



## **Worldbuilding in a Middle School French Classroom: A Community-Based, Communication-Focused Structure for Meaningful Language Learning**

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### **Introduction and Rationale**

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The longer I teach, the more I see how complex the effect of classroom dynamics is on the learning that happens within every class; those dynamics are influenced by each student and all that he or she experiences both inside and outside the classroom, as well as of course by the expectations and demeanor of the teacher. In the world language classroom, especially at first, many students become so fixated on the "foreign-ness" of the language that they struggle to recognize the commonalities, linguistic and social, that can serve as footholds from which to propel themselves forward and upward on their personal climb toward language acquisition. Without those footholds, the climb can seem insurmountable, too great to achieve.

Issues of perfectionism, self-doubt, being laughed at, and being less-than, all revolving around self-esteem, enter with our language students as they begin class. I find this to be especially true when students begin learning a language in middle school, an age and time that is already so fraught with themes of self-consciousness and insecurity. Stephen Krashen coined the term affective filter to refer to that imaginary wall that blocks learning, of language or anything else, when student anxiety is high and self esteem or motivation is low. There is a strong tension between wanting to "get it right" and a subsequent fear that one is not in fact doing that; these expectations and fears are obstacles to both learning as well as enjoying a new language, and the way students interact with each other around these concepts most certainly affects the learning environment of the classroom. By getting purposeful about building a classroom language-learning community starting in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, as students transition to middle school, I hope to channel those feelings of self-doubt by focusing on student roles and responsibilities to others within the classroom, using the ways they will relate to each other as reason for communication as well as motivation to support one another.

In today's world language classes, we are constantly looking for ways to provide or create opportunities for students to communicate authentically in the language we are teaching. The emphasis is on actively using the language and providing lots of opportunities for students to do so that are unique but similar, so that they can get repeated practice, but in continually engaging ways. This can at times feel somewhat contrived, as the prompts for conversation, although realistic and real-world to varying degrees, don't always actually touch the real world of the student. It is a what-if world that students must imagine: If you were in France, if you met a

French-speaker, this is what you would say or ask in this particular, sometimes random-seeming situation. Or if you needed to borrow a pen, this is what you would say. But either you don't actually need to now, or by the next time you need to again, you will have forgotten how to say it because you haven't needed to practice the phrase since then. Even the attempt to make the prompt feel more real, the extra layers of detail to imagine in order to make the scenario more - in fact - imaginable, sometimes pulls it instead further from our students' reality, turning the task into a collection of hoops through which to jump.

In part this is because of the inherent complexity of language and the tension between giving students simple, widely usable language, and the ways in which concepts and language don't always translate into neatly packaged bundles. So on the one hand I try to give students lots of commonly used sentence starters that they can apply in different situations just by switching out vocabulary; on the other hand, sometimes the student wants to express something that defies simple swapping, something that doesn't easily map onto current conceptions of language structure. Of course part of learning a language is learning how to use what you know to communicate something more complex than you are currently able to say; but still, students can become frustrated when they don't understand that what they want to say involves a complicated tense change or a different and confusing structure, and thus don't understand why I won't just give them what they are asking for. Because there exists always this dance of what to teach and explain as a way to build linguistic understanding in general, and what to just give, free of much explanation, simply as a communicative option for self-expression. All of this threatens the clarity of the language foundation you have been working so purposefully to build; without that clarity, even the best ideas and plans will risk falling short. Our students need something to say and a reason for saying it, accessible and varied ways to respond and explore, and a space in which they feel comfortable doing so.

It is for the social and self-esteem needs of my students as well as for the desire to bring a new kind of authenticity to communication within my language classroom that I write this unit. To understand and use the factors already at play in my language classroom, to organize our procedures and activities around the idea of community, and to create a structure for being and communicating within that classroom community that empowers students as language learners, as agents of their own learning and contributors to our classroom learning community.

I teach at an arts magnet middle school comprised of grades five through eight. When students enter in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, they are placed in a reading or math enrichment class if there is need; if not, they are placed in French, Spanish, or Mandarin Chinese. If students or parents aren't pleased with a placement, they may meet with guidance and switch languages at the beginning of the year. But we try to convince them to stay, as students and parents often have preconceived notions of what is or isn't a useful language, and we are trying to change that message. So it is my job to show students and their parents the usefulness of French, and if I can't convince them of that, then at least either to show them how much fun they can have with it or how much they are learning to communicate with it. Students who enter a language in 5<sup>th</sup> grade generally continue with that language through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Grades five and six focus on vocabulary-building and more simple question/answer sets, while grades seven and eight focus on more complex conversational prompts and how to access and apply language within a growing diversity of linguistic knowledge, while building more overt awareness of grammatical structures.

So for example, in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, if we are learning classroom vocabulary we will also learn or review phrases for asking if you have an item and replying in the affirmative and negative, as well as asking if you can borrow one, or if there is such and such an item in your book bag. By using those few question and answer phrases, we are repeating the key vocabulary in several different and useful scenarios. But useful

though they are, those scenarios are largely fake. Students don't actually need the items at the time they are asking for them, and they don't have any real reason to know if their classmates have them. It is just an exercise in language. And it's a good one! Although the set up as it stands is largely successful, at times it can get a little too focused on vocabulary-building and questions seemingly plucked from the sky.

And there, the question forms itself: How to provide a more meaningful and engaging context in which to ground these questions and answers? I've become familiar recently with the concept of worlding, or constructing a world. In that light, I like to think of the answer as moving from word-building to world-building, where that world is built on the words we need and the relationships we form in the classroom. Where we learn French and recognize language connections, where we leave behind limiting beliefs and adopt those beliefs that move us forward in our common goal.

## **What is a Language-Learning Community?**

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The word community may seem an easy word to define, but getting at the actual essence of a community is much more difficult. As I understand it, community revolves around commonality and connectedness. Let us first consider the concept of commonality, something shared. What is shared could be related to geography or location (neighborhood, town, state), interest (voluntary clubs and organizations), people (family, friend circles), values (causes, charities, political parties), or need (child care, school, work). However, commonality alone does not make a community, or at least not a strong, successful one. It is when this shared thing is able to bring forth a feeling of belonging and connectedness to one another that community really happens and indeed thrives among individuals.

