Post-Election Issue: The Liberal Arts, The Nation, and The World
As the world becomes increasingly technologically advanced and globally interdependent, we need the liberal arts more than ever before. They are the foundation of all academic learning.

We need the disciplinary knowledge of the liberal arts, their interdisciplinary connections and discoveries, and their insights. A world without the liberal arts risks being a world without values, without beauty, imagination, or pleasure—a world bereft of history, language, the arts, and any understanding of the complex social, economic, and political networks in which we live our lives, both professionally and personally.

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they’re coming from the same source as our emotions,” Borgida says. “It’s
not easy. Some of these ways of thinking are deeply ingrained.”

Then there’s ideology. For most of us, absorbing political information
is like dining in a restaurant. We don’t begin from scratch to form
our positions on issues and candidates. Instead, we choose from menus
that—candidates, journalists, professional activists, and academ-
ics—have defined as the ideas that go into political choices and deter-
mind what it means to be liberal, conservative, or middle-of-the-road.

Clearly, it makes it easier to sort through the cacophony of
political voices. In those cases, people don’t have to sort issues by issue
because their ideology gives them a network of interrelated positions on
a wide range of choices.

“It means that I have answers at my disposal to many different ques-
tions,” says Federico, who also directs the University’s Center for the
Study of Political Psychology. “It’s not just one question like ‘Should
we raise taxes?’ or ‘Should abortion be legal?’”

“Having knowledge isn’t enough to make people politically or
ideologically engaged,” he says. “They also have to ap-
proach the world with what you might call an evaluative
way of thinking and teaching, and he will ensure that CLA flourishes as an intel-
lectual community.”

In his new book, The Political Psychology of Democratic Citizenship, psychology
professor Eugene Borgida and his co-editors, political science colleagues
John Sullivan and Christopher Federico, review research about how we vote
and why we care so passionately about our political positions.

“Our understanding of political behavior has been dominated by a
rational-choice model where people are engaged in deliberative thought
and calculation,” says Borgida. “But when we are asked why we evaluate
a candidate the way we do, it’s not as if we zoom into the prefrontal cor-
tex, grab the real reason, and cite that reason. What we are more likely to
do is tap into a pool of culturally accepted expectations and spout them,
even though our preferences are being driven by other factors.”

Those factors—emotions, values, and cultural understandings—all
tag along with reason to the voting booth, says Borgida. They may even
overshadow it. For one thing, our inclinations toward partisanship reside
in the parts of the brain linked to emotions.

“Insofar as those structures control our feelings and fears, they may
guide some on the passion we have for partisan politics because they’re coming from the same source as our emotions,” Borgida says.

Then there are the powerful forces underlying our biases. In spite of
what we may say, studies show that our decisions are affected by almost
unconscious responses to a candidate’s skin color or gender.

“We may not think we harbor general antipathies toward women or
African Americans,” Borgida says. “Yet, when they are running for the
most powerful political office in the land, this hidden bias affects our
perceptions of them, and our willingness to support them.”

It may be possible to correct such hidden bias, Borgida says, but “it’s
not easy. Some of these ways of thinking are deeply ingrained.”

“The next stage of political science research should be to explore how
and why we are so passionate about our political positions,” says Borgida.

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rational-choice model where people are engaged in deliberative thought
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DISSECTING HEALTH NEWS

Can you trust the news media to tell you what you need to know about your health? Not so much, says Gary Schwitzer, an associate professor of journalism and mass communication who reviewed 100 health news stories that ran in 10 major U.S. media outlets over 22 months.

Schwitzer and his colleagues found that news stories about treatments, tests, products, and procedures often omit information about costs, benefits and harms, other treatment options, and potential conflicts of interest. The results, says Schwitzer, can be unnecessary fear-mongering and consumer demand for unproven therapies.

One common fault is citing only relative risk (the risk comparison between two different groups) as opposed to absolute risk (actual probability). For example, ABC’s “Good Morning America” reported that breast cancer patients with relatively low blood levels of vitamin D were 94 percent more likely to have their cancer spread and 71 percent more likely to die than those with high levels of vitamin D. But nothing was said about an individual’s overall chances that a cancer would spread or cause death.

As for cost, Schwitzer says, “It’s unfortunate that more than 75 percent of health journalism articles…failed to address cost.”

