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## Teaching Compassion in the Russian Language and Literature Curriculum: An Essential Learning Outcome

BENJAMIN RIFKIN

One of Dr. Olga E. Kagan's most important contributions to the language education field was a reconceptualization of the perspective of the language performance of heritage speakers of Russian. In the past, heritage speakers' language was considered deficient in all the ways in which it diverged from Contemporary Standard Russian. Their lack of formal instruction in Russian or the interruption of their formal instruction due to their immigration from a Russophone country to North America was considered the source of numerous errors and anglicisms, which the Russian language curriculum was designed to eliminate. Teachers of Russian as a foreign language often viewed all heritage speakers as similar despite the fact that they had very different life stories and language profiles, as Dr. Kagan and colleagues ultimately proved in their research. Furthermore, teachers of Russian as a foreign language did not appreciate the richness of the speech of heritage speakers of Russian, all of the strengths they possessed in their language use by virtue of the fact that they used the language to communicate in their home environments. Dr. Kagan's groundbreaking work on the assessment of the language of heritage speakers of Russian and the development of instructional materials to facilitate the further development of the language skills of these individuals was a pedagogy born of compassion. And in that spirit, I share the following proposal to extend the pedagogy of compassion to be a cornerstone of the teaching of foreign languages and cultures, starting with the curriculum for Russian language, literature, and culture. To that end, I dedicate this article to the memory of our dear colleague, Dr. Olga E. Kagan.

The Liberal Education and America's Promise program (LEAP) of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, accessed July 29, 2019) identifies intercultural knowledge and global

learning as among the essential learning outcomes of a liberal arts education. Intercultural knowledge is defined as the ability to interpret “intercultural experience from the perspective of [one’s] own and more than one worldview” and the ability to “recognize the feelings of another group.” Global learning is defined as as helping students “engage and learn from perspectives and experiences different from one’s own . . . [and understanding] how one’s place in the world informs and limits one’s knowledge.” These outcomes are measured in two of the “VALUE Rubrics” (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education), as described by McConnell and Rhodes (2017).

Work on the question of intercultural understanding in higher education settings appears in the context of larger concerns about civility. Indeed, some observers have argued that compassion and empathy are in decline in the twenty-first century (e.g., Rosin 2019), and some have argued that this is particularly the case in the context of higher education (e.g., Dolby 2013). It is noteworthy that many scholars have studied intercultural competence, intercultural empathy, and intercultural understanding, including Bennett (1986, 1993, 1997), Byram (1997) , Deardorff (2006), Fantini (2010), Harvey (2017), Heyward (2002), Jackson (2015a, 2015b), Kealey (2015), Martin (2015), Papadopoulos et al. (2016), Uyaguari (2018), and Zhu (2011). Some of these scholars, such as Uyaguari and Zhu, have focused their attention on these constructs in the context of the foreign language and culture curriculum, and some, such as Heyward and Jackson, have focused on these constructs in the context of study abroad experiences or experiences working with international students in North America, but none of them has focused on these constructs in the context of the learning and teaching of Russian in particular.

I suggest that it is productive to operationalize the concept of intercultural competence as part of a larger construct of “intercultural performance,” with the understanding that “performance” is observable behavior. The Asia Society and Center for Global Education uses the term “global competence,” but operationalizes it with a framework of four areas for learner action, called “domains,” which speak to actual observable performance:

- 1) Investigate the world: demonstrate curiosity to learn about the world;
- 2) Recognize perspectives: understand that one has one’s own

particular perspective, which may not be shared by others;

- 3) Communicate ideas: communicate effectively, both verbally and non-verbally, with diverse audiences; and
- 4) Take action: make a difference in the world. (Asia Society and Center for Global Education 2018 a and 2018b)

Given these features of “intercultural performance,” I would argue that we can and should add to our definition of the term *compassion*. I argue that people show compassion when they do the following (from least to most challenging levels of performance):

- 1) Suspend culturally biased judgment in interpreting how individuals from diverse backgrounds meet their respective needs;
- 2) Demonstrate cultural self-awareness in the context of a multicultural world;
- 3) Exercise empathy for and take the perspective of individuals from diverse backgrounds;
- 4) Build cultural bridges to enhance intercultural understanding; and
- 5) Advocate for intercultural understanding among individuals from diverse backgrounds.

All these features of intercultural performance, summed up in the single-word construct “compassion,” are profoundly relevant to learning experiences throughout the liberal arts disciplines at the post-secondary level as well as in K–12 education more generally. The first question, then, is why instructors teaching in these disciplines should incorporate the teaching of compassion into courses and curricula, given our inherent time constraints and the ever-expanding volume of information we feel compelled to “cover.” In consideration of this essential question, I turn to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote the following about education:

The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals. . . . We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education. The complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate. (King 2019).

