Chapter 5

Communication, Culture, and Technology:
Learning Strategies for the Unteachable

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The challenges of teaching Content Strategy and Information Architecture in a professional Master's program are daunting because in these two disciplines the source of quality is hidden, and methodology can provide little useful guidance. The solution was to provide the cultural, epistemological, structural, and strategic principles behind these disciplines in classroom sessions, employing traditional lecture methods plus interactive exercises. All practical, hands-on experience comes through group research projects where students are expected to apply the principles that have been discussed in class. Students are evaluated solely on the group research projects. This case study suggests classroom methodology adjustment to make it more interactive and bring it into line with the informational environment students live in every day.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

I teach in a professional Master's program called *Conception de Documentation Multilingue et Multimédia (CDMM)*—Multilingual Multimedia Documentation Design. The program is housed in the language and linguistics unit of the Université Paris Didrot (Paris VII). Paris Diderot is part of the French university system

(distinct from the elite *Grandes Ecoles*), with a 40-year history. It offers studies in sciences, humanities and social sciences, and in medicine and health sciences.

Paris Diderot was one of the first French universities to experiment with autonomy. This may seem an obvious idea for people accustomed to the U.S. university system, but in France, the norm has been that all universities are funded centrally by their ministry, and that the basics of how teaching is offered to students be the same throughout the country. This is done in the name of equality. Recently, however, the government has been experimenting with limited autonomy for universities, including the ability to create their own new programs and find private financing to augment their government allocations.

Paris Diderot was a pilot campus for this initiative, and is thus well ahead of most other French universities in self-governance and self financed initiatives. The university grants undergraduate and graduate degrees, and at *licence* (equivalent of a Bachelor's degree) and Master's levels, the offer includes traditional, research-oriented degrees and a newer class of professionally oriented degrees, one of the fruits of the autonomy experiment.

SETTING THE STAGE

In France, the professional Master is a terminal degree, and does not normally lead to doctoral studies. Our program, *Conception de Documentation Multilingue et Multimédia* (CDMM) is a second year specialization after a core first year for all professional Master's students in language and linguistics. There is an alternative second year specializing in translation industries, as well.

The CDMM program is taught *en alternance*—meaning that periods of course work are alternated with periods of internships in enterprises. A "job dating" session (Career Day) is also organized for students near the end of the second year.

In addition to these internships, the France chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) has initiated a mentoring program that pairs a student with an accomplished professional in the field for coaching and mentoring activities. Students who have opted to join this program have found it helpful.

Our students (about 20 per year) come from very heterogeneous backgrounds, and the group often includes older students with work experience. They may already have one or more graduate degrees in other fields before coming to our program. Ages can range from 21 – 30.

The students come from a variety of socio-cultural backgrounds, and many are citizens of countries other than France. The European Union has an active student exchange program, (Erasmus) between universities of member states, but students

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