Although he says that we’re also getting some of the best health journalism ever, “the valleys between the peaks may undo a lot of the good by driving consumers to demand unproven therapies.”

Sha-Ra Strother

Schwitzer’s work was published in the online journal PLoS Medicine in May. He publishes a Web site reviewing medical information at HealthNewsReview.org.
WHAT WOULD YOU TELL HIM? OUR EXPERTS HAVE THEIR SAY.

IF YOU HAD FIVE MINUTES ALONE WITH PRESIDENT-ELECT BARACK OBAMA, WHAT WOULD YOU TELL HIM? OUR EXPERTS HAVE THEIR SAY.

BY DANNY LACHANCE

“MAKE VISAS AVAILABLE FOR BLUE-COLLAR WORKERS. PUT UNDOCUMENTED, FOREIGN-BORN WORKERS ON A PATH TO LEGAL RESIDENCE.”

We often use terms like “illegality” and “illegal immigrant” as neutral descriptors of policies and people. But to Donna Gabaccia, professor of history and director of the University’s Immigration History Research Center, they reflect an approach to immigration that has been quick to criminalize those who cross borders seeking work and slow to recognize how our own policies have incited those border crossings.

“The problem is not that criminal people are waiting to sneak across the borders,” she says of the nation’s estimated 10 million undocumented immigrants, “but that the immigration policy is out of sync with the needs of our economy.” Gabaccia notes that restrictions we’ve placed in recent decades on immigrants from places like Canada and Mexico did not always exist, but they now make “illegal” those who would have been easily admitted just a generation ago. What’s more, they were put into place at the same time we loosened the flow of commerce across the Mexican and Canadian borders with free trade agreements.

“We have ever-rising movements of goods across borders, but we try to stop the flow of people who ordinarily accompany commerce,” Gabaccia says. That’s problematic, she says: Liberal trade policies contribute to changes in the labor market that compel workers to cross borders and become “illegal.”

To address this problem, Gabaccia thinks the president should work with Congress to make a variable number of visas available to blue-collar workers and give currently undocumented workers the opportunity to attain visas. Most undocumented workers are blue-collar, for whom “there are almost no visas in the first place, only a few thousand per year to stop the flow of people who ordinarily accompany commerce,” Gabaccia says. That’s problematic, she says: Liberal trade policies contribute to changes in the labor market that compel workers to cross borders and become “illegal.”

And the consequences of “illegality” are significant, she says. Although anti-immigration voices see a threat to our national identity in granting residence to undocumented workers or putting undocumented foreign-born workers on a path to legal residence, Gabaccia says, “illegality itself” is problematic. She says that illegal immigration policies are typically cast as tough on criminals, but, she says, “the problem is not ‘illegal immigrants’” but illegality itself.

“Don’t close off trade.”

In response to a troubled economy, we heard campaign-season calls to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the 1993 treaty lowering the costs of trade among the United States, Mexico, and Canada. It’s a popular idea in states like Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, which lost high-paying manufacturing jobs after NAFTA was implemented. Renegotiating trade barriers may save or revitalize those jobs, some have suggested, by removing the incentives for companies to manufacture their goods in Mexico.

But renegotiating NAFTA would be a mistake, says Tim Kehoe, a Distinguished McKnight Professor of Economics and advisor to the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. The loss of manufacturing jobs is not caused primarily by the migration of manufacturing to Mexico, he says, noting “the amount of goods we’re producing in the U.S. is going up all the time. And if we measure how fast production—real output—is rising, we see it rising just as fast or faster in manufacturing as in any other sector.”

“So what’s happened to those well-paying manufacturing jobs?” Technology, says Kehoe, has taken over work once done by humans, and gets the job done faster: “To produce more and more goods we need fewer and fewer people,” he explains. That trend will continue regardless of agreements with other countries.

Dismantling or renegotiating NAFTA, then, is akin to Don Quixote attacking the windmills he mistook for threatening giants. What’s needed instead, says Kehoe, is a concerted effort by the next president to help our vulnerable populations respond to an economic climate that now requires a college education for entry into the middle class. With college enrollment increasing, many young people are adjusting to the change. But he’s worried about those who didn’t pursue higher education in the 1960s and 1970s because, even with just a high school education, they were assured good manufacturing jobs. What about them?