In a language-learning community, the commonalities are based around need and, hopefully but not always, interest. By itself, this doesn't really result in the springiest of springboards from which to launch into that great pool of connectedness! Therefore, we as teachers must be purposeful and thoughtful about the structures we build for our classes, so that there is a higher likelihood that they will be able to support the growth of the bonds necessary for a successful, thriving language-learning community.

I think many teachers and students today conceive of their classes as things - courses, classes or even the classrooms in which the classes take place. We talk about what will happen in my classroom; students talk about taking this or that class. The implication is of the class or classroom as this somewhat concrete thing, a space in which students amass as we work to teach them, or a collection of work which must be addressed and completed. In either scenario, the emphasis is often on doing the work, what happens when the work isn't done, and how students behave regarding the completion of tasks. Consider even the word task, which carries with it the idea of a small and perhaps fairly meaningless chore to cross off a list, an assignment for which to get a check in the grade book. For better or worse, whether we mean to or not, whether this is as a reaction to mandates and pressures or simply how we think school should be, I believe that as completion rather than accomplishment has, perhaps inadvertently, become inherent in much of the conventional text and subtext of education today, so too has the person each student is been unintentionally subsumed by the quantification of the work he or she has or has not done.

From this point forward, I would like to be adamant about the idea that this is a language-learning community rather than a language-learning classroom. We are our members, our students, not the space in which we are

gathered. (Although in the name of establishing a cohesive community, I suggest that what is done with the space does indeed matter.) We are our members, our students, not necessarily the work that is or is not checked off in our grade books. Oh yes, work will be done here. And it will indeed be graded. But it will be more meaningful, I hope, than it has previously been, and it will be done in the pursuit of a greater goal, not just for the grade or to please parent or teacher. It is through the construct of community, with the recognition of individuals and how they interact within the whole, that I intend to create the conditions to support this.

As is often the case in discussing aspects of community, I have started defining our language-learning community by hinting at what it is not. It can oddly be easier sometimes to suss out the barriers and impediments to a thriving community rather than to articulate its actual qualities. Let me try to clarify what this community actually is, for me; you may emphasize different aspects than I do, but we will probably all land in the same general neighborhood of understanding. <sup>2</sup>

I believe that a language-learning community is a group of people (in this case students and teacher/s) who are working together to make meaning out of language. We want to understand what is being communicated and to communicate expressively for ourselves, using our learned language. We understand that mistakes are a necessary part of our process, and that each individual learns and processes language in different ways and at different paces. We support each other in our endeavors and only laugh with, never at, each other. We explore and experiment with our language and encourage each other to do so as well. We take our work seriously, as practice and preparation is necessary for language to stick. We are linguistic explorers who search for word root connections and stepping stones to understanding. We realize that no good work can be done unless we all feel safe and at ease, and we work to maintain that sense of security for each other. We understand that we are all doing the best we can, and that judging each other will not help anyone to feel more at ease. We understand that each of us has a role, and that it is integral to the success of the community for each of us to do our part. Above all else, we believe that learning language can be fun!

## **What does a Language-Learning Community Require?**

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Often, it is by asking questions that we build up an understanding of what makes up a particular community. For example, what does a language-learning community require? What about a language-loving community? How can I tell this is a language-loving and -learning community? What do I see/hear? How can I tell what the community values are? What are barriers or impediments to the success of our community? Our answers will inform our actions as we seek to build such a community, and as you consider this framework for your own classes, your answers may lead you to different outcomes, activities, and elements.

As I understand it, a language-learning community requires the following atmospheres, which I will refer to as climates in order to concretize the concept a bit for students:

A calm climate where language can be heard and processing can happen

(This requires rules, order, structure, and respect of that need.)

A safe climate where mistakes can be made without blame or insult

(This requires trust, solid commitment, and fierce protection.)

A productive climate where language can be practiced

(In addition to the qualities required in the first two climates, this requires preparedness as well, on the parts of both the student and the teacher.)

A language-learning community also requires a variety of scaffolds and supports for students to be able to learn, to understand, to discover, and to realize their errors, all at their own paces.

The following is a model for a way to consider how we speak about our community environment in class. As always, I try for simple structures that students can apply in various scenarios in combination with other vocabulary, and use cognate vocabulary whenever possible. In the Rules and Values section of this unit, there is a subsection on "Affirmations" that will speak to ways affirmations can be used in class.

Guiding Affirmation: Le climat ici est calme, sûr, et productif.

(The climate here is calm, safe, and productive.)

Questions to Ask: Est-ce que le climat est [calme, sûr, productif] à ce moment?

Is the climate (calm, safe, productive) at this moment?

Positive Responses: Oui, la classe est calme. / je me sens calme.

(Yes, class is calm. / I feel calm.)

Negative Responses: Non, c'est nécessaire que la classe se calme. / que je me calme.

(No, class needs to calm down. / I need to calm down.)

## **Building our World: Immersive Fiction and Community Values**

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Although I have spent a lot of time emphasizing the importance of environment to our community, let me be clear: The primary purpose of all this emphasis is the ultimate facilitation of communication, and the pursuit and accomplishment of meaningful language work. As employment is described in the following statement, so I wish to describe school and, more specifically, each class, as the context in which our own work occurs; that it "...meets enduring human needs for time, structure, activity, social contacts, participation in a collective purpose, and knowledge of one's place in society." <sup>3</sup>

With this unit, I want to provide a structure for how to be a language learner in this new world we are creating together. Without that structure, we are left with little more than a string of communicative activities and some nice ideas.

One of the biggest obstacles to language learning is fear of making mistakes. I talk to students about the importance of leaving behind the need for perfection, that the whole process of learning language is a series of errors followed by corrections, and that the process of making the mistake actually helps you learn the correct way. We also talk about how I will purposefully make it so that no one understands every single word I

say, because part of the skill of a language learner is how to make meaning when you don't know every word, how to use context clues, and most importantly, how to stick with it when you are confused and overwhelmed. But these are all tough concepts for my new language learners to wrap their brains around. I think by framing it in this idea of building our new world and building guidelines for how to be here, that I can get the idea across better than I previously have.

