

**Wisconsin Curriculum Articulation Project  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE WORKING GROUP  
CESA 1 & 6**

The foreign language working group consisted of UW-faculty members Larry Kuiper (Milwaukee) and John Stone (Oshkosh), high school faculty Brigitta Breu-Ritter (Waukesha), Kim Foell (lead teacher, Oshkosh), Laurie Friedrich (Wauwatosa), Pam Seccombe (West Allis), Gladys Wisnefski (Oshkosh), and DPI Consultant Paul Sandrock.

To “articulate” means not only “to connect” but also “to express clearly and distinctly”. Accordingly, it is appropriate that our project focused on bringing together university and high school faculty in several regions of the state to examine our instructional deliveries and expectations. These ‘focus groups’ were less for gathering data regarding the areas where articulation might be lacking than for involving instructors in the process of creating a more clearly articulated system. We believe that if instructors at each level have the opportunity to clearly express their expectations for student performance, they may uncover not only areas needing adjustment, but also common ground from which to make those adjustments.

Our group met monthly throughout the spring and fall of 2000. During our first meetings we were primarily interested in educating ourselves regarding the contents and expectations of university courses statewide and how well prepared high school students were for them. To this end, we gathered syllabi from the first through fifth semester courses in Spanish, French and German at universities across the state. We also elicited responses to questions about preparedness from current university and high school students within CESAs one and six (see Appendix one). These initiatives led to rich discussions concerning instructor/student expectations – how they differ at various levels, what informs them, etc. – within our group and with guests invited to group meetings.

The syllabi revealed diversity among the universities and little horizontal articulation between institutions. This heterogeneity is due in part to the range of university settings and their various delivery systems; courses at larger campuses, taught by different TAs every year, will necessarily be different from those in smaller programs. The culture of the university also plays a role in the variation of course content, because university instructors often attach great value to intellectual autonomy and believe course-design is an individual rather than group endeavor. While the syllabi informed us of course content, they gave us little information on expectations for student performance or instructional techniques. We created a survey instrument (Appendix two) designed to uncover these expectations and techniques, but chose not to administer it, believing our resources would be put to better use with focus group discussions.

The student surveys presented problems in interpretation. The open-ended questions had the potential to provide richer information; however, the necessary anonymity made it difficult to evaluate the feedback. Not knowing, for instance, how a student had performed in high school made it difficult to assess claims of being well or ill prepared for the college course. It was difficult to evaluate the role that developmental changes played in student expectations. The same university student that advised high school teachers to drill more may have been alienated by such drills when s/he was in high school. This student may also be assigning a hierarchy to the teaching practices of high school and the university, automatically assuming that if instructors drill in college, then high school teachers should adjust their teaching styles accordingly, when the exact opposite may be true. In cases where students said they had been well prepared, we could not analyze the high school programs from which they had graduated to determine what made them successful. Still, the surveys were useful in uncovering some information regarding student experience. Many students seemed to clearly understand the need for review, rarely complaining about university course review components, and often expressing a need for review. In general, students seemed to show awareness of grammar as a separate concept at about the third level of a language sequence, though it is difficult to know whether this is because they reach a new developmental stage or because they encounter different expectations. Students also indicated

an overall desire to apply and use their skills rather than focus solely on discreet grammatical or linguistic concepts.

As stated above, our group had developed a survey instrument to gather more data about instructors' performance expectations. Instead of implementing this survey, which we believed might again raise more questions than it answered, we chose to host a series of focus sessions that would allow all levels of foreign language educators from across the state to directly discuss their expectations with us and with each other. Our information gathering had led us to the position that, while the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards for foreign language informed our discussions, they were also often the source of gaps in alignment. While many, if not most, secondary foreign language instructors are familiar with the standards, there is still great diversity in the application of the standards to classroom instruction. Similar diversity exists among university instructors' knowledge of the standards; many implement them in instruction, while many others remain unaware of their contents. We chose to make the standards a centerpiece of our because of their potential as a unifying document.

The format of the focus groups (Appendix three), held in Eau Claire, Oshkosh, and West Allis, allowed smaller groups to discuss the following questions:

1. What are your course goals? What do you expect students to accomplish in your class?
2. What are your expectations as to how students will apply what they've learned in your class? (i.e. what will they retain and use?)
3. How are the Standards reflected in your expectations?
4. How do you measure student achievement of your goals?

