

CDIPS Final Project
2022-2023 Cohort
Marina Grineva
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Reimagining teaching the little ‘c’ culture through remote collaboration with a partner university.

Part I: Executive Summary

Teaching the small ‘c’ culture, or “behaviour culture” (Tomalin and Stempletski, 1993) is an important aspect of any foreign language program. Having taught foreign and second languages (Russian and English) for many years in various academic environments in three countries, I strongly support the idea that immersion in the target culture and living in a country where this culture is dominant is a deciding factor in whether teaching and learning about cultural values and beliefs will be successful. Creating opportunities for students to come in contact with native speakers and “plunge” into the target culture is a challenge in some academic environments due to a number of factors, including geographical and institutional ones. My project, which is based on a course that has already been successfully piloted in the Russian program at Memorial University of Newfoundland (Canada) aims to provide Russian language learners with opportunities to learn about the small ‘c’ culture through remote collaboration with students in a Russian university. This type of virtual cultural exchange would allow to fill the gap that has previously been filled with a very robust study-abroad summer program in St. Petersburg and, therefore, add a very important aspect to the Russian culture studies that has been excluded from the curriculum in the past few years - the firsthand experience of the Russian small ‘c’ culture.

References List

Blum, S. D., & Kohn, A. (2020). *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*. West Virginia University Press.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Garza, T. J. (2021). Here, there, and elsewhere: Reimagining Russian language and culture course syllabi for social justice. *Russian Language Journal*, 71(3), 41–64.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Association*, 32(3), pp. 465-491.

Moore, A. (2022). Interpersonal factors affecting queer second or foreign language learners’ identity management in class. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103(2), 428-441.

Paris, D., & Alim, H.S. (Eds.) (2017). *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*. Teachers College Press.

Stommel, J. (2018, March 11). *How to Ungrade*.
<https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>

Tomalin, B., & Stempleski, S. (1993). *Cultural awareness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Part II: Analysis (300-500 words)

Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) where I teach Russian, used to offer a very robust study-abroad program in St. Petersburg which gave students a unique opportunity to immerse into the Russian small 'c' culture and form their own unbiased opinion about life in Russia based on their interactions with their Russian peers and hosts in St. Petersburg. This opportunity is no longer available for the students. From my point of view, the inability to offer this study-abroad program created a tremendous gap in the curriculum and negatively affected the learning outcomes, especially from the perspective of teaching the small 'c' culture. I could literally sense this gap in my classrooms already in the first couple of years after the study abroad program was cancelled.

The Russian program at MUN is very small. The university is located in a small city on an island where the opportunities to communicate with native speakers, moreover, with those who lived in Russia not long ago, are very limited. Teaching the small 'c' culture does become challenging. As a result, what I could often see and hear in my classes was questions or comments that reflected false stereotypes, very often false to the extent when it was hard to believe that in the 21st century, with the open access to online resources, your students' knowledge and perception of the Russian way of life can be so distorted. Of course, as a Russian language and culture instructor, you do your best to help your students navigate through the information and dismantle these stereotypes, but it is often challenging to compete with the mainstream media and Hollywood portrayal of the Russian character.

As a result, and partly due to the situation of the pandemic which forced us all to switch to a fully online format of teaching and learning, my colleague from a Russian university and I came up with the idea of a virtual study-abroad course which could be beneficial for students from both universities and could help my Canadian students learn about the Russian small 'c' culture from the representative of this culture. The course was piloted with a small number of participants but turned out to be a great success for both sides.

The main objective of my project (course) is to give students an opportunity to learn about and experience Russian life and culture through guided research and digital discussions and informal online interactions with the target culture representatives living in Russia. The experience can help students interested in Russian Studies form an up-to-date and free of stereotypes image of the Russian society and can let them learn the opinion of their Russian peers about the most recent developments in the country and, therefore, will contribute to the development of students' intercultural competence, which is a goal of any foreign language and culture program.

The course will offer students a challenging opportunity to explore the topics of their interest related to Russian life and culture through guided research and online collaboration with Russian university-level students pursuing their education in the area of foreign language studies, linguistics, journalism and philology. The discussions will be conducted in English. The course will also provide an opportunity to develop students' abilities to analyse literary and cultural texts, including media-rich resources, and improve their critical thinking, presentation and writing skills.

The course will consist of three major sections: introductory research/discussions about Russian identity, mentality, life and culture; online collaboration with Russian students; presentation of the research paper/project.

During the first section of the course, the students will be introduced to and investigate the main concepts of Russian life and culture and will be provided with the overview of possible topics for the research papers/projects as well as with a list of resources that can be used as sources of inspiration while choosing the topic to work on in the course.