“There are retraining and education programs we can put into place. There are tax policies and subsidy policies we can use to help out those older workers,” Kehoe says. “The fact that we’re concerned about older workers who have skills that aren’t being valued by the market—that’s a good reason to develop public policy. But trying to somehow reverse technology or close ourselves off to trade with other countries because we think trade is the cause of these changes in employment patterns—that’s a big mistake.”

“A president’s hardest task is not to do what is right, but to know what is right,” Lyndon Johnson once said. Facing challenges ranging from economic woes at home to political instability abroad, the new American president will need all the good knowledge he can find. We turned to CLA faculty members whose research and expertise might translate into good advice and asked them what they would tell him. Here’s what they said.

DONNA GABACCIA, HISTORY

TIM KEHOE, ECONOMICS
“DON’T BLAME SPECIFIC INDIVIDUALS OR INSTITUTIONS FOR LARGE-SCALE PROBLEMS.”

We should stop blaming individuals or institutions for problems and instead look at issues systemically, says English and cultural studies professor Ellen Messer-Davidow. Too often, she says, we direct our anger at individual players rather than at the rules of the games they play.

Take the affordability crisis in higher education. Since 1980, economic trends and new business policies have dramatically increased university expenditures on goods like energy, health care, and library materials. On the income side, universities have struggled with stagnating or declining support from federal, state, and private sources.

Those same trends and policies have affected students’ ability to pay. In recent years, Congress has shifted federal funding into student loans and subsidies for the loan industry and done nothing to remedy the declining purchasing power of Pell grants, the government’s largest scholarship program. In 1975 the maximum grant covered 84 percent of the total cost of attending a public university. In 2001 it covered 39 percent of tuition only.

“Today we see the heartbreak results,” Messer-Davidow says. “As families struggle with the affordability crisis, it can be hard to understand how that works. People can easily grasp anecdotes about families that can’t afford college because the state universities have raised their tuition.” Messer-Davidow explains. But it’s much harder, she adds, to understand how both colleges and families are trapped by large-scale economic trends and public policies.

Messer-Davidow believes her research on higher education suggests the next president needs to think more systematically about problems that are, well, systemic. “I would set up problem-solving teams that include experts from the academic, business, and government sectors as well as representative ordinary Americans,” she says.

But she’s quick to note that any solution will take time. “Since the problems facing the nation were decades in the making, our leaders should expect that solutions may well take as much time and should resist the pressure to seek quick and easy fixes,” she says. “There aren’t any.”

“FORMULATE A FOREIGN POLICY THAT RECOGNIZES THE UNIQUENESS OF IRAN.”

Iran’s nuclear power program worries many Americans who believe the country may become a threat to global security, and the specter of Iran-as-the-next-Iraq hones heavily in national discussions. But CIA-professor of history Iraj Bashiri says these discussions neglect a crucial point: Iranians are Indo-European in their ethnic origin. They share their earliest cultural ties with the West not the Middle East.

Before Iran was annexed to the Arab world in the seventh century, Bashiri says, Iranians were Zoroastrian, members of a religious tradition that encouraged philosophical contemplation. Iranian philosophers became deeply engaged with Aristotle and Plato—so much so, he says, that “Iran became a bridge for the transfer of Greek knowledge to the Western world.” Philosophers like Avicenna, al-Bruni, and al-Razi, who wrote in Arabic and were influenced by Greek philosophy, were “Iranian.”

After the Islamic world rejected philosophy in the 13th century, Iran retained its philosophical tradition and enhanced it tremendously in the 16th with the contributions of philosophers like Damad and Malik-Shah. It had flourished in the years since the 1979 Iranian revolution, as Iranians have moved to reclaim a national identity that had been suppressed by Western domination.

Irrs Western roots are discussed by its stature today as a major Middle Eastern power, but Bashiri thinks those roots are significant in understanding contemporary Iran. The philosophical thought that underlies Iran’s present thinking, and that has moved Iran rapidly to its present position in the Middle East, has promoted the drive for scientific progress— a drive Bashiri sees in its recent efforts to develop nuclear power. “Thirty years ago, Iranians did not have any manufacturing capability. Today they send rockets into the atmosphere.” It’s the type of progress, he believes, that cannot be halted by bombing a few installations.