According to Dr. King, all of us in education should consider not only the substance or content of the disciplines we teach, but also the ethical perspectives of the application of that content to our lived experiences in the world. Indeed, the International Charter for Compassion states that: The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions. . . . We call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality . . . and to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions, and cultures to cultivate an informed empathy . . . with all human beings... (Global Compassion Council 2009).

The thought leaders who wrote the Charter for Compassion advocate for the restoration of “compassion to the centre of morality,” emphasizing “informed empathy . . . with all human beings.”

Accordingly, I argue that we as college and university faculty in the liberal arts disciplines, in general, and the foreign language and culture disciplines in particular, ought to consider the exercise of learners’ “compassion muscles,” which I will define as the ability to respond with compassion to a new situation, as one of the learning objectives of our their courses and curricula. Indeed, professional organizations for many of the liberal arts disciplines identify something like “intercultural performance” or “compassion” as one of their desired learning outcomes. We certainly see this in the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages ( 2015). The concepts of intercultural performance and compassion are embedded in the standards for culture and community, according to which learners are expected to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives and products of the cultures studied, so as to interact and collaborate with target-language speakers in their community and the globalized world. The Modern Language Association’s 2009 “Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature” states that students should “experience people and places that are different and distant from . . . [their] home communities” and should “apply moral reasoning to ethical problems,” emphasizing cross-cultural literacy (2). Indeed, Mar (2014) has reported on the relationship between the reading of prose fiction and the development of empathy; many faculty who teach Russian literature will agree that many texts in our canon support that instructional objective.

The teaching of compassion in the Russian language, literature, and culture curriculum is not merely a good idea ethically; nor is it simply a matter of lofty aspirations reflected in the documents of scholarly organizations. Indeed, the teaching of compassion is worthy as an activity reflective of the true purpose of a liberal arts education, to wit, the development of critical thinking skills and creative problem solving as applied to a broad range of complex problems, as described in the Essential Learning Outcomes of the Liberal Education and America's Promise program. When Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956), especially as revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2014), is considered as a map of thinking skills taught in educational contexts, the performance of acts of compassion is located at the highest levels of thinking because, in order to perform successfully in this context, students must understand their own biases, analyze a complex situation, and synthesize or create an appropriate response on the basis of that analysis.

Given that it is worthwhile to teach compassion in the Russian language, literature, and culture curriculum, the next question is how to do it. One of the problems of teaching such a complex matter is that there seems to be no inherent hierarchy of knowledge (by contrast, it is generally understood that one must learn algebra before tackling trigonometry and that one must master the Cyrillic alphabet before reading Tolstoy in the original). Another problem lies in the fact that it is difficult to measure the growth in our students' hearts or souls: even an X-ray will not quantify the changes we seek to promote in our students.

We must start, nonetheless, with the premise that if we are to teach compassion as relevant to our own discipline and if our students are to acquire it, we must develop and implement appropriate learning tasks in our curricula. Furthermore, at least some of these tasks must be graded so as to incentivize student engagement with the learning process. To conduct compassion-focused activities from time to time in the classroom without these activities contributing to a course grade would communicate to the students that the activities are, in fact, worthless. The students must understand that these learning tasks are worth something. Furthermore, these tasks must be regularly assigned so that the students have repeated opportunities to practice and enhance their skills.

The compassion tasks themselves should require students to respond to situations or scenarios, still or moving images (e.g., photographs or video-recorded commercial messages, excerpts from television broadcasts or films, or full television broadcasts or films), or audio recordings (e.g., radio or podcast). Learners could share initial responses, perhaps informed, at first, only by their monocultural framework. They can then review additional background information about the relevant culture, first considering how they might want to be treated were they to be strangers in or visitors to the given culture and ultimately trying to imagine how representatives of an ethnic, racial, sexual, or religious minority or foreigners among them might wish to be considered. Discussions, presentations, and writing projects can start with a comparison of stereotypical understandings of individuals from a particular group or culture (e.g., “some people believe that Americans are all racist cowboys” or “some people believe that all Russians are spies or mobsters”) with more nuanced understandings of intersectional identities. Activities might be conducted with initial individual reflection, small group discussion, and then wider class discussion, culminating in team projects that might include interviews with individuals from within or beyond the campus community.

