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- ◇ The *Journal of Celtic Language Learning* is published each winter.
- ◇ The deadline for submissions is 15 April of each year. Submissions received by this date are guaranteed consideration for the upcoming volume. Later submissions may be deferred to later volumes as space requires.
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- ◇ All submissions should be double spaced. Articles should be 2,500 to 3,000 words (with a 50 to 60 word abstract at the beginning) and short descriptions of a program or technique should be 200 to 500 words.
- ◇ All submissions will be refereed blindly by two anonymous readers.
- ◇ Comments from the referees will be forwarded to the authors together with the editors' decision regarding publishing after 15 September of the same year.

### INDEXES

Some of the articles published in the *Journal of Celtic Language Learning* are abstracted or indexed in *Language Teaching*, LLBA (*Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts*), RIE (*Resources in Education*), the Modern Language Association *International Bibliography*, and Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann's *Selected Articles from Language Journals*.

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## ISSUES IN THE DESIGN OF CREDITED IRISH COURSES

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This position paper shares experiences and opinions regarding the creation of college level Irish language courses in North America. It begins by explaining why Irish should be offered in third level institutions and proceeds to consider practical issues including peer support and opposition, hiring of instructors, piloting courses, planning publicity, negotiating credit type, and dealing with transfer issues. Syllabus development is also briefly considered.

### WHY IRISH?

There are many reasons why a college or university might chose to offer Irish language courses to its students.<sup>1</sup> Some institutions take into account their large number of students of Irish descent and decide to offer the tongue as a heritage language. Some colleges may offer Irish as a result of a notable number of Irish immigrants in the student population. Still other institutions may offer Irish as a part of an Irish or Celtic Studies program or to complement an English department program that focuses on Irish literature. Whatever the reason, the introduction of this less commonly taught language into the permanent foreign language offerings of an institution of higher education in the United States can be a difficult and long process. This position paper will share general comments and specific experiences related to creating credited Irish language courses. The opinions presented here come from interactions with several institutions and especially the author's multiple experiences of designing courses for Bergen Community College (BCC). It is the hope of the author that these comments and

examples might help others striving to initiate Irish language offerings in their institution. Of course, the reader needs to remember that regulations at different colleges will vary greatly; however, most likely some of the considerations listed below will apply to all third level institutions.

The goal of the process described in this article is to have Irish adopted as a foreign language in a given third level institution. At some colleges, a course can be given one or more semesters on a trial basis. Also some universities offer less commonly taught languages in seminar linguistics courses, for example. Neither of these options will be focussed on here; rather this article will attempt to define the process by which Irish can be adopted as a general education undergraduate course on equal footing with French, German and Spanish.

Before investing a lot of time in a project such as this, it is recommended that one does some regional research first. Program designers should look at other institutions in their area offering Irish.<sup>2</sup> Having no other institution in one's area offering Irish is not automatically an advantage. Administrators may not be very courageous and question why no other institution has gone this route. For example, comments such as one in a *New York Times* article (Steward 1997) pointing out that Bergen Community College was the only institution of higher education in the State of New Jersey to offer Irish for credit, did cause concern on the part of those with limited knowledge of the situation. In reality, BCC was one of many institutions in the New York City metropolitan area to offer Irish for credit, although technically speaking, it was indeed the only institution on the Jersey side of the Hudson River.

The opposite case may also be a concern. If one already has several neighboring institutions offering Irish, one may not have a large enough pool from which to draw students. However, cities such as New York and Boston have adequate numbers of Irish enthusiasts to support credited courses at a number of neighboring institutions.

Lastly, it is suggested that the individual proposing the course may want to gather information concerning the percentage of Irish-Americans in the college's student population and in the communities that surround the college campus. In the BCC example, I was well aware of the high percentage of Irish in the county. Bergen County residents who claimed Irish ancestry on the 1990 census totalled 148,018. Besides having over ten percent of all Irish-Americans living in the State of New Jersey, Bergen County also had 50% more Irish-Americans than Monmouth County, a county where its community college has a strong tradition of Irish language classes (Llorente 1995).

### UNDERGRADUATE VERSUS ADULT EDUCATION OFFERINGS

Some will undoubtedly question why Irish should be offered at the college level. Isn't it enough to study Irish in adult education or continuing education programs? Four possible reasons could be suggested for focusing on college as opposed to adult education. First, for the Irish language in America, it is important that it be treated with the same level of importance and seriousness as other less commonly taught languages at a university. For example, Bergen Community College already offered Japanese and Korean as credited courses before the proposed addition of Irish. If Irish is going to survive in America as a seriously taught foreign language, it will need to have a presence especially at the most highly esteemed level of studies, university.

