SURFING THE AEGEAN – A sensory approach

COURSE EVALUATION

Instructor

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Overview

“Surfing the Aegean” (STA) was a new course offered by Centre for Hellenic Studies during the Fall 2016 term. As a cultural course, STA took a holistic approach to Modern Greek identity and used films, music, written and digital sources as well as hands-on activities to engage students to discover the various elements that form contemporary Greece. By encompassing select aspects of Modern Greek history, language and culture the course aimed to complement and extend the knowledge about ancient Greece offered by the Classics Department within a three and a half thousand-year historical continuum. The course aspired to a deeper understanding of an ancient and still vibrant culture that has branched off worldwide, and included insights by members of the Greek-Canadian community in Fredericton, as well as faculty members and students that had visited Greece or come to Canada for graduate studies. The lessons went beyond stereotypical presentations or touristic oversimplifications of “Greekness” that have plagued the understanding of Modern Greece. However, the course content did include topics on cuisine and dancing along with music, theatre, folk culture, great literary works, and historical accounts, taking a critical approach to facets of culture within an experiential learning frame that used sensory elements (taste, smell, touch). As a prototype course, in STA participants and instructor created our own original educational material from students’ assignments inviting them as co-constructors of knowledge: a question-and-answer card game available to schools, libraries, Hellenic Centres in Atlantic Canada on request for their cultural studies with its open-access digital version on the Internet, for the general public (see link below).

The project

Motivation, objectives and results

In order to bring out the richness and diversity of a culture, what is needed is a multimodal (Jewitt & Kress, 2003) and sensory approach to learning. The sense of smell, taste, touch should be as important as audiovisual and cognitive approaches (Beard & Wilson, 2002, 2006; Brady, 2011), even in an academic setting, which traditionally prefers abstract and conceptual approaches to embodied learning. Throughout the course, topics were linked to Greek flavours, scents, objects, and visitors of Greek descent to the classroom to engage students in more than one ways, motivating senses, minds and bodies to learn by acting (Bresler, 2013). STA aspired to open the classroom to the outside world, namely the Greek community in Fredericton, St. John and other regions of the Maritimes, and invited professors who had visited Greece as well as former students of Greek culture and history to share their experiences with the new cohort, while making use of the material culture regarding Greece from ancient to contemporary times.
The course objectives were (a) to facilitate understanding and appreciation of Modern Greek culture for the general public and, in time, to draw more people of Greek heritage to the University; (b) to support the central role of the UNB for Centre for Hellenic Studies, by fostering ties within the Greek Maritime communities; (c) to practice experiential, embodied learning in academic settings, and make lessons more engaging for the students; (d) to publicize the results of the course in social media.

### Description

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<tr>
<th>DURATION</th>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>TOPICS</th>
<th>ACTIVITIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 2016</td>
<td>THE COUNTRY</td>
<td>Week 1, 2: Introduction to Greek History &amp; Geography</td>
<td>Hands-on activity: Making the map of Greece with clay.</td>
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<td>Week 2: Greek Mythology and the English Language (i.e. The Apple of Discord, the sword of Damocles, Narcissus, to tantalize etc.)</td>
<td>In class: dramatizing expressions of the English language pertaining to Greek mythology</td>
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<td>Week 3: Travel destinations in Greece</td>
<td>Guest lecturers</td>
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<td>Week 3 &amp; 4: Great works of contemporary Greek literature.</td>
<td>Homework: Make an audio file of a literary piece of your choice. Social evenings: Reading Club at the Classics Seminar Room with former student, and film night, open to guests and students of Modern Greek Language courses.</td>
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<td>Week 3: Religion and Folk culture.</td>
<td>Group activity: Learning to dance like a Greek. Drawing an icon in class. Q&amp;A with theologian via emails. Playing Traditional Greek games Student suggestion: Put the finishing touches on the traditional Greek “tsolias” costume (from the previous semester)</td>
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<td>Week 4: Immigrating to Canada</td>
<td>Homework: Interviews with first and second generation Greek Canadians. Film night.</td>
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<td>Watching a film on immigration</td>
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Justification and assessment

Ever since I was appointed to UNB by the Greek government, I have been observing how Cultural Studies events successfully involved the academic and non-academic community. Opening my lessons to the affective and psychomotor domain at a University setting not only has supporters at the Teaching and Learning Literature (Kolb, 2005; Peters, 2004), but resonates with the millennial students’ school experiences (DiLullo et al., 2011; McGlynn, 2005), creating a bottom-up continuum in their learning, but also challenging them to move out of their comfort zone (the instructor’s too), fostering creative thinking (Jackson, 2004; Robinson, 2011) and getting research experience from the non-academic community (Holland & Gelmond, 1998). However, I tried to balance different learning types with a variety of activities, that interest multiple learning types (Kolb, 1985) as well as types of intelligence (Gardener, 2011), as the awareness about the variety in our classes is growing and needs to be better addressed. This approach was met with mixed feelings by the initial learning group; two dropped out from the start, and an audit joined and remained until the end.

The assessment of the course objectives was done formatively, via ongoing observation of student behavior/engagement/participation, as well as with tests and a final exam, where, among content questions, students were asked to offer critique and suggestions for STA. It turned out that students enjoyed the face-to-face interviews with members of the Greek community; they wrote they liked dancing with their classmates and doing hands-on work (cooking, sewing, drawing, modelling). They offered criticism of the coursebook and the wide variety of the topics, saying that the course should tackle fewer aspects of Greek culture and more in-depth. However, they admitted that they understood Greek mentality more after this course. As a self-assessment, I should add that a field trip to the Greeks of St.John could have been realized, but the community was mourning the passing of a member and postponed the celebration for the 28th of October, a national holiday in Greece, which could have enriched the students’ cultural experience. Finally, the informal sensory game during the potluck (“Blind-Man’s-Buff”) showed that students had truly acquired knowledge of the material culture during the lessons.
Meeting the mandate of the fund

The funding for this course helped purchase the materials that enabled sensory learning in the classroom and engaged students to learn in ways that move beyond cephalocentric dominance of higher education. Enticing the senses, moving the bodies and employing the hands creates experiences that enforce memory and learning, and work together with cognitive and social teaching methods and theories (project method, Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development). I aimed to bring the teaching experience, the trial and errors and success of four years into a new course, better fitted to the cultural context and to the needs of the students as they were articulated in informal discussions. Technology and hands-on activities alternated in a course that grew and was formulated out of the ideas, input and critique of the participants. The material culture (objects, books, the game) became a learning tool and part of the course outcome, available from the Centre for Hellenic Studies.

Sharing the results

Students’ work¹ was published on websites (http://yourgreekcorner.blogspot.ca/p/blog-page.html) and social media (#UNBhellenic). The videoclip on the course summarizing the key points and philosophy of STA is found on YouTube https://youtu.be/55Qs7pSdNbc. An online game was published on https://quizlet.com/168914395/modern-greece-101-flash-cards/ for the general public and the equivalent board game will be taken to the Greek Ministry of Education: Directorate of Diaspora and Multicultural Education and Minority Schools and to the St. John Greek community.

Duration and sustainability of the course results

“Surfing the Aegean” took place in Fall term 2016 at UNBF. Materials produced in the course by students and the instructor (games, crafts, handouts etc.) were used in ensuing Modern Greek language and History Courses during WIN17 and SUMMER17.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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¹ Students signed written consents in the beginning of the course, that would allow the publicizing of photos and course outcomes.
References