Ultimately, students can be asked to write essays, create and deliver oral presentations, or create multimedia projects about how what they have learned changes the way they see the world, the discipline, their communities, or themselves with greater intercultural understanding; alternatively, they could be asked to write op-ed essays for a campus, local, or regional newspaper, create a public service announcement, run a talk-show panel discussion for a student media organization, or create a study guide examining an intercultural conflict for first-year students to better understand the intercultural context of their new academic home. Students could be asked to rewrite a section of their textbook, a Wikipedia entry, or another text they were assigned to read, enhancing its intercultural analysis or its inclusiveness and in this way contributing to their discipline from a perspective of compassion. All of these suggested learning tasks, which engage students in perspective taking and empathy, can be framed with expectations for students to connect their work product with the language, literature, and culture curriculum of the given course.

When we think about graded tasks in the language curriculum, we tend to think about vocabulary and grammar quizzes, listening and reading comprehension quizzes, chapter tests, oral exams and presentations, and compositions. Perhaps we also think of grades for class participation or participation in group cultural projects presented in English at lower levels of Russian language study or in Russian at higher levels. In order to help students exercise their compassion muscles in the Russian language classroom, they could also be asked to analyze intercultural conflict scenarios on their chapter tests, in English at lower levels or in Russian at higher levels, as part of their course grade. In these tests, students could be asked to identify aspects of an interaction in which an individual is disrespected—perhaps due to a lack of understanding of cultural differences—and propose alternative behaviors that would be respectful. Students could be asked to compare these intercultural interactions with interactions in their own communities and, at higher proficiency levels, describe how they would want to be treated or how they would want others to be treated in such situations. Students could also be asked to create a Russian-speaking avatar on a social media platform and connect with Russian speakers in that virtual space, asking and answering questions and sharing with them, demonstrating that they can understand the cultural perspective of the native Russian speakers; they could then print out the transcript of these interactions and submit it together with an intercultural analysis. Students could also be asked to interact with visiting Russians or with students from Russia on the campus and then write a reflection on cultural differences they observed in their interactions and how they managed those differences with empathy and compassion.

In the literature or film classroom, students could be asked to write about a character in a work they studied and why they do or do not feel compassion for that character, and how that character's experiences and perspectives are similar to or different from the experiences and perspectives of a similarly aged individual in North America, whether Tatiana in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, D-503 in Zamiatin's *We*, Bezdomnyi in Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, Rita in *Little Vera* (Vasilii Pichul, 1988), or Dima in *The Fool* (Yurii Bykov, 2014). They might write reflection papers on how they would have responded differently in a given situation represented in the literary or filmic text

or how they might have liked others to respond to them in a similar situation. Alternatively, they could write reflections on how they might coach Americans or Russians to engage in a difficult intercultural conversations and conclude with how negotiating intercultural differences is important for a deeper understanding of Russian culture. Russian literature and film are replete with situations and characters about whom students will find it easy to write, such as Akakii Akakievich main character from Gogol's "The Overcoat", whose plaintive cry—"I am your brother!"—is perhaps the clarion call of compassion in Russian literary culture. Learning tasks could include analyses of the behaviors of fictional characters or the nature of situations in which those characters find themselves in the short stories, novels, or films the students have read or viewed for class, comparing the characters and situations from the Russian texts to real-life situations students have experienced in their own communities. Reflecting on situations in which individuals demonstrate a lack of compassion and proposing alternative, compassionate behaviors could help students imagine how they might respond to situations in which they witness a lack of compassion. While it remains to be seen whether the exercise of compassion in one context (e.g., writing about a fictional character) can be transferred to the exercise of compassion in another context (e.g., responding to a live intercultural conflict in the community), one can hope that the practice of the compassionate response in the former context might enhance the effectiveness of a compassionate response in the latter.

In a culture class focusing, for example, on Russian architecture, iconography, music, or painting, students could be asked to connect the images of Russian culture in their historical context to the spiritual and emotional needs of the people of Russian communities and consider how aspects of the given works compare to analogous aspects in the same art form in communities in other cultures. Rather than dismissing cupolas as an exotic manifestation of a distant culture, students could be asked to compare this architectural feature and its place in Russian spiritual culture with the expressions of spirituality in American churches, synagogues, and mosques. Their analyses could be executed in class discussions, in a community-engaged learning project in which they interview native speakers, in papers, or in skits or public service announcements. Alternatively, students could be asked to draft a statement in defense of

plans to build a Russian Orthodox Church in a neighborhood where the residents are opposed to a foreign-looking structure with cupolas and consider how that discussion might be similar or different in the context of a proposal to build a mosque with a minaret.