Second, colleges and universities offer prolonged exposure to a language, far beyond that which an adult-language program can possibly offer. For example, continuing education at BCC offered, starting in 1995, two courses of Irish, each lasting 15 hours (90 minutes for ten weeks). The total of 30 hours can hardly compare to the 128 hours of the fall and spring sequence of undergraduate courses at the same institution, which began in 1997<sup>3</sup>.

Currently, the majority of Irish language learners appear to be adults (Ihde 1994: 84). In many cases, the adult

learners I have come in contact with have been individuals whose children are now at college age or older and at this point in their lives, they have some extra time to pursue their own interests. These learners have been the backbone of the Irish language learning movement in the United States. However, if it is desired that individuals of other age groups study the language, programs will need to be made available for them. For example, in some parts of Canada, secondary students can opt to study Gaelic (Smith 1994:3-4). By offering Irish as a foreign language in higher education, 18-25 year olds are often introduced to the language for the first time.

The last reason cited here for offering Irish at the college level would be technological opportunities. Colleges, unlike any other venue for teaching languages in the United States, have spent large amounts of money to equip classrooms and labs with the latest technology. Some examples of advantages that a college venue can bring include language labs, computer labs, libraries, software and book acquisitions, Internet access, satellite conferencing, multi-system television and video-players, and organized publicity<sup>4</sup>.

### **OTHER ISSUES TO CONSIDER: SUPPORT**

Once the course proposer decides to dedicate time and energy to have an Irish course offered at a given institution, there is a number of issues she will need to consider at this early stage. It is important to identify allies in the college. By the time one begins working on developing Irish at a given institution, the proposer should already have a good idea of who the Irish or Celtic cultural enthusiasts at the institution are. Of course, before taking any formal steps, it is advisable to begin to discuss ideas regarding course creation with full-time instructors at the designated institution. One shouldn't limit oneself to the foreign language department. English and history departments, for example, often have scholars with interests in Irish themes

in their own fields as well. Additionally, if the college or university web page enables you to search the institution's pages for specific words, try "Irish," "Gaelic," and "Celtic." Individuals in departments not traditionally associated with the humanities may be carrying out research focused on the Irish experience or have hobbies related to Ireland. In my Bergen Community College experience, the nursing faculty staff had a few Irish language/culture enthusiasts. It is important to build as many bridges between the foreign language department and other departments as possible. College- or university-wide bodies such as the senate may eventually need to understand what the course designer is proposing so that they can vote to adopt or reject course proposals. Allies, however, are even more important because they are able to drum up general interest and encourage students to enrol in the course.

The value of having a full-time faculty member to spearhead the project is essential. A project such as this requires the full-time sponsor to act as a link between the faculty and administration on the one hand and the student body forming the grassroots support for such a course on the other. In the Bergen Community College example, I was an assistant professor in the English Department at the time. Having this status provided me with greater opportunities for contact with other full-time colleagues and also gave me greater exposure as to how programs were developed at the institution.

There are other ways to develop community support for the courses. One possibility is to schedule a lecture on the Irish language and culture in the month of March. This can also be a great opportunity to collaborate with faculty from another department. The event can be publicized in local papers and on the local Irish-American radio show, if the area has one. This approach worked well at BCC. The topic of the joint lecture (with a professor from the history department) was the Irish language and the Great Hunger. We drew a crowd of about 120 listeners who included students, faculty, staff, and off-campus interested individuals.

## INSTRUCTORS

One area that must be considered at an early stage regards instructors<sup>5</sup>. As with any less commonly taught language, adjunct instructors have other full-time responsibilities that dictate their availability. For this reason, it's best to have several instructors identified or interviewed beforehand. If the individual proposing the courses is planning to teach the courses, it is still advisable to identify other instructors. One must be prepared for growth. At BCC, I started by teaching the first class myself. Since then we have had times when three different Irish language instructors were scheduled to teach in a given term.

## PILOTING

After building up support and informing others that such a course is needed, the chair of the hosting department must be approached. If the department is open to giving the language a try, the chair will instruct the course designer in how to pilot the course. Some colleges may suggest that the course be piloted through continuing education to prove student interest. Other universities will permit the course to run in the foreign language, linguistics, or English department on a trial basis for a limited number of semesters. Data from the trial run will be helpful to both the instructor and the administration regarding course planning. Additionally questionnaires can be administered seeking information concerning students' intentions and their interest in undergraduate classes. In the case of BCC, trial adult education offerings proved immense interest. In our first semester, we closed enrollment at 34 students. This beginning course and a second level course have continued to be offered through the years.

Whether an institution requires the course proposer to pilot the course through continuing education or permits a few trial semesters of the course directly in the department it is expected to eventually be housed, there will still be

several common factors to be considered. These include publicity, syllabus design, credit status, transfer issues, and internal opposition.

