

Transcript

Richard Hibbitt, Senior Lecturer, French Literature

How do you make sure your students can relate to your subject?

Well, I think the same for any teacher really, and I remember this when I was a schoolteacher myself, is that you need two things: you need to be enthusiastic and you need to be organised, so you need to have a passion for your subject that comes across when you're teaching it to the students but also you need to be organised in terms of what you want to do, where you want to go with the aims of the particular class. Now, for me teaching French literature at undergraduate level, that means, similar I think to at school, making sure that students are aware of a particular context, they're aware of information that lectures could help them understand, the time when the text was written and how it was received and beyond that, you can bring more and more into the classroom itself, not simply the written text itself. I use a lot of visual aids, so I will make analogies with painting for example and some of the things I teach, 19th century literature for example, Zola, I will bring in Manet for that. I will also bring in a lot of recordings: YouTube has been a fantastic resource for me because for example, teaching French poetry, there are so many recordings and not just people reading the poems but also the whole *chanson* tradition of poems being set to music, from the 20th century and back into the 19th century as well. So there's lots of extra things that you can bring in to help bring the text to life for the students. And finally if you're teaching theatre as well, I think what's particularly interesting about that is to show students productions and the best thing, if you can do it, is if you can take students to go and see these particular plays themselves, and then talk about the history of theatre, talk about censorship for example and how it still exists in other cultures in the world and how important censorship is to freedom of speech for example. And I love to



teach, for example, Beckett and Ionesco: I've taught them in the past, I don't teach them here at Leeds at the moment. But I think if I had my time again and I was an A-level teacher, I'd love to be able to teach texts like that and also to take my class to Paris because there's always a production of Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve* on in a theatre in Paris and that'd be fantastic for the students, particularly at that age when they're learning about themes such as existentialism, and that's the kind of theme which I think is very interesting for that age. My own stepdaughter did French A-level a couple of years ago and she did Voltaire's *Candide* and Camus's *Les Justes* and I think it was very interesting for her, seeing how these ideas are part of forming her own ideas. I can remember from doing it myself so I think from that point of view, all the extra things you can do beyond the written text help bring the literature alive for the students.



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Which area do you most enjoy teaching?

If I had to choose, I would choose poetry because I love teaching the novel and I love teaching short stories and I love teaching plays as well, but what I particularly like about poetry is that it lends itself so well to teaching, particularly teaching undergraduates, but also can be done at school level as well, in fact all the way through education. What I like about a poem is that the students can see it in one particular go, so they're able to look at the particular poem and say it's a sonnet of 14 lines or something shorter, sometimes it's a concrete poem so you can see the image as well. There's lots of interesting things you can do about that: you can present the poem to the student, you can give a lecture, you can talk about the context of the poem, possible interpretations, then you can introduce a poem yourself, then you can ask the students in seminars to come in and talk about the poems themselves. I really like it when students come in, in pairs or by themselves, put a poem up on the wall. For example I've brought one along to show you here: this is a particular poem by Apollinaire, which is actually a letter that he wrote during World War One, and you can perhaps just pick up some of these images here. There's an eye, there's an aeroplane, there's also the towers of Notre-Dame as well. So when students can bring something in, it's almost like a painting and they can put it up and they can talk about the language. Poetry is also very interesting as a language point of view because of course, there's not much vocabulary and you can go into a lot of detail. So I love the novel and I really like the other things but if I had to choose, it would probably be poetry.



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What personally excites you about teaching your subject?

Well, what I particularly like about literature is that it contains everything. Literature gives you history, it can also give you politics, it can give you culture, it can give you philosophy, religion, spirituality...It can give you all these things and also human relations, about the human condition and it's something I think no other art form really can do. Milan Kundera, one of my favourite novelists who started writing in Czech but now writes in French, so I'm able to teach him as well, he said that the novel in particular is messy and yet it does more than he can ask it to do, and what I like particularly about literature is what they call the paradox of literature. It seems to be an invention, sometimes people say it's a lie that tells the truth, and yet at the same time, even though it's invented, it tells us truths about ourselves. People like literature because there's this human tendency to want to tell stories, which you see right going back to the early myths and also the way that we make sense of our lives. So that's why I find literature particularly interesting, particularly about French literature as well: when I was at school, my A-levels were English, French and German and I always loved reading books. My degree was French and German, and I've always loved French literature and getting to know the language and increasing my vocabulary through that and finding out about another country and another language through its literature.