Each small group was asked to identify areas of convergence and divergence in relation to these questions. After the small group discussions, participants reconvened in the large group to share their discoveries, insights and thoughts. Appendix four contains the summaries of these wrap-up discussions.

The three issues that consistently arose at every focus group were the **roles of grammar, student motivation**, and the **placement test**. The answer to the question of what role grammar plays tends to be the philosophical wedge that divides foreign language instructors. Traditionally, grammatical knowledge has been a primary goal of foreign language instruction. Instruction aimed to produce students who could display knowledge of grammar, without regard for their ability to apply that knowledge beyond the foreign language classroom. Newer methods, however, which are based on extensive research in the field of Second Language Acquisition, emphasize functional approaches to grammar. Grammar remains important, but grammatical knowledge is a by-product of language use, rather than a primary goal of language instruction. What students can *do* with language supersedes knowledge of grammar rules. The standards reflect this thinking, consistently requiring students to communicate effectively in real life situations, where correct grammar is implicitly necessary, but successful communication is the primary target. While high school instructors tend to be more informed about the standards and the role that they play in guiding instruction, university participants also generally voiced support for the philosophy that the standards reflect.

The role of grammar in instruction preoccupies language instructors because it is a component of a much larger issue, that of student motivation. We understand that the longer a student learns a language, the better s/he will know it. We also understand that we are, for now, an elective area, and that there are many subjects and activities competing for our students' time and attention. We must make learning a language relevant, interesting and pleasant if students are to continue learning the language and reap the greater benefits. Language instructors at all levels seemed to grapple with the issue of how to balance rigor with maintaining student enthusiasm.

Secondary level instructors often called into question the validity of the university placement test. If language instruction at all levels, but particularly at the secondary level, is based on what students can do with the language, is it fair to place them in a college language class on the basis of a grammar-based test? University faculty members consistently explained the need for the placement test as an economic means of sorting students into somewhat homogeneous groups, but also stressed that the sole role of the placement was such sorting. The placement test, they contended, should not be seen as an achievement test, but rather a simple tool whose usefulness does not go beyond the immediate task of finding the right class for the right student. The existence of retro-credits has made a high stakes test of a tool that was never intended to drive curriculum.

In addition to identifying areas of agreement and conflict, participants were asked to suggest changes that could improve articulation at the local level or system-wide. Identifying and replicating current models of good articulation was one such suggestion. The CAPP program, a partnership program currently in place in various communities around the state, is one potential model that was frequently discussed. This program allows high school students to earn college credit by taking a college equivalent course. A high school teacher, working closely with the local university faculty and following their curriculum, may teach the course, or students may attend the university itself. This strong and well-articulated partnership between university and high school instructors could serve as a good model for articulation between educational levels.

Other potential directions suggested include creating a uniform admission / graduation requirement based on the standards or the Oral Proficiency Interview, as well as the joint creation of curriculum. A working document outlining the foreign language programs at universities across the state would help to inform secondary teachers as well as potential students. Participants generally felt the focus group discussions were very worthwhile and suggested that a framework be set up to continue the dialogue and allow it to grow. A full list of all the issues and suggestions generated at the three focus group meetings can be found in Appendix four.

Our working group also felt that the focus group discussions were rich and valuable. Our objectives were met in every way: participants not only identified areas that needed a clearer articulation, they discovered a great deal of philosophical common ground, and most left clearly motivated to continue the work of aligning our programs. We believe that several elements in the structure of the meetings contributed to their success. First, the key questions guided discussion and kept it focused. Furthermore, the focus group questions centered on assessment, the key piece for identifying expectations. The smaller group breakout sessions generated thoughtful and varied discussions. Discussion of next steps after initially identifying issues motivated participants who could feel that they were a part of an ongoing and important process. The organizational layout of the focus sessions also contributed to their success. Facilitators lent credibility, trust and respect to the discussions both by being knowledgeable in the field and by flattening out the presentational hierarchy so that all participants felt they played an equal role. Finally, hosting the focus groups in more than one location across the state not only allowed for greater participation, but helped us to identify real overarching issues, not simply local ones.