## PUBLICITY AND SYLLABUS DEVELOPMENT

Publicity will need to be increased and syllabi will need to be developed as one prepares to pilot the course. Concerning publicity, an instructor should never leave the responsibility in the hands of the department or institution. Seeing that these first few semesters are serving as a trial, the course proposer will need to ensure that the piloted classes are full and that enrollment is maintained at respectable levels throughout the semester.

Some institutions require that publicity be channeled through a public information office at the college. If this is the case, it is highly recommended that the course proposer provide the public information office with press releases and addresses for grassroots Irish-American publications and radio programs. Such an office has no way of knowing the communication networks of every ethnic group in the community. The course proposer may also want to ask local Irish-American organizations if they will permit a flyer to be disseminated in a subsequent membership mailing. For example, I asked the New Jersey Gaelic League if they would include a flyer with their newsletter. Although the college printed up the flyer, I physically drove the box of flyers to the NJGL president's house to make sure the flyers arrived on time. Half of the 34 students in that first adult education class came from that mailing.

If the program designer is required to develop the syllabus, he or she can ask to see the department syllabus for Spanish or French to get an idea of what will be expected of an elementary level student at that institution.<sup>6</sup> One might also want to contact a professional organization such as NAACLT (North American Association of Celtic Language Teachers - <http://www.naaclt.org>) or an organization that focuses on the needs of students such as Daitai na Gaeilge (<http://www.monmouth.com/~daitai>) and

ask their membership if any samples of syllabi can be shared. Likewise, once the new course designer has developed a syllabus for an Irish course using these resources, he or she may want to share it with the membership of NAACLT or Daltaí na Gaeilge to increase the discussion of course syllabus design. An excellent venue for such sharing is the listserv discussion list CELTIC-T.<sup>7</sup>

### TYPES OF COLLEGE CREDIT

As the syllabus is being developed, the course designer will need to keep an important issue in mind, credit applications. One often hears Irish language teachers speaking of their concern about the exclusive relegation of Irish to an adult education status and the lack of credited courses. However, credit itself is not the answer. There are many restrictions regarding how students can use credits earned (Ihde 1996 : 185). In most cases, the designer of an undergraduate course will want to obtain the right for students to be able to use credits earned while taking Irish to fulfill their general education degree requirements or foreign language requirements.

Offering Irish as an elective would also offer credit, but if students cannot apply these credits toward their degree, general education requirements, or foreign language requirements, the credit earned by taking the course will do little to help them to obtain their bachelor's degree. When students can take the proposed course because they are interested and because they can use the credits towards their general education requirement or language requirement, one will find both motivation and numbers increased. Those who offer Irish as an elective often have difficulties filling classes. One reason is tuition. Although a three-credit course at a community college may cost as little as two hundred dollars, the price of a three-credit Irish course might be unimaginable at a private institution.

### TRANSFER

While community colleges can offer courses at lower tuition levels, they have another concern, credit transfer. The understanding at junior colleges is that some students will eventually transfer to four-year institutions. There is no use encouraging students to take Irish for general education or language requirement if the four-year college to which they transfer does not view Irish in the same way as the community college. In the case of BCC, I wrote the academic vice-presidents of the five senior colleges to which most of the BCC students transfer. This required several follow-up phone calls, e-mail messages, and overnight express mailings (which I paid for myself). In the end I did receive a majority of institutions that claimed they would accept Irish, but it was not an easy battle. When offering the course, I informed students that one institution had claimed that they would not accept Irish. My intent was to give those students hoping to transfer to that university the opportunity to drop my class and take a more commonly taught language.

Regardless of whether an institution is a junior college or a senior college/university, students need to be warned that, since Irish is only sporadically offered throughout the country, they will need to take both Elementary Irish I and Elementary Irish II at the same institution before transferring to another college. This is especially the case if the college to which they are transferring requires two semesters of a foreign language before graduation. In other words, they could not transfer with just Irish I and expect to complete their language requirement at the other institution because the other institution most likely does not offer Irish II.

In the case of introducing Irish into a four-year college's course offerings, the above aspect is not as much of a concern. Since the senior college itself offers the bachelor's degree, it is independent to choose which language it decides to offer. However, there is still a fair number of senior

college/university students who transfer to another institution for a variety of reasons.