Nor should it be. Rather than interpret Iran’s scientific gains as evidence of bad intentions, we might see its progress as a sign that Iranians may be reclaiming the common ground they once shared with the West.

Bashiri sees Iran’s turning, more and more, to reason and science as a way to address their problems. They face, after all, the same energy problems that we do. Iran’s philosophical distinctiveness may make it more receptive to diplomatic negotiation about its use of nuclear power than we currently think possible,” he says.

Of course, limits on Iran’s compatibility with the West will still exist so long as it remains an Islamic theocracy. But Bashiri is confident change is in the air. “Iran is on the threshold of an Enlightenment,” he says. “Reason is playing a major part in the decision-making of the Iranians as a people, as opposed to government. The seeds are there. It’s up to our next president to recognize them and cultivate, rather than curtail, their growth.”

“THE SEEDS ARE THERE. IT’S UP TO OUR NEXT PRESIDENT TO RECOGNIZE THEM AND CULTIVATE, RATHER THAN CURTAIL, THEIR GROWTH.”
Decades ago, the late U of M economist Leo Hurwicz developed an abstract theory called “mechanism design.” Just months before his death in June, he was honored with a Nobel Prize for the theory, which now shapes solutions to some of the world’s most mind-boggling problems. But what on earth is it?

By DOUGLAS CLEMENT

ON DECEMBER 10, 2007, the Nobel Prize committee assembled in Stockholm to present the 2007 award for economics to three American scholars. Two of them took the stage to accept their gold medallions. The third, University of Minnesota professor emeritus Leo Hurwicz, remained in Minneapolis.

It wasn’t a protest, by any means, simply a recognition that international travel, especially for a worldly 90-year-old, is sometimes more burden than adventure. (And really – Sweden in December?) Staying home was also symbolic of the work for which Hurwicz was being recognized: Rules aren’t immutable; changing them can result in better outcomes. The trick, mastered by Hurwicz, is in knowing how to change them. So, also on December 10, Jonas Hafstrom, the Swedish ambassador to the United States, arrived at the Ted Mann Concert Hall at the University of Minnesota and presented the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences to Leonid Hurwicz—who was surrounded by more friends and family than could ever have flown to Sweden.

A better outcome, by design.

Minneapolis, December 10, 2007: Leo Hurwicz accepts the Nobel Prize in Economics from Swedish Ambassador Jonas Hafstrom.
“The success of emissions trading is further proof that the private sector brings forth enormous creativity in solving social problems if we introduce a profit motive and a price signal.” — Richard Sandor, U of M alumnus, founder of Chicago Climate Exchange

Easy as pie

“Mechanism design” is the idea that social, political and economic institutions (mechanisms) can be shaped (designed) to yield superior results.

“Whether one considers auctions, elections or the taxes we pay, our lives are governed by mechanisms which make collective decisions while attempting to take account of individual preferences,” wrote the Nobel Prize committee in explaining the economics behind the award. “Mechanism design can be described as the art of producing institutions that align individual incentives with overall social goals.”

Consider this familiar example: Two people agree they want to divide a pie equitably. How can they achieve that “social” goal? By the rules of the optimal mechanism, known to us all since childhood:

1) One person divides the pie into two slices.
2) The other chooses the first slice.

Because the second person, out of self-interest, will likely choose the larger of the two slices, the first person has an incentive to cut the pie perfectly in half. The rules don’t rely on either person being honest or altruistic. Rather, they harness the self-interest of each individual in such a way that the best possible outcome is achieved.

Rules for dividing a pie might seem child’s play, but changing the variables quickly increases complexity. Increase the number of people or pies, make one person the pie’s owner, introduce money or differing preferences or types of pie, and the rules—and the math—become much more difficult.

But what about the “invisible hand,” Adam Smith’s famous metaphor? A student of introductory economics learns that perfectly competitive markets harness the self-interest of individuals to achieve the best possible allocation of scarce resources. Doesn’t that cut through the confusion?

No quite, the Nobel committee observed. Although these ideal competitive markets do a remarkable job of satisfying people’s preferences with maximum efficiency, “in practice,” the committee said, “conditions are usually not ideal. Competition is not completely free, consumers are not perfectly informed … [and people] may use their private information to further their own interests.”

This is where Hurwicz offered Smith a helping hand, designing mechanisms for situations that are less than ideal.