The apparatus for informing potential participants of the meetings was a major contributor to the overall success of the focus sessions. Having the complete support of the UW-System as well as the DPI encouraged instructors at all levels to attend. The communication from both offices was clear, thoughtful, and timely. Providing participants with the discussion questions as well as an agenda in advance gave them an opportunity to think deeply about the issues before attending the meetings. We did find that the meetings that generated the richest discussions were those that had a good balance of university and secondary faculty attending. Having a language teaching methods instructor in attendance also proved beneficial. See Appendix five for a brief summary of these elements of success.

Because of the success of these discussions and their strong potential for gaining committed support for future efforts to align curriculum, our group has decided to host three more focus groups in the fall of 2001. We will target areas of the state in which we did not host meetings in 2000, as well as our state foreign language teachers' convention. Once instructors from across the state have had the opportunity to participate in these discussions, a potential next step could be to host opportunities for high school and university instructors to create curriculum segments based on the standards. Other system-wide initiatives such as those mentioned above could also begin at the same time.

**APPENDIX ONE: Student Survey Instruments**

UW-System/DPI Curriculum Articulation Project

**Audience: High School Students**

Language you started in Middle School and are presently studying:

French:\_\_\_\_\_ German:\_\_\_\_\_ Spanish:\_\_\_\_\_ Other:\_\_\_\_\_

Number of years you have been studying this language:

Middle School:\_\_\_\_\_ High School\_\_\_\_\_

1. What aspects of the course you are now taking do you believe have prepared you best for a college course in this subject?
2. What aspects of a college course in this subject do you think will be most challenging?
3. Do you feel your beginning levels were academically challenging?
4. Did your beginning courses prepare you well for intermediate courses and / or for the one you are now taking?

**Audience: Collge Students**

Language you started in High School and are presently studying:

French:\_\_\_\_\_ German:\_\_\_\_\_ Spanish:\_\_\_\_\_ Other:\_\_\_\_\_

Number of years you have been studying this language:

High School:\_\_\_\_\_ College\_\_\_\_\_

Did **your** high school experience involve:

Regular courses (e.g.: levels 1 – 5) \_\_\_\_\_

AP courses \_\_\_\_\_

CAPP courses \_\_\_\_\_

1. Did your high school courses in this subject prepare you well for this course?
2. Have some aspects of this course simply been a review of your high school courses? If so, which ones?
3. Are there aspects of this course for which you had no preparation?
4. What advice would you give your high school faculty member concerning preparing future students for this course?

**APPENDIX TWO: University Faculty Survey**

Dear Foreign Language Instructor,

The following survey was designed for the purpose of gathering information for the UW-system K-16 alignment project in Foreign Languages. We would like to encourage you to reflect on these questions and be as detailed as possible in your responses. Any information you can provide will be very useful in our project to create a coherent foreign language curriculum that bridges the gap between secondary and post-secondary education.

Name (Optional): \_\_\_\_\_ Institution (optional)

\_\_\_\_\_

Language(s) taught: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Please list the courses you teach: *(allows us to evaluate responses to various expectations below)*
2. What percentage of your student assessments are mechanics-based or communication-based (speaking, writing)?

Mechanics-based \_\_\_\_\_ Communication-based \_\_\_\_\_

3. What do you expect students entering the following classes to be able to do?

3<sup>rd</sup> semester: \_\_\_\_\_

4<sup>th</sup> semester: \_\_\_\_\_

5<sup>th</sup> semester: \_\_\_\_\_

6<sup>th</sup> semester: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Identify the areas in which, in your experience, entering students exceed, meet, or do not meet your expectations.

3<sup>rd</sup> semester / exceed: /meet: / do not meet:

4<sup>th</sup> semester / exceed: /meet: / do not meet:

5<sup>th</sup> semester / exceed: /meet: / do not meet:

6<sup>th</sup> semester / exceed: /meet: / do not meet:

### **APPENDIX THREE: Focus Group Agenda**

- (30 minutes)    Introductions and greetings  
                    Definition of purpose  
                    Overview of the day  
                    Set the context (refer to Explanation of Project)  
                    Explanation of the task (use standards and questions to conduct a facilitated  
                    small group dialog --report to the large group)
- (90 minutes)    Break into discussion groups

#### **FOCUS QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION GROUPS**

Prior to the meeting, please consider these questions, which form the basis for the small group discussion.

Consider the courses and students you teach:

1. What are your course goals? What do you expect students to accomplish in your class?
5. What are your expectations as to how students will apply what they've learned in your class? (i.e. what will they retain and use?)
6. How are the Standards reflected in your expectations?
7. How do you measure student achievement of your goals?