During the second section of the course, the students will conduct research and will be paired with Russian students (In the pilot course, the Russian students were from the Department of Foreign Linguistics at Lobachevsky University, Nizhny Novgorod.) to work together on a project of their choice. The project will consist in the analysis of a topic the students choose during the first section of the course. They students will be expected to compare a Russian cultural concept, tradition, custom or ritual with a similar one in North American/Canadian/Newfoundland culture. This should be done through, first, preliminary research of the topic (bibliography is due before the first online session with Russian students) and, second, through weekly meetings with Russian students. The results of the research and online discussions will be presented in

a) the final paper and b) the presentation made together with the Russian student who is assigned as a partner for the course. (After the pilot course, one group of project participants chose to present the results of their collaboration in the course at the II International Conference "Languages and Cultures: Functional, communicative and Linguo-pragmatic Aspects" which was conducted by the partner university on May 12-13, 2021)

My goal for this project is twofold: based on my experience in the pilot course and the knowledge and ideas accumulated throughout the CDIPS sessions, I aim to

- a) make this course a more inclusive environment for the learners keeping in mind that students in this course come from different sociocultural contexts and, thus, have different identity-managing decisions in the classrooms;
- b) incorporate the ungrading approach to foster critical thinking

Part III: Design

Performance objectives: Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to

- Demonstrate understanding of the most important concepts of Russian life and culture
- Identify typical features of Russian mentality and Russian mindset
- Explain what stands behind Russian socio-cultural stereotypes
- Analyse literary and cultural texts, including media-rich resources
- Demonstrate improved critical thinking, presentation and writing skills

Learning Assessments

- Students will complete self-assessments and self-reflection activities
- Students will complete self and peer evaluation of their creative individual presentations and group projects

Strategies, Activities, Methods

- In the first phase of the project, students will be asked to familiarise themselves with a few resources from the list offered by the instructor that will help them learn/review what they already might know from previous courses about the main concepts of Russian life and culture. They will be asked to complete a self-assessment based on the readings/viewings and identify the areas they would like to learn more about. The activity will function as a needs analysis for the instructor and will allow students to “tune into” the course and to draft their path in the project.
- During the second phase of the project, all project participants will conduct research, and Canadian students will be paired with Russian students to work together on a project of their choice. The project will consist in the comparative analysis of a topic the students choose during the first section of the course. The students will be expected to compare a Russian cultural concept, tradition, custom or ritual with a similar one in North American/Canadian/Newfoundland culture. This should be done through, first, preliminary research of the topic (bibliography is due before the first online session with Russian students) and, second, through weekly meetings with Russian students. Facilitating students’ discussions, I aim to emphasise that very different socio-cultural contexts of the participants may result in different identity-managing decisions and strategies (Moore, 430), especially considering that perceptions and attitudes to queer students differ considerably in Canadian and Russian academic environments as the awareness of queer identities is not placed much emphasis on in Russian culture.
- Peer and group discussions will be conducted based on Paul Freire’s principle of the dialogical nature of education (Freire, 2000) and the idea that “knowledge is not static; it is shared, recycled, and constructed. (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 481). Therefore, Canadian students will be constantly encouraged to actively engage in the discussions with Russian students to discover meanings, similarities, and differences and form their own opinions of what Russian way of life, mindset, and character is.

- Students will be asked to create a rubric that they would like to use to evaluate their own learning. My goal is to emphasise the role of self-reflection during the course activities. The decision to “ungrade” and base the final grade in the course on students’ self-assessments is inspired by Stommel’s reflection on his ungrading practices: “Their self-evaluations... and my responses to them, become a space of dialogue, not just about the course, but about their learning and about how learning happens.” (Stommel, 218)

Alignment

Objective	Assessment	Strategies/Activities/Methods
Identify typical features of Russian mentality and Russian mindset		Students will be asked to familiarise themselves with a list of readings and viewings that will serve as a starting point in their project.
Demonstrate understanding of the most important concepts of Russian life and culture	Quiz (Note: this will also serve as needs analysis for the instructor) Self-assessment and peer review activities	Students will make individual mini-presentations based on their research during the first phase of the project.
Explain what stands behind Russian socio-cultural stereotypes	Self-assessment based on the rubric created as a group in one of the intro classes	Students will engage in a number of peer and group discussions to work on projects of their choice.
Analyse literary and cultural texts, including media-rich resources	Peer review activities	Students will prepare final project using the format of their choice.
Demonstrate improved critical thinking, presentation and writing skills	Final group projects (class presentations/video/conference presentations) Informal assessment through observations of the participants during peer and group discussions	Final group “debrief” - group Q&A session to reflect on what has been learned, how the perceptions of the Russian/Canadian culture have changed/what were the biggest takeaways.