“People are not angels”

When Hurwicz began research on mechanism design, he ignored the issue of whether people would obediently follow the rules he designed. “Whenever I was asked to present some of my work,” he told an interviewer, “I would start by saying ‘Of course, the incentive problem is very important, but I will assume that people are angels.’ At some point I decided that since I know people are not angels, perhaps I should not completely ignore the incentive aspect.” And that, really, was his breakthrough. Rather than rely on coersion or unrealistic assumptions about human behavior, he would insist that mechanisms be “incentive-compatible,” he said, “a system of rules designed in such a way that people would have an incentive to obey these rules.”

“What Leo brought to the table was the insistence that any mechanism must be incentive-compatible,” says V.V. Chari, professor of economics at the U of M. “That is, we cannot rely on individuals to act in some social interest. Instead we must expect them to act in their private interests. And given that, any mechanism must provide people with the incentives to take the right action at the right time. Leo developed that language and brought it to the forefront of economics.”

Global warming

Perhaps the most global of all applications of Hurwicz’s theory is climate change, the object of a mechanism
future provided “a rock-solid foundation” for his future work. That future included a professorship at the University of California, Berkeley, and years as chief economist at the Chicago Board of Trade.

But today, Sander is best known for creating markets for trading carbon emissions credits, a direct application of mechanism design. The social goal: Curb global warming by limiting the quantity of carbon released to the atmosphere.


Private information

The Hurwicz theory also finds clear application in a context that has emerged in recent years to sell public resources as tangible and amorphous as radio frequencies. When Hurwicz decided to deal with the fact that people aren’t angels, he meant, in part, that we don’t always speak the truth. We might not work as hard as we tell our bosses we will, we might tell a used car dealer that we can’t spend more than $5,000 when our actual budget is twice that. This “private information” problem has been especially problematic when governments sell public resources because private buyers may misunderstand the market value, and for example, to get it at a bargain price. Mechanism design theory has allowed economists to design better systems for selling public resources through auctions. “In the last 12 years or so, there has been a big push to move beyond theoretical mechanism design and bring it to bear in real markets,” notes Peter Cramton, an economist at the University of Maryland. “The shift is to what I would term ‘market design,’ where economics is a huge role in the design of actual market mechanisms. Applications include timber auctions, spectrum auctions, and the electricity market.”

“Auction is a particular mechanism and mechanism design has us thinking about what the incentives are for participation and bidding strategy and so on,” Cramton says. “A big aspect of it is addressing the informational issues and trying to establish rules so there is better information conveyed in the bidders’ bids.”

Voting mechanisms

It might be easy to suggest that elections are the ultimate government auction, but mechanism design is also finding direct application in improving voting procedures.

“Often we have problems like finding a voting system with low cost, or the characteristics and the techniques we use to figure out the answer to those problems are mechanism design,” observes David Epstein, professor of political science at Columbia University. “The same theory used in economics to figure out a good auction mechanism is used in politics to create a type of mechanism. As we say, it’s a way of allocating or producing results and you get different results depending on how people value the object in question. Here it’s an election, not a spectrum to be auctioned off, but the idea is the same.”

Epstein has studied how political and legal courts can design political maps so that voters can achieve specific goals. “Do you want a political map to promote ‘substantive representation’ or ‘descriptive representation’? That is, do you want to focus on the type of people that get elected or the type of outcome the producer produces?”

Political scientists like Epstein help policy-makers figure out what kinds of redistricting will further legislative goals. “In fact, the Supreme Court has a lot to do with that in the voting rights area,” he notes. “They’re going to lay down basic principles of redistricting and given those principles, the different states will implement them.”

Of course, mechanism design isn’t confined to U.S. voting systems. Roger Myerson, one of Hurwicz’s Nobel co-recipients, has done recent work on how to structure voting that will promote democracy in Iraq. “Democracy doesn’t come easy,” he told The New York Times last year, “but by institutions and mechanisms that ensure that politicians must compete for the trust of the voters.”

Epstein himself has applied mechanism design in international contexts, consulting with the World Bank. “These projects are on demonstration and corruption, one of the oldest mechanism-design problems there is,” he observes. “How do you design a government that is strong enough to make laws and enforce them, yet isn’t so strong that it overrun individual freedom? You see applications of mechanism design all over in political economy.”