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What is the biggest challenge you encounter when teaching your subject?

The biggest challenge that you encounter when teaching literature as part of a French degree is the fear on behalf of some students that it's going to be too difficult, it's going to be hard for them to understand, particularly literature which isn't modern. And so there's different ways that you can actually approach that challenge, right from the beginning doing it at school for example, putting it in its particular context, giving people awareness of the historical and social context, giving them some examples of the language, giving them linguistic support as well, helping them with reading techniques, telling them we don't need to look up every single word, focus for example specifically on the verbs, gradually building up a more active reading vocabulary. Also we have some very good editions that we use teaching here, some very good editions are used in France for example, *collège*, *lycée*, the editions we recommend to our students, because they have a lot of support and I think that's particularly useful as well. But it's also showing students that it's not just the question of a language. Some students think: 'Well, what is the relevance of studying literature? Surely I should be doing simply language for business or looking at translation, history, politics'. In fact, it's relevant in two different ways. Any form of textual analysis that you do is going to be useful. So, for example, if I have a student who's done a final year module with me and has been looking at 19th century French poetry, I can write a reference for that student saying 'this student is able to analyse a text and to write about it and bring out its salient points' and that's the same for any particular text. But also I think it's realising that a text is not just all about escapism, literature isn't simply something you just do for the fun of it. It's also something that can actually make you think about the topics I mentioned at the



start, but also particularly about politics. Often students don't realise that even if a text doesn't seem to be explicitly political, of course it is about politics. It might be an allegory about politics so you can think about plays which are obviously political, like Camus's *Les Justes* for example, but you might think, actually, let's look at something about Racine in the context when it was written, what does that say about pre-Revolutionary France? What does that say about order, for example? Look at La Fontaine's fables: how and why has a beast fable been used? How's that talking about power relations? So from that point of view, it's interesting when you talk to students and say: actually every text is political, every form is political, even though it may not seem so and often texts just seem to be conservative with a small 'c' because what they're doing is simply reinforcing the status quo by not calling it into question, but other texts actually, when you start to look at them, you realise they're much more political than you might think.



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What would be your “top tip” for those going on to teach your subject at A-level?

Well, I think it's to be pragmatic about it. It's something that even if it's something you haven't got experience of doing, not to be afraid of doing it. It's like anything else: you just learn the best way to do it, you learn from your experience. Feel free to chop the text up into small bits: start by asking students just to read the first opening pages and then come in and talk about them. Then maybe give them a few more chapters to read, gradually go through it more and more as they build it up, intersperse it with different conversations at different times, making sure that they're understanding things, asking them to do presentations. When I did my A-levels, and I'm thinking it's nearly 30 years ago now, I can remember my German teacher in particular slowly reading sections of the books with us and talking us through them, and I think it's the same for all of these things. That's particularly helpful. If one technique isn't working, try something else and always break it up. Obviously that's the same for anything that you teach but I think it works just as well for literature as for teaching language or an area of culture.



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Why do you think the study of literature is integral to the study of French?

Well, I think that the study of literature is vital to getting to know any culture but particularly in France because literature plays a specific role there. I wouldn't say that literature is more important in France than it is in Britain, say, but it's important in a different way and I think you can see that for example in the independent bookshops in nearly every town or every district of a big city, all the readings that they do, the way that it's taught in the curriculum, 'la rentrée' every year where they have all the books come out, almost like records for example in the music business, not that they're called records anymore. But I think that in France, to understand French culture, you really need to understand about literature and also because so many of the French thinkers, philosophers and also people who are interested in politics were themselves actually writers of novels or short stories, so if you go back to Diderot for example, the most famous one of course Voltaire's *Candide* but also if you think about after the Revolution and specifically if you think about people like Sartre and Camus, you can see how the idea of the writer, the public intellectual, literature is part of getting to know about politics. So I think if you want to find out about the Occupation for example, it's particularly interesting to know not only about the types of things that were being written, historical documents, but also the poetry that was being written for political purposes during that time. Also if you want to know about satire in pre-Revolutionary France, it's very interesting looking at Molière for example or looking at the fables of La Fontaine. So as I say I think that literature is a vital part of French culture and it's a very good way of teaching different subjects and bringing it in as one part of the way that you might teach it.