To borrow a term from the literary world, I hope to create a sort of immersive fiction for my students, an all-encompassing and fully engaging world of comfort, safety, language learning and necessary language usage. This world will be created, artificial but believable because the core values will be reflected in the details of the surroundings. The problem with some language-learning activities, even the really fun ones and the really authentic ones, is that they are isolated islands that don't feel connected to the whole. And just speaking the language 100% of the time doesn't remedy that, because that often ends up alienating students who feel insecure and confused and don't yet know how to make sense in a setting like that. But if I can create a world that requires our language use and protects the comfort level of the student, then students will be able to grow and thrive in it, progressing appropriately at their own paces.

There are many resources online that name important elements of worldbuilding, but since they are written for fiction writers looking to create and write a believable fantasy world, they must be culled for what elements we can consider in creating our 3D language-learning world. To these, I have added some of the elements of community that I consider important to emphasize in the creation of our world. The following is my synthesized list of language-learning community worldbuilding elements: Believability and Purpose, Authentic and Comprehensible Language, Rules and Values, Systems of Order, Roles, Rituals, Place and Space, Sensory Appeal, and Boundaries. In each of the following sections I will discuss pertinent aspects of each element as well as some specific strategies for approaching and implementing them in the classroom.

## **Believability and Purpose**

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The world must be authentic, in that it feels true. Even if it is clearly not real to the rest of their life, if we can get our students to buy in to the world we create in our classroom, to believe that this is all for a purpose other than just being silly, and that that purpose is a worthy one, then there is a great chance that they will agree to participate in what we propose. While believability is fundamental to all the lists I've seen on necessary components of worldbuilding, I have added here the idea of purpose which is so integral to hooking and engaging students in learning.

Even if our students think that it is corny at first, the goal is that after a stretch, they feel right in the room, and the room feels right to them; here I am using the room to represent the world, as it certainly does on a fundamental level. This feeling of rightness requires a complete and consistent creation and application, a full integration of the other worldbuilding elements into a cohesive atmosphere of purposeful language learning and strong community connection: The tasks and roles must feel necessary, true, not contrived (or if somewhat contrived, then with some other overarching factor that trumps that feeling); the language must feel natural and authentic and be mostly comprehensible; the atmosphere and the rules must reflect the values and the nature of the community. This can be a challenge, but without this sense of believability, all the rest is for naught.

## **Strategy: Building Up Plausible, Purposeful, Do-able Language**

Always, always, always double-check activities for plausibility and purpose. Would people actually say these things, and if so, when and why? In terms of lesson and activity planning, I like to think through all the incarnations of the final goal, the ultimate language-learner conversation around this topic in which my students might engage. From there I pull back to decide what language is non-negotiable, what I can introduce to some students or the whole class but as enrichment options, and what will likely be better left out of this unit for now. In this way, I ensure that my students are equipped to actually do what I ask them to do, from where they currently are.

For example, if you want students to be able to ask and answer questions about having something, and you are doing this around the topic of animals vocabulary, you would think about all the realistic linguistic elements necessary to converse on the topic, envisioning all the directions in which the conversation could go. Then you would delineate the must-have language or foundations for talking about the topic, some of which might be:

The question – Est-ce que tu as un/une...? (Do you have a...?)

The affirmative singular response – Oui, j'ai un/une.... (Yes, I have a ....)

The negative substitution response – Non, mais j'ai un/une.... (No, but I have a....)

Next you would pull out the phrases that will entail more explanation or scaffolding, as they use more complex grammar structures or linguistic concepts:

The negative response – Non, je n'ai pas de ... (with the understanding that there is no gender indicated in the negative here.) (No, I don't have a ....)

The affirmative plural response – Oui, j'ai # ... (with appropriate plural ending.) (Yes, I have # ...s.)

The expression of wanting – Non, mais je veux/voudrais un/une.... (Non, but I want/would like a ....)

The past tense affirmative – Non, mais j'avais un/une.... (No, but I had a....)

The "when" clarification to the previous statement – ...quand j'avais x ans. (...when I was x years old.)

And so on. The balance comes in supplying enough options so that students don't feel the constraints of what they don't yet know, but not so many that it is all too much, too soon, and just plain confusing. For example, the past tense affirmative might be too much for a beginning language class; however, for a group with a particular confluence of interest and linguistic facility, it might work really well. This is where thinking about the do-ability of each activity, in terms of linked steps, is important.

Of course we already know this. As language teachers we are always making decisions about what to introduce when and what to revisit how, what to supply, what to encourage students to explore, and when to redirect them. The difference here is in the consideration also of a community contribution target. Students will now consider: How will my completion of this task or my participation in this activity affect my classmates?



## **Strategy: Community Contribution Targets**

When framing an activity, as you consider its linguistic target and its do-ability in terms of the steps needed to achieve it, consider also its community contribution target. How can you achieve your language goals in as concrete a fashion as possible so that students are both linguistically prepared and physically engaged, but also poised to work together toward a common goal? And how can you attach a convincing reason to the activity, so that students are driven to participate in the classroom community as a whole, through contribution to a class endeavor?

In our example about animals, perhaps we are gathering data from our classmates about what animals they have because we are going to ultimately share that information in a newsletter to parents or the school, as a regularly occurring community snapshot of our class. Or maybe we will create a class mural (on paper) representing the animals we have or even those we want, like a wish list collage representing the character and choices of our classmates. Perhaps we will have a class bulletin board in the hallway that students would have an active role in creating, based on what and how they want to share with the school. Within this process and toward these goals, we could graph answers, experiment with hybrid animal creations, try to guess favorite and least favorite animals, find pictures to share with each other about them, record interviews, and so on. But "task completion" now will be vital to gathering necessary data or working on a project that not only involves people outside of myself, but also has an audience outside of this class.

## **Strategy: Every Day is a Mystery**

I invite you to think of each day as a mystery, so that when students come in, they have a goal that they seek to achieve through the communication activities you've set up. At the end of the class (or several classes), there will be something required of students that they can only do if they've followed the progression of activities and requests. Perhaps students will need to share data collected through interviewing or questionnaires. We may have a goal of a weekly newsletter that comes from the work students do in class, and then maybe a monthly report. Perhaps students will create and film Public Service Announcements (PSAs) using what they practice in class! Students can create videos and idea or content guides to help others who are struggling. The end goals and products will be dependent on the nature, needs, skills, and interests of each particular classroom community.