### INTERNAL OPPOSITION

Although the example of designing and offering Irish at Bergen Community College over four years was a process met with support and success (25 students enrolled in the first semester of Elementary Irish I) opposition at similar institutions should be expected. One source of opposition might come from the very foreign language teachers that one calls colleagues. It may be felt that there is a limited pool of undergraduate students and that the proposed course will be taking students away from other language offerings. Some institutions may have only one full-time German professor, for example. This individual may be barely maintaining a full schedule, which is usually required to justify continued employment. The idea of Irish making inroads into their German language student body might be a frightening thought whether justified or not. Likewise, other full-time faculty teaching general education courses may see the proposed course as taking away students from their classes. This would especially be the case where the college does not have a language requirement and one can opt to fulfill one's general education requirement from courses offered from a number of departments. Lastly, one may find oneself in opposition with other less commonly taught languages. It might be argued by the administration that if Irish is offered, the languages of other ethnic groups present on campus will have to be offered. The designer of the Irish language courses may even find herself designing courses in another heritage language just to satisfy this administrative complaint.

One should not underestimate the amount of work and time needed to make a course part of the permanent course offerings of a college. After all the preparatory work had been completed in the Bergen example, piloting the course, building publicity, and designing syllabi, I had to seek the

approval of the foreign language department, the College-wide Curriculum Committee, and the College-wide Senate. Additionally, administrators all along the way had to be consulted. I began working on that project in 1994. The course was piloted in the spring and fall of 1995. The credited course was first offered in the fall of 1997. Although I moved to the Department of Languages and Cultures at William Paterson University in 1998, it is gratifying to see that both the undergraduate and adult education courses continue to attract students at BCC.

### A CONTINUING PROCESS

I would like to close with a final note regarding publicity. If a course is going to have any future once established, it will need to be constantly publicized, even years after being established. Word of mouth of course is the best publicity. However, Irish-American newspapers and radio shows as well as local Irish-American organizations should be continually informed of registration dates.

Additionally, as the program is developed, news coverage in local and regional papers is welcomed. In addition to the above-cited *New York Times* article, articles mentioning the Irish language offerings at Bergen ran in *The Record* (Llorente 1997) and *The Weekend Jersey Journal* (Donohue 1996). I was also interviewed for WMBC's evening television news program and for a local half-hour cable program *On Campus...* (Duggan 1995). While such coverage can aid in filling a class, the best publicity at a given institution will be the college catalogue and the master list of courses. Deadlines for both of these publications are many months before the courses begin. If the new Irish course is not included in the master list of courses, the initiator of the course will have a hard time attracting students currently enrolled in the college. One consolation is that with master lists going on-line at many college web sites, the updating of the course offerings can sometimes be done at a date closer to the beginning of the semester. One important consideration is how many students are required to run a

course. In the case of a less commonly taught language that is offered in one section only, it may be advised that this number be doubled to assure enough students enroll in the second semester. For example, if one needs 12 students for the course to run, it would be best to try to have 24 students in the first semester so as to have at least 12 students in the second semester. If the institution where the course is being proposed does not have a foreign language requirement, students may be able to just take Elementary Irish I to fulfill a general education requirement.

The introduction of Irish in the Division of Continuing Education and the Division of Arts and Humanities at Bergen Community College was a rewarding experience for the students, the instructors, and the college. I hope that the above general comments and my specific examples will help other individuals introduce this language into their local community college or senior college as a general education course.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article was originally presented in paper form at the annual meeting of the North American Association of Celtic Language Teachers in June of 1998. The conference, which was held in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, MN, was co-sponsored by the University of Minnesota and the University of St. Thomas.

<sup>2</sup> See Ihde 1996 and Murphy 1995. See also the LCTL Project database maintained by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota, <http://carla.acad.umn.edu/lctl/access.html> and the teacher database of Daltai na Gaeilge at <http://www.monmouth.com/~daltai>.

<sup>3</sup> The BCC courses were four contact hours per week. Most other institutions may be either three contact hours per week only or three contact hours plus one lab hour per week.

<sup>4</sup> See the following for more information on how these technologies can be used in language learning: Armstrong and Yetter-Vassot 1994, Kennedy 1991, and Stenson 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Although it is outside of the scope of this article, instructors' qualifications will be an important consideration. Some institutions will insist that the instructor have a master's in a foreign language or applied linguistics with near-native fluency in Irish. See Ihde (1997).

<sup>6</sup> The issue of designing an Irish language learning curriculum is not directly discussed in this article. The reader is encouraged to read Duran (1994, 1995, 1997) and Ihde (1994) regarding syllabus design of Irish courses for North Americans. Ihde (1999) provides an overview of literature in this area.

<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank one of the blind referees for this excellent suggestion. To subscribe to CELTIC-T, send an e-mail to [listserv@VM1.SPCS.UMN.EDU](mailto:listserv@VM1.SPCS.UMN.EDU) with the message SUBSCRIBE CELTIC-T Yourfirstname Yourlastname.

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