As Bennett (1986, 1993) argues, success in learning a new skill is most often observed when the skill is taught developmentally, in accordance with the developmental stages suggested by both Bloom's (1956) taxonomy and Anderson and Krathwohl's (2014) revision of the taxonomy, with the National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages and American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NCSSFL) "Interculturality Can-Do Statements" (2015), and with Griffith et al.'s (2016) "approach-analyze-act" framework. In other words, the integration of compassion in the curriculum is developmentally sequenced with opportunities to recognize situations, identify appropriate and compassionate responses in rehearsed situations, practice responding in rehearsed situations, and develop a deeper understanding of the abstract features of intercultural conflicts that beg for compassion and perspective-taking. For instance, students in a Russian language or culture class could be asked to recognize or identify a situation in which there is an intercultural conflict between Russian speakers and American-born speakers of English. Next, they could be asked to identify the different perspectives of individuals participating in the intercultural conflict. This might include, for instance, brainstorming possible motivations for the participants in the given intercultural conflict while practicing suspension of judgment and tolerance of ambiguity. At the next stage, learners could be asked to exercise their compassion muscles by taking up those perspectives, imagining themselves "in the other's shoes," so to speak, and presenting and advocating for the perspective of the "other" in a particular situation. For instance, they could role-play a situation in which a Russian speaker with limited English is trying to accomplish a transaction in English at a bank, post office, or grocery store in the United States. At first, those tasks could be designed within areas of interest for the given students, but gradually the tasks could extend to broader and broader areas at increasingly greater distance from the students' area of interest. At the next, higher level of performance, learners could be asked to describe an intercultural conflict or misunderstanding fully, but concretely,

explaining how each participant in the conflict approaches the particular situation from his or her own perspective.

We can consider implementing relevant tasks at higher levels in the learning taxonomy, as well. For instance, at a very high level, learners could be asked to analyze an intercultural conflict not merely from the concrete context of the given conflict or incident, but from a more abstract perspective, generalizing from the specific case to an entire category of such incidents. Furthermore, learners at this level could practice debunking stereotypes and hypothesizing how intercultural misunderstandings or conflicts could be avoided. At the highest level, learners could be assigned project-based learning tasks in which they take ownership of a project with real-life application, including, for example, interviews with individuals who live in a community beyond the campus about a problem they are experiencing in their neighborhood (for example, an oral history interview with immigrants from the former Soviet Union). This developmental approach to the teaching of compassion in the language and culture curriculum ultimately helps train students to participate spontaneously and successfully in authentic, unrehearsed settings in which intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts occur.

Instructors should schedule these tasks to occur at regular intervals throughout the course (and curriculum) to promote good learning outcomes in compassion-focused learning tasks, thus attaining the positive results associated with distributed practice. Because the topics around which intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts occur are often sensitive in nature, in that they may challenge students' deeply held but unexamined beliefs and assumptions, instructors should consider asking students to reflect individually on the intercultural conflict scenarios before asking them to work in pairs or groups. Students can be asked to work in pairs or groups to analyze conflict situations and create responses in speech, writing, or in a technology-mediated presentation. After they have had a chance to work in groups, they could be asked once again to work individually, producing individual responses (in speech, writing, or technology-mediated performance) demonstrating the exercise of compassion. These individual responses can be assessed in accordance with a rubric, such as the VALUE rubrics on intercultural knowledge or global competence, the global competence rubrics of the Asia Society, rubrics proposed by Deardorff (2006) or Harvey (2017), or

by a rubric the instructors create themselves. By scheduling several such tasks throughout each semester, instructors can hope to see students transition from states of denial, defense, and minimization to states of acceptance, adaptation, and integration, as suggested by Bennett (1986, 1993).

Instructors assessing student performance in the exercise of compassion could select one of the developmental rubrics described above (e.g., Asia Society, Association of American Colleges and Universities, National Council of State Supervisors for Languages-American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Harvey, or Dearthoff) or adapt one or more of them for use with the tasks they have developed for their classroom. The assessment process could include a self-reflection based on student self-assessment with the rubric chosen or developed by the instructor, as well as a peer-assessment using the same rubric. By conducting compassion-based exercises periodically throughout the semester or the year and engaging students in the process of self-assessment, instructors will help focus students' attention on the value of growing in this critically important area.

Shekhtman et al. (2002) proposed a strategy for the teaching of language at the highest levels of instruction: "the Island Theory," which suggests that teachers can require students to memorize abstract discourses with complex language on rehearsed topics in order to have models of performance. Students with these "islands of performance" at higher levels of language production would use these models to create new, unrehearsed performances at similarly high levels. So, too, can faculty teaching compassion not only in language but also in literature or culture courses help students develop and enhance their sense of compassion by practicing these skills in rehearsed topics to create models of performance the students can subsequently use in unrehearsed topics.

When we include the teaching of compassion in our curriculum, we demonstrate to our students that we value compassion and show them that we expect them to grow into compassionate adults and citizens. In keeping with Dr. King's formulation of the true value of education, I suggest, in conclusion, that the best possible education in Russian language, literature, and culture is one in which students are asked to develop and hone their intercultural performance skills, or, in other words, their sense of compassion.

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