## **Student Buy-In, Teacher Responsibility, and Community Contribution**

Some students are motivated simply by the assigning of a task, and will do what you ask just because you asked it. Which is lovely for us when it happens and makes our lives easier as a result for sure, but I feel like when we accept that, we are inadvertently reinforcing the idea that authority figures should not be questioned, that we should all just do what we are told, regardless of how we feel about it or how much sense it seems to make. However, I think it's healthy for students to respectfully question the work they are asked to do, and fostering an environment in which they are safe to do so will give them the practice and confidence necessary to question people and actions later in life that may have consequences far more dire than are immediately imaginable in our beginning language classes.

So for our dear, diligent, and obedient students, I think it is our duty to (carefully!) interrupt their cycles of passive acquiescence, to shake them up (just a bit), by immersing them in this community accountability model, where I hope they can see the implications of both interrelatedness and personal agency. I hope this will help empower them to trust their understanding of the structures and processes in which they take part, as well as their voice and how it can articulate injustices and inconsistencies.



Some students will do what is asked out of fear of repercussions. In addition to my own philosophical disagreement with using fear as a motivating force, what we know about students and learning and the affective filter tells us that fear has no place in a productive language-learning environment. <sup>4</sup> Others will do what is asked only hesitantly, and still others may not do it at all.

So we have to be ready to answer for what we are doing, and to stand by our choices in the classroom. And the most common refrain from students, across content areas and grade levels and degree of willingness to participate, is Why are we doing this? Too often, the answer is little more than one of the following variations: Because: I said so; it's important; it will help you succeed; you will be tested on it; you are being graded on it. With this unit, now we can bypass those true but hollow reasons and simply say ...Because we are going to use the information you gathered to do x, y, or z. We will now have some greater purpose to our work, to all our work, so that it really does matter whether or not someone participates beyond a grade, reprimand, or praise. Again, even if the overarching concept is imposed or less than realistic, by engaging students in community endeavors we can make each activity be and feel necessary and worthwhile.

## Authentic and Comprehensible Language

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Language - Of course this is really the crux of all that we are doing here, so let's just speak a bit more specifically about it for a moment. We've discussed how important a sense of purpose is, and that the things that are said must be appropriate to the situation as well as to the level of language development of the class. Students need to know natural intonation and speech patterns, idiomatic vocabulary, and conversational fillers; this lends authenticity to their speech. They must use language that people actually need in life, not technical jargon or oversimplified baby talk. A balance of language that is known or can be easily inferred (as with cognates) and authentic, commonly used language is needed here.

I add that the language must be comprehensible, because if it is not, we lose the student completely. In his input hypothesis, Stephen Krashen refers to the  $i + 1$  formula, which represents the idea that for maximum language acquisition, students must be exposed to language that they fully understand (represented by the  $i$ ) plus just a little bit more, hence the  $+ 1$ . <sup>5</sup> If the portion of the language that is beyond what the student fully comprehends is too great, then the student gets discouraged, thinking that either the language is too tough or that he or she is simply not good at new languages. If the student always understands everything, then there is no opportunity for further language acquisition and development invariably stagnates. From the teacher's point of view, this means that there will need to be some non-negotiable vocabulary that everyone can access and apply, but also a variety of options for extension, for getting more colloquial, that students may take and use when they are ready. Balancing each student's needs in this respect can be challenging, and what works for one class or one students might not work for another.

In the previous section (Believability and Purpose), see also: "Strategy: Building Up Plausible, Purposeful, Do-able Language."

### Strategies: Grouping and Scaffolding

I have found that the ways I group students can help support my goals quite well, so that some days I want students working with those of similar vocabulary level and facility, and others I want them more diverse in

their foundations so that one can learn from and/or support the other. I try to vary this so that it is not overtly about skill; I also try to be sure that it is not simply a matter of a stronger student helping someone who is struggling. Whenever possible I try to capitalize on a strength that the struggling student has and to challenge the stronger student. Perhaps more important is a regular mixing of partners; the more changes in partnering that occur, the more students learn to work with many different people, which supports and enhances our community framework.

Regarding language scaffolding and support in the context of these activities, I have found it useful to prepare focused half- or quarter-sized support sheets with key supplemental language, particular to the activity, providing enough information but not too much. Sometimes I will pass sheets out to some students but not others; sometimes I will pass out different sheets to different students, so that the more advanced students will have extension vocabulary to try out or will be prompted for more detail while strugglers have helpful phrases; other times I have students self select if they would like the support sheet. Students know themselves and their needs – whether they need to be challenged or supported and how much. I rarely see someone stick to the sheet when it is no longer needed, but when I do I nudge him or her to try without it, in the spirit of a game or a dare more than a demand.

## Rules and Values

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Our rules and values indicate how we interact with each other. Our world must have rules that are fair, that support and protect the community we are building and the values necessary to thrive in the community. From an anthropological standpoint, it is helpful to think of what the value system is that makes our language-learning and – loving community possible, as well as how we will institutionalize those values. Another way to approach this is from the standpoint of the Common Good – what is it here, and why?

This work refers heavily back to the following sections of the unit: What is a Language-Learning Community? and What does a Language-Learning Community Require? The understandings from those sections should inform the rules and values established in your classroom community. Below, I offer an example of how to reinforce the values you wish to see reflected in your language-learning community.

### **Strategy: Affirmations**

I have a 7<sup>th</sup> grade homeroom class. We say the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance in French every morning. A while back, I saw a video online in which a celebrity (Tyrese Gibson) was teaching his young daughter about confidence. He made a series of statements like the following, and asked her to repeat them: I am smart. I am great. No one can stop me but me. I immediately thought of my homeroom class, and how nice it would be to start their day off with some positive, confident statements. And we had already established the routine of saying the Pledge, so this would fit in perfectly right after that.

As I was deciding what the affirmation should be, there were several things I considered. I knew I wanted to repeat the phrase Je suis (I am) so that students would start to develop an automaticity with this building block phrase. I wanted to choose adjectives that were written the same in both the masculine and feminine forms, so that our daily recitation would be uniform. This was not the time to practice and illustrate the different endings for boys and girls, although next year when these students are in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade I will. (At that

point they will already have built this strong foundation and will be ready to use the activity to demonstrate differences at the same time as they reinforce our established unity.)