I would like to try the ungrading approach in my project as the philosophy aligns very well with the nature, objectives, and the dynamics of the course. During one of the intro classes, with the guidance of the instructors, students will be asked to create rubrics that will be used for peer and final evaluation. This will allow the project coordinators to make sure that students' expectations are factored in and their voices are heard. Using their own rubrics will also allow students to have a sense of accomplishment at the end of the project.

Part IV: Development

- There is no textbook assigned for this course due to its nature. During the first phase of the project, the students will be offered a list of readings and viewings which will serve as a starting point in their search for topics for final projects. Some such resources will be determined by the instructor beforehand and will include articles (samples are indicated below) and media resources (to be determined) about Russian national character, personality, and stereotypes.

Allik, J., Mõttus, R., Realo, A., Pullmann, H., Trifonova, A., McCrae, R. R., & Meshcheryakov, B. G. (2009). How a national character is constructed: Personality traits attributed to the typical Russian. *Cultural-Historical Psychology, 1*, 2–18.

Bagnovskaya, N. M., Golovina, V. V., Agibalova, E. L., & Tarasova, I. V. (2020). Sobornost as a specific phenomenon of Russian culture. *International Journal of Applied Exercise Physiology, 9*(4), 158-163.

Ter-Minasova, S. (2015). In search of national character. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 20-25*.

“To suffer is to suffer”: Analyzing the Russian national character. (2010). *Association for Psychological Science - APS*. Retrieved June 23, 2023, from <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/were-only-human/to-suffer-is-to-suffer-analyzing-the-russian-national-character.html>

Some other learning activities that will be used during the first phase of the course:

[Ice Breaker](#) (an episode of a video created by the course instructor):

Class Discussion

The learners will be offered to watch a video on common stereotypes about Russians and discuss three questions based on their interpretation of the video and their own experiences.

The link to the video: [Russian stereotypes in 60 seconds - YouTube](#)

Discussion questions:

1. Brainstorm typical stereotypes about Russians that you have seen, heard, grew up with. Are they changing?
2. Give some examples of how these stereotypes are reflected in North American literature, cinematography, pop culture, etc...
3. Think of the reasons behind these stereotypes.

The discussion page in the LMS from the pilot course:

Table of Contents > GROUP DISCUSSION > DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Watch the following video and see if the content reflects what you visualize when you hear the word "Russian"

Russian stereotypes in 60 seconds

Watch later Share

Watch on YouTube

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Brainstorm typical stereotypes about Russians that you have seen, heard, grew up with. Are they changing?
- 2) Give some examples of how these stereotypes are reflected in North American literature, cinematography, pop culture.
- 3) Think of the reasons behind these stereotypes.

- All course materials will be available for the participants of the project through the LMS used for teaching and learning at MUN - Brightspace, and the weekly meetings with Russian students will be conducted through Webex - a conferencing system used by the university for synchronous online sessions. Russian students will be added to the class list as student-auditors and will have access to all the course resources. To communicate with each other outside of the scheduled class sessions, the participants will be using communication channels they are comfortable with, e.g., Slack.
- The project was supported by the department in the past, and I hope that the approval will be granted in the future as the pilot course feedback was positive.

Part V: Implementation

- The course will be guided by Memorial University policies that will be included in the course syllabus and discussed with the participants during the orientation session.
- I will incorporate the activities (e.g., class discussions) that foster learners' awareness of possible difficulties in intercultural communication and possible ways to navigate conflict in culturally- and linguistically- diverse learning environments.
- I will be mindful of time zone differences scheduling synchronous class and peer group sessions and take into consideration student preferences with respect to time slots. In one of the sessions, I plan to invite a guest speaker - a Russian author [Olga Lisenkova](#) to talk about current developments in Russian literary studies. To make sure that all project participants will have an opportunity to attend the session, I will conduct a poll to find out the best day and time slot for the session.

Part VI: Evaluation

- I will conduct class observations on a regular basis and will use my notes to analyse the course dynamics that will guide my self-reflection process in order to modify the course for the next offerings.
- The participants will be asked to complete mid-course evaluation and end of the course feedback survey as well as will be encouraged to submit their feedback in any other format. After the pilot course, for example, one of the participants sent me a video feedback where he commented on the value of the project:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LbUWgJo9yTOdnInzm0cgnr8AgIo9Gyux/view?usp=sharing>

I will post the video to the class site at the end of the course to encourage the participants to provide feedback.