but all students. In their classes every student has access to a computer with Antidote (French software), a self-editing guide, memory aids and extended time for writing exams. Instructions and texts are read aloud to the class. Students select books at their reading levels. Oral presentations can be submitted in a variety of formats including videos. Weekly journals are handed in but are not graded for spelling and grammar. Visual aids, including graphic organizers, are frequently used. Students develop writing skills by using material they

previously wrote, but changing certain components such as the tense or gender. Scaffolding the writing activity in this manner usually results in a better end product and a greater sense of accomplishment.

Students in Galipeau and Soleil’s classes are surveyed at the end of each semester to obtain feedback on the pedagogical practices being implemented. Their students report that they are more confident because they understand what they are learning and are able to apply it. In other words, they find UDL truly makes learning French more accessible.

For information on the UDL French Language Instruction project at Dawson College contact Laure Galipeau at lgalipeau@dawsoncollege.qc.ca.

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