I knew I wanted to have three similar but different phrases, building in degree of difference. I also wanted to choose words that were similar to English without being direct duplicate cognates, so students could have that gift of an aha moment when they made the bridge from the French to the English as they built their vocabulary. Lastly, I chose words for how they sounded, since if you are going to say something every day, I believe it ought to have a nice ring to it, a nice mouth feel as it is uttered and a pleasant aural flow to the ear.

Here is what I came up with. The first sentence is the most basic: Je suis magnifique (I am magnificent.) Sounds great, strong positive message, and introduces the -ique adjective ending and the gn consonant blend. The second sentence illustrates the concept of elision, linking up what is normally a silent final consonant in suis with the vowel sound of the proceeding i: Je suis incroyable (I am incredible.) Also, although incroyable isn't a direct cognate, once students know what it means they will thrill at the similar-but-differentness of it to its English counterpart. The third sentence is the most complex; instead of using another adjective to complete its thought as the previous two sentences do, it uses a noun phrase: Je suis le maître de mon destin (I am the master of my destiny.) Here we have two cognates of different degrees and an example that can be used later in describing or showing possession with de, as the linguistic structure of le maître de mon destin can be applied to things like le livre de français (the French book, as constructed like "the book of French") and le stylo de Sophie (Sophie's pen, as constructed like "the pen of Sophie.")

The effect has been lovely; students say the affirmation with enthusiasm and I can see the smiles on their faces as they do so. Even the ones who clearly think it's a little corny are also showing evidence in their smiling little semi-smirks that they are enjoying it a little! I think affirmations that we all say together at the start of class are a great way to establish a positive attitude, a sense of common order, and a shared connection, and this is definitely supportive of our community-based framework.

In addition to starting our class with a general affirmation, I would also like to see each activity done in class start with a brief affirmation, to re-introduce expectations and reframe students for the task ahead. It is a great way to set students up for success as they negotiate transitions between activities, processes, and goals.

#### *Affirmations: Variations and Extension Opportunities*

In addition to the thought process explained above as a way to think through the creation of classroom affirmations, application may vary by experience level. For my 5<sup>th</sup> graders, especially at the beginning of the year, we may have one statement and start like Tyrese Gibson did with his daughter, where I would say it and the class would repeat it. Then we could move to repeating the 1 statement together three times. But in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I would change the statements to reflect verb changes from Je to Tu to Nous (I, You-familiar, We), also getting more purposeful about the idea of a community reflecting a "we" and not just a collection of you's and/or I's.

Students haven't expressed interest in changing the affirmation, but if they did, I would seek input and check for support from the class. Alternatively, we may wish to change our affirmations to reflect challenges or needs we face; for example, we may have a set we say on test days to reinforce our preparation and focus, or early dismissal days to reinforce our ability to not get distracted or off-task.

I offered students the option, as an extra credit assignment, to make a poster that we could post for

reference. A few did, and everyone seemed pleased to see the affirmation made visual by their classmates. We might in the future put our affirmation to a beat, although I tend to prefer keeping it pretty slow and measured for clarity of group choral recitation. Depending on your level of functional technology, it would be fun to video individuals leading the affirmation and play those to guide the class.

## Systems of Order

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There must be a clearly defined system of order and organization in place for students, and roles must be distinctly established. Clarity and consistency are absolutely fundamental to the believability and maintenance of our world. Each teacher will need to take a focused look at what can realistically be done in his or her own classroom, considering things like classroom configuration, individual teacher goals, school and district requirements, student interest and skill level, and established need.

The student artifact that will hold all the things we do in and for class - the work, the tasks, the notes, the explorations - is the dossier. I toyed with calling it many different things: Daily Journal, Travel Log, Travel Guide, Field Notes, World Guide, World Manual. Each had pros and cons to it, but ultimately I decided on the French word dossier because, in addition to being a French word that we have co-opted into English, for me it best encompasses the idea of a working collection of information. Dossiers grow, and the information is used in different appropriate and actionable ways; the information is gathered for a purpose. I want students to think of all that we do as useful to a goal, so where "guides" get at information useful to navigate a place, and "logs" get at reflections, and "notes" get at the study of something, "dossiers" get at all of those things, as a compendium of information that is useful for navigating and knowing our world as well as reflections on that information, toward an end outside of merely being there and experiencing it.

### **Strategy: The Dossier**

All class work, center work (see Activity B: Centers with a Twist), daily Do Nows, and notes will be completed in a composition book that we will call a dossier. Students will date every entry they make. We will use the idea of the interactive notebook, which considers the notebook as made up of two distinct halves; as seen when the book is opened, there is the page that is the right side and that which is the left. Here, the right side page is for facts - the entry, work, information, or vocabulary; the left is reserved for relevant notes, synthesis, and creative exploration of the work, as well as feedback from me. Within this general structure there is freedom of interpretation, so that for one student, in one instance, a picture might be considered like a fact, as a visual representation of something, and thus put on the right side; whereas in other instances it might be seen as more of a creative synthesis of information and so live on the left. I would much rather have a student begin to consider why he or she is conceiving of something as fact or creation than trifle with regulations about what belongs where.

Dossiers will be composition books; their compact, portable, sturdy shape - distinct from the rest of the notebooks already in use - will set them apart as something special. I will ask students to get at least four for the year (one per marking period), although they may find that they need more. I expect the dossier process to help make real the importance or at least the habit of dating and labeling every assignment. You do this when you are documenting information, so you can look back over your work and remember what you did when. As part of this work, you can supply images or ask students to bring in or create images and use them

as springboards for activities; you can also ask students to draft song/rhyme ideas and other creative explorations of our topics or attach things that illustrate the sensory details of the work. I hope that the dossier becomes a treasured resource for students as they take ownership of it in this process.

These dossiers will be helpful in alleviating issues revolving around students absent from class. Upon return, absent students will need to pair with a student who was present (a neighbor). That student must explain the missed day's goal, the result, and the way it was achieved. The absent student then will summarize that conversation in his or her dossier, using English as necessary, and list all pertinent French vocabulary and phrases. This will follow a format that I will give to students at the beginning of the year, and I will also have it printed on paper. That way students are helping each other, absent students are still involved but not asked to do something that they won't understand, and they are able to join in on the next class.