Task: Identify areas in which there is divergence and overlap in each of these areas.

- (30 minutes)    Report to large group
- (30 minutes)    Next steps: notice key issues across groups. What can Wisconsin foreign language educators do next, based on the key issues identified?

## **APPENDIX FOUR: Feedback from Focus Groups**

### **Wisconsin Curriculum Articulation Project Summary of Foreign Language Regional Articulation Forums UW-Eau Claire, UW-Oshkosh, and Greater Milwaukee Area: October 2000**

#### **Expectations:**

- Awareness of specific grammatical structures vs. a command of the structures (discussion of what students actually know and can use vs. what has been taught and “covered”)
- Grammar grows in importance
  - progress from simple sentence structure to more difficult grammatical structures vs. early learning of advanced level grammar
- Emphasize all skills at all levels (accompanied by an increasing accuracy and an increasing knowledge of grammatical structures)
- Real life applications (so students see a second language as a life skill, as career enhancing)
- Sensitivity to other cultures, on a personal level, embedded throughout curriculum
- Build confidence
  - to communicate at a basic level
  - to converse
- Pronunciation
  - improve oral communication
- Emphasize understanding/meaning
- Read authentic materials
- Motivate students to continue

#### **Assessment:**

- Are college assessments and HS assessments aligned?
- Employ rubrics to capture expectations
- Assessment should include writing samples, an oral component, listening and reading comprehension (See “all skills at all levels” above)
- Standards connect with OPI levels
- Issue of “outside” assessment: Placement Test, AP weighted grades (how do these types of assessment affect our classroom assessment and to what extent should they?)
- Is there a correlation between placement and AP?
- UW System Placement test does not indicate proficiency, should not dictate high school curriculum, does not tell us what students can do in the language (it is only intended to create a more homogeneous group of students for each university semester level course)
- Consider the unique characteristics of each student (including differences based on different program models and differences in the continuity of their language study)
- Weigh exams more later in semester (give value to improvement)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Suggestions, contd.:**

Link within, learn from ESL, Bilingual

- – value of learning languages
- to prepare
- Link to community groups to aid in articulation (e.g. French group)
- 
- Create links between language students from school to school
- Make greater use of community resources

**\_\_\_\_\_:**

Differences of high school and college students (including their skills in English, the amount

- UW system should not dictate the K-
- Variations in courses between UW campuses  
Consistent requirements across
- Difference between achievement and placement tests  
Disconnect between oral proficiency requirements, student development, and the emphasis  
placement test gives to grammar
- College placement tests should not dictate high school curriculum for placement purposes only
- --
- Teaching methodology (we found a commonality in our desire for “immersion” in the
- Depth of impact of Wisconsin’s Model Academic Standards to date (ongoing debate on the role of grammar; are we truly teaching to our standards throughout the state?)
- et when foreign language is required K-
- Balance of “rigor” and “fun” (needing to provide a motivation for students to continue; perhaps bringing both rigor and fun into communicative activities)
- ars” of language study
- Variety of language preparation students receive in middle school programs
- 
- Subjective aspect to oral proficiency  
Wide range of student proficiency within a particular class
- -long learning
- ther areas (integrate with business, law, etc.)

**Other Issues, contd.**

- Are the expectations at the college level “real life”?
- Focus on “how to learn” a language

## **APPENDIX FIVE: Elements of Success for Focus Groups**

### **FRAMEWORK**

- The team presentation set a tone that was inclusive and flattened out the hierarchy
- Facilitators were content experts
- Focused questions guided the discussion
- Providing participants with the questions and agenda in advance allowed them to prepare for the discussion
- Breaking down into smaller groups generated focused and varied discussions
- Discussion focused largely on assessment, which is at the crux of the matter
- Focusing on next steps allowed participants to feel that they were a part of the process, and allowed them to leave the meeting motivated
- Having more than one location across the state provided the opportunity to more people and institutions, as well as provided us as facilitators with a variety of experiences

### **COMMUNICATION AND ATTENDANCE**

- The best meetings were those which had a good balance between university and K-12 faculty
- Having the total support and sponsorship of the UW-System and DPI encouraged participation on both the secondary and post-secondary levels
- Communication from Steve's office was clear, well done, and timely
- Teacher trainer representatives from the university was a plus