## Roles

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This is where the idea of a community-based framework for language learning really takes off. As students adopt and accept roles and what they mean, they begin to develop a sense of community contribution and responsibility to each other. It becomes about more than oneself and the consequences of doing or not doing work that affect the individual; now what I do or don't do will have an impact on the people around me, in a real way. As students struggle and likely stumble at times with the implications of an integrated system of work, they will hopefully develop an internal motivation for completing a job and keeping up their end of any task, with an emphasis on follow through that can be so difficult to convey to students.

See Activity A: Establishment of Community Member Status.

### **Strategy: Role Creation**

Some roles, like community member, will be automatic upon agreeing to participate in our community. Another example of this is the role of neighbor; everyone will have several neighbors based on where his or her desk is located, and of course every student will in turn be a neighbor to several people. I currently have students set up so that sometimes they work with their cross-table neighbors, other times their side-table neighbors. (This is sometimes for variety, other times I work it that like-level partners are cross-table and side-table partners are high-low paired.)

Teachers are used to having students take on roles ranging from paper passer outer to attendance taker to study buddy. Some roles will be, like these, established based on the need to maintain proper function of the ins and outs of classroom mechanics. Students will apply for these jobs by filling out a simple application that asks for name, desired job, reason for applying, and related experience and submitting it to the job box, or la boîte d'emploi. Some jobs may be created based on student competencies, and for these jobs we may select students and invite them to the role.

Since students will change neighborhoods and other jobs or roles over the course of the year, the information cards will not be laminated. To whom one is both cross-table and side-table neighbor will be indicated there, as well as other jobs held or roles assumed. Job/role information can also be concurrently tracked on a student resume, with jobs indicated under Les Emplois (Employment/Jobs) and neighbors or other relational roles under Les Contacts (Contacts.)

## Rituals

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Every community has its rituals that highlight, reinforce, and celebrate what it most values. Some of these are events and acknowledgements, special occasions on which we can celebrate and congratulate; others are more mundane, just repeated procedures that carry small meaning in our everyday lives. In our community, I expect our rituals to revolve around language usage, accomplishments in language, exploration and appreciation of language and culture, and community contribution.

### **Strategy: Creating or Capitalizing on Everyday Rituals**

In addition to our affirmations that we will use to begin class or start a new activity, I consider there to be an element of ritual around my reactions to certain actions or behaviors. For instance, as a language teacher and a sensitive soul, I find great power in the words we utter. For me as a teacher, the "sh" word is none other than "shut up" and it's the only "sh" word I know; my reaction to hearing it in my classroom is consistent and exaggerated, always an expression of astonished dismay accompanied by a slow, expressive Oh là là! so that the offending student has time to register the problem, apologize, and rephrase the "request" before I finish. The "s" word (stupid) evokes a similar response. While my students certainly think that I am ridiculous and overly preoccupied with these words that flow so freely from their mouths, they do in fact respect my wishes, and over time, they seem to understand the benefits of speaking kind and uplifting words, even when few other people are bothered by what is so often the status quo. Although not a ritual in the typical sense, I find ritualistic reactions to behaviors to be effective in getting points across, especially perhaps for younger students.

I like the idea of having the ritual of themed days, like Wacky Wednesday or Fun Friday. Some of these you might want to have every week, but others you might want to have more on a pop-up basis. Basically, think of things you want to happen in class or skills you want to emphasize, and try to make a fun-sounding name out of it! Like sometimes Monday could become Lundi de Langage and students could spend time looking up chosen vocabulary or experimenting with language; or every Wednesday can become Mercredi Merveilleux, where everyone tries to say positive or complimentary things all class long, culminating with a moment of complimenting each other before class is over. Also, you can use the same idea but apply it to small chunks of time within a class period, akin to spots or features on a talk or variety show, and introduce them in a fun way, with a silly voice or some kind of instrument sound or other consistent but notable way.

My school already has an established system of acknowledging students by how they show or support Respect, Integrity, Safety, and Excellence in school; each week, teachers can nominate students for Shout Outs that occur during lunch waves. There is a group picture that is taken and students get a certificate. I also give my own certificate that gives a little more detail about the reason for the Shout Out. I have a poster on my wall for students to sign, and I ask them to write any French sentence they would like, along with the date. Shout Outs occur on Fridays, and I can ritualize this more by making it a part of every Friday or Monday class (depending on when class falls in relation to lunch.)

Strategy: Milestones and Memories - Ritualizing and Celebrating the Good Stuff

Think of what matters most to you and to your students, and how you can make an event out of it. I want students to have fun with language and really engage with it. So a few years back I helped create an event at my school called Rhymefest, where language students sing and dance or recite poems that they have learned



or created. It is optional and after school, but all language students get involved by helping to prepare and giving support to performers as they prepare. It is a wonderful celebration of language, culture, and creativity, and students look forward to the opportunity to show what they can do! To bring some of this to the rest of the year, I will add a quarterly performance celebration event involving invitations, perhaps some French food, and dressing for the occasion.

My school is an arts magnet school, so after two marking periods of sampling all the arts modalities in rotation, 5<sup>th</sup> graders select their emphasis (like their major.) I will create a ceremony of acknowledgment around this, where each student will declare his or her emphasis, get a picture taken, and we will then create a mural of these new community affiliations (which will also be added to student ID cards.)

Less formal, but still special, would be the integration of community spotlight days, where students share what they can about themselves in French, using pictures to help communicate what they don't yet know how to say. We could also post these on a class bulletin board and incorporate video as available to students.

## Place and Space

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The environment is so important to the sustained believability and success of a community. It must be set up to support what we value, both for ease as well as for alignment of message and practice. Consider the aesthetics of the room; use surfaces to convey the messages you want to convey, broadly in terms of reiterating and reinforcing rules and expectations visually, and specifically in terms of labeling locations in the room/world like points on a map. Involve students in the process!

Student seating in my room is done with two sets of two columns of desks facing each other. This makes it easy for students to work in pairs and well as groups of three or four. I already refer to students sitting next to each other as neighbors, so it will be quite an easy jump to refer to clusters of students, or neighbors, as a neighborhood. When I want students to mix up their groupings we can talk about "traveling to the next neighborhood." No matter what your desk situation is, I recommend that you try to configure it as much as possible for paired and small group interaction, emphasizing the community feeling however you can.

See Activity B: Centers with a Twist.

## Sensory Appeal

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In writing, this refers to giving details relating to the senses, and is most often illustrated by talking about food! Of course we can occasionally add food to our rituals, but really, for our purposes sensory appeal means getting descriptive, so that students can build their vocabularies. Because description in French involves not only vocabulary but also the grammar concepts of noun gender and matching adjectives to nouns, I often hesitate to use description much in my beginning classes, in an effort to keep it simple. But as discussed in the previous section on Authentic and Comprehensible Language, that can end up resulting in an oversimplicity that frustrates some students. So the goal here is to find a way to describe and get students to

describe without requiring them to master those gender rules.

## Boundaries

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While all communities have boundaries, it is really important to me that we don't create boundaries within the classroom; that we don't marginalize students who are struggling. I do not want one student held up in contrast to another, which so often creates a sense of competition rather than community.

If we start from a place where we believe that we are all doing the best that we can, it can help eliminate tendencies toward judgment that can run rampant and get exploited in poorly-functioning or ill-conceived communities. Rather than criticize or blame, here we remember that yes, we are each doing the best we can and, for whatever reason, sometimes that includes messing up or making poor choices. In this way, I don't have to feel compelled to chastise students for small transgressions in order to make everyone feel like I am the guardian of rules and safety. Instead, they will be comforted by my role as guardian of their well-being. This isn't to say that discipline won't happen, because it certainly will when needed. But the general feeling in our room will be one of support and problem solving instead of nagging and criticizing.

To drive this point home, I have created here a few affirmations for class that capitalize on the sound similarity of peur (fear) and erreur (error).

Je n'ai pas peur de faire des erreurs.

(I am not afraid of making errors.)

J'apprends par l'erreur.

(I learn by making errors.)

La peur de l'erreur n'existe pas ici.

(Fear of errors does not exist here.)

In constructing our world, we will also be constructing boundaries, both articulated and silent; this is something to think about a bit. How to balance the boundaries needed for school success with the ones that feel right to students as individuals, and how to convey these in such a way that our students understand and value them. From something as simple as establishing or revealing boundaries between when it is and is not ok to joke around, to something as far-reaching as the idea that by buying into being an active community member, you are setting a boundary between yourself and someone who is looking to distract from or work against the community. I merely ask that you consider the implications of what you do in the community you are creating, so that you may consciously explore the boundaries that do exist without creating unintended boundaries for your students.

## **(Word)Play and Concepts of Correctness**

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This safe environment we have created is ideal for students to play with language, to experiment with word creation and to really take ownership of their learning. Contrary to what may be popular pedagogy among French teachers, I will tolerate and in fact encourage blending of French and English into a personalized Franglais of sorts. Of course I will always promote using our words (our French words) to express what we wish, but so often interest and enthusiasm for language is squashed when teachers criticize the use of English, and in so doing criticize the student's efforts at communication. While we want to help them leave the security blanket behind, we can do that while we encourage creative word play that students can now use to work through complex concepts of differing linguistic structure. If we want confident, spontaneous speakers, we can't stifle that creativity that helps them achieve this right now. And honestly, what bi- or multi-lingual person do you know who doesn't bounce back and forth between languages every now and again? As we strive for students to endeavor to express themselves, we have to allow for the varied ways in which they will find to do so, as we support them in exploring ever-more-appropriate ways.

In the beginning stages of language learning, students want to be right, and I think language instruction has a bias toward the existence of right or wrong, of perfection. Well, language isn't perfection, and students learning language will make errors, even when they are doing really well. But they hear a traditional correction and they feel like they are wrong and thus not good, and this quickly discourages them. Often however the foundation is correct, and it is just that the refinement isn't there yet; the spelling is slightly off but recognizable, for example. So although this may be controversial for some, I intend to be more accepting of things like flip-flopped letters and other common misspellings, not counting them as errors, and identifying the accurately spelled version as plus (or more) correct. In this way, I hope to encourage students in their linguistic endeavors in a way that inspires and liberates them rather than stifles them.

### **Community Connections**

The 5Cs of Foreign Language Learning are the guiding goals of language instruction; they are: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities; of the 5, Communities is notoriously the most difficult to incorporate meaningfully into lessons.

The easiest way to do so is to set up some sort of email exchange with a school in a French-speaking area, but I have hesitated to commit to that because, with all the deadlines and demands we face already, I am afraid to commit to something that will be too difficult for me to follow through on properly. But by building the culture of the class around community, I can start to develop the concept of community with my students in their first and second year with me, and as part of that process we can transition to an exchange. First, we can connect with the Spanish and Chinese classes in our school, and then perhaps other 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade language classes in the district. Also, I would like to foster the connection between older and younger students by having my older kids visit the younger classes occasionally to read or work with them.

## A Note to the Language Teacher on a Cart

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I've been there, and I know how difficult it is to build a world in a space that is not static, that doesn't always feel yours. When seating arrangements get changed without any notice and wall space is limited, many of these elements are a challenge to implement. I would suggest focusing on the roles, creating mini-reference books with pertinent information that students keep with them, and using lots of overhead transparencies and chart paper labeled ahead of time with the identifying information. Also, creating a strong greeting ritual that establishes your arrival and that the world has shifted will be especially important for you.

### Activity A: Establishment of Community Member Status

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All students will be members of our community, and we will talk about what that means. In English, we will discuss what a language-learning community needs, what we value, and how our rules and roles support that. We will spend the time that is needed here, without lingering unnecessarily. Although our goal is language, especially at the middle school level I think we need to be very clear about why we are creating the world that we are, and why what I will be asking of students is so important. In the past I have not dwelled long enough here, and not engaged students in thinking about it in the way I conceive of now.

In the name of ownership and linguistic experimentation, I propose that together we play with language and create a name for our new world. It can be a fun exercise in using forms of the word France and French combined with what they already know about location suffixes in English, to create a world called Françaisville, France-ylvania, or Françerica! <sup>6</sup> We can list some suffixes and root stems and students can combine them creatively, or we can make cards of the suffixes and stems and students can manipulate them to create various combinations; students can then vote on the winning name or try to come to consensus on it. At the same time we can make that name into a label for us, a way to refer to ourselves as a community – using the examples from above, we might now consider ourselves Françaisvilliens/ennes, Franc-ylvaniens/ennes, or Françericains/nes! To further involve students, we can hold an open submission process for choosing an image or emblem to represent us, on a flag, or as a stamp on what we do.

To sanctify the acceptance of the role of community member, I will create a pledge to sign, based on our discussion. We will make an occasion of it, and then I will issue each student a simple ID card identifying him or her as a member of our community, with its new name and emblem. Laminated ID cards, along with unlaminated information cards (explained more below), will be stored in a clear plastic sleeve that every community member will be required to have at all times. We will discuss back up plans, like writing the information in a safe place, because it is real world appropriate. If students forget their ID, they can register for a temporary day pass and they can always refer to a duplicated list of their other roles for reference. If it is important to you that there be a consequence for not having the ID, I would urge that it be something the student has to do, something related to the daily goal perhaps, rather than something he or she will be unable to do because the card is missing. I don't find exclusion motivating and my goal is always to have the student participating and using the language.

Other options for ID cards include: Using pins that you can stick label cards in, wipe off labels or nametags on

lanyards, and passports.

## Activity B: Centers with a Twist

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To enforce the aspect of coming and going that exists within a community, both the mobility as well as the ways that mobility affects interactions, I am excited to set up learning centers in the classroom, by language skill: Writing, Reading, Speaking, and Listening. Each center will have several activities that will link back to the particular themes, vocabulary, and linguistic structures we are using. To begin to build a sense of the Francophone world around us, I will label each section as a different French-speaking area; activities within each center will be labeled as sub-parts of that area – countries, cities, or landmarks, depending on the scope of the four main label divisions. I keep going back and forth on whether the centers should have static names or names that change according to need or development, but I've decided that I want the names to change, so I can highlight different areas and explore others more deeply as I see fit.

It is important to consider locations as relative to each other, on a similar scale of existence. So for instance, you don't want to label the writing center Paris and the listening center Canada, as one is a city and the other a country. Instead, you would perhaps name the listening center Montreal. We want to help students understand geographical relatedness, that Paris is a city within France, which is a country within the continent of Europe; and that Montreal is a city within the French-speaking province of Québec, in the much greater country of Canada, which with the United States is a part of the continent of North America. By changing the names of the centers from time to time, we will be able to approach these concepts from different angles and give students multiple opportunities to make meaning of it all.

Since learning centers will be named by francophone locations, we can have students talk about going to France, for example, instead of going to the Writing Center. This gets students using the simple but very useful phrase *Je vais* (I am going) while also subtly internalizing an eventuality of travel, as they get so used to talking about going places that it no longer seems like such a foreign possibility for them and thus normalizes the idea of a vast global community.

For each center cycle, I will make a passport that indicates all the center options; students will register completion of center work there. For each activity completed, students will write the date and composition book page number that correspond with the assignment. If it is a paired activity, the partner will initial as well. I have done something similar with a sheet of paper, and it was a useful way to keep students on task and accountable; I can only imagine how much more they will enjoy the process with the use instead of a passport! Students will attach completed passports into their dossier for future reference.

## Notes

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1 Curtain & Pesola, 54.

2 I articulate the characteristics of a language-learning community using the pronoun *we* because no matter

how many times I tried, I could extract neither myself nor others from my conception of it.

3 Dudley 32.

4 See Fay & Funk for a way of approaching teaching and classroom management that very strongly supports our community goals.

5 Curtain & Pesola, 53.

6 In older grades, I might have students pick a town name and place it within the context of a country, but for 5<sup>th</sup> grade I think it's best to keep it simple and fun.

## Resources

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### Resources Cited

Curtain, Helena and Pesola, Carol Ann Bjornstad. *Languages and Children: Making the Match (Foreign Language Instruction for an Early Start Grades K-8)*, second edition. Longman, 1994. This is a fundamental resource for K-8 language teachers, and the source for Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis.

Dudley, Kathryn Marie. *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America*. University of Chicago Press, 1994. This core text for our seminar was full of illuminating insights on community.

Fay, Jim & Funk, David. *Teaching with Love & Logic: Taking Control of the Classroom*. The Love & Logic Press, 1995. This is an indispensable resource into ways of being and managing in a classroom that is based on respect and consideration; perfect for our community-based focus!

### Resources for Activities

Interactive-Notebooks. <https://interactive-notebooks.wikispaces.com/>. This is a great teacher resource for ideas on implementing interactive notebooks.

YouTube: Tyrese Gibson. "Tyrese Gibson Self Confidence Starts at Home with Daughter."  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TluZh8p9rz0>. This short video inspired me to use affirmations in my classroom.

### Resources: School Community Films

The following modern films show students in school communities in France and Francophone Canada. They may be used in whole or through clips to enrich lessons, so that students will be able to make connections to contemporary French-speakers their own age.

Québec, Canada: *La mystérieuse Mademoiselle C (The Mysterious Miss C)*

Auvergne, (rural) France: *Être et avoir (To Be and to Have)*

France or Belgium: *L'élève Ducobu*. This is not subtitled. Based on books that may be used for exercises.

French countryside. *Les choristes (The Chorus)*. This is not modern but even now, French children love it so much that I include it.



The following films take place in high school and may be able to be used at a higher level. Of course, be sure to preview all films first to be sure there is nothing you don't wish to address in your class.

Paris, France: Entre les murs (The Class)

Canada. Le Journal d'Aurélie Laflamme (Aurélie Laflamme's Diary). This story of a 14 year old also has a book series attached to it.

Resources: WorldBuilding in Fiction

Burke, Lita. Writer's Craft Blog. December 8, 2011. 5 Critical Elements for Fantasy World Building, Parts 1-3.  
<http://litaborke.com/2011/12/08/6-critical-elements-for-fantasy-world-building-part-1/>

Lo, Malinda. Author's Blog. October 8, 2012. Five Foundations of World-Building.  
<http://www.malindalo.com/2012/10/five-foundations-of-world-building/>

Milanovich, Laura. Cultural Anthropology for Writers. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. November, 2013.

## Appendix: Implementing District Standards

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This unit is based around classroom communication, and specifically ways students and teacher can ask and answer questions in a meaningful way. This supports the Interpersonal Communication and Communities standards of the National Standards for Learning Languages as well as the Speaking and Listening and Language strands of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts (ELA) and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.

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