From kidneys to credit

Indeed, once you start looking, mechanism design seems ubiquitous. The process of matching medical school students to hospital residences used to be one of ultimate pressure and potential disaster. It’s still stressful, but techniques derived from mechanism-design theory have rationalized the process considerably, achieving optimal matches between new doctors and the hospitals that need them. The same is true for kidney donations, where finding the right recipients for a particular organ donation has long been open to delay and mismatch. Here, too, mechanism design has smoothed the process by establishing rules of the game that are incentive-compatible and oriented toward optimal solutions.

The arcane formulas and abstract theory that constitute mechanism design—even find relevance in the voting and electoral contexts, consulting with the World Bank. “These projects are on demonstration and corruption, one of the oldest mechanism-design problems there is,” he observes. “How do you design a government that is strong enough to make laws and enforce them, yet isn’t so strong that it overrun individual freedom? You see applications of mechanism design all over in political economy.”

David Epstein

Columbia University

“Tell us your rules and then the [lender] ought to think about more stringent penalties imposed on borrowers.”

In both India and Thailand, Townsend’s exhaustive research has applied the theory of mechanism design at the most basic level. “We’ve been gathering an enormous amount of data and found that these principles apply throughout,” he says. “It’s all been geared toward first, understanding how things actually work, and second, thinking about possible remedies.”

Catching up

Had the contributions of Leo Hurwicz been recognized earlier, before he turned 90, he might have traveled to Stockholm for the award ceremony. But no one would suggest that the Minneapolis celebration was a lesser affair. By staying at home, he shared his honor with the people who surrounded him during the years spent creating and refining this seminal theory. One of them, his son Means, shared these words at the gathering: “When Leo first started talking about mechanism design . . . there was no immediate, concrete application for his theories. But these days we don’t have to look far to see what Leo was imagining and trying to explain a half century ago.”

It has just taken a few decades for the world to catch up.
Ahhh, the good old days.

POSSIBLY YOU REMEMBER.
Squeaky chalk-on-blackboard.
Dry-as-dust textbook.
Thumb-sized professor way down there behind the podium.

Now fast-forward to 21st Century CLA.

There's still a place for the lecture, to be sure, but for today's students, even PowerPoint presentations can seem positively outdated. Teaching and learning—not to mention research and outreach—have become wired, interactive, electronic, immediate, and, most would say, a lot more fun.

Take a look at some of the more innovative—and spectacular!—uses of technology around CLA.

YOU THINK art is static?

Something only for the gallery wall? Fasten your seatbelt. Art on Wheels is a hands-on class in which students create video works with mobile projection units that include a specially designed bicycle, generator, laptop, powerful projector, and control interface. Students project their work onto urban buildings—or even trees and streets. The program is under the direction of assistant professor of art Ali Momeni.
And if you want to MEASURE EYE MOVEMENT, well, you have to get really, really close.

To do that, researchers in fields like psychology and cognitive linguistics are using a device called an eye tracker.

Set up in CLA’s Social and Behavioral Sciences Laboratory in Blegen Hall, the eye tracker measures and records eye movements correlated with displays on a computer screen. The research applications are practically infinite—the tracker can measure everything from driver fatigue to reading rates in people with vision-field loss.

Some students use “clickers” in the classroom these days. It works like this: The professor asks students to respond to a question. They do, using handheld devices. A computer tallies the results and, at the teacher’s signal, a histogram (bar graph) displays the results on a projection screen in front of the room. Because each student’s selection is anonymous and no one has to raise a hand, the clicker bypasses peer pressure. Known technically as “student response systems” (SRSs), clickers are battery-operated and handheld—more or less like small TV remotes, except that the buttons are used to submit answers, rather than change channels.
The Blegen Hall Closets: That once stored maps are empty. No need for flat maps when goggles and a 3D projection system take you on virtual field trips: the GeoWall. Used mostly in geography and geology classes, it employs Two Projectors and Polarized Glasses to allow everyone to view at the same time. If it’s not feasible to take an entire class on a field trip, for example, the GeoWall becomes the alternative. Geography assistant professor Susy Ziegler and two of her colleagues, senior cartographer Mark Lindberg and graduate student Dan Sward, have also used the GeoWall in the community with students and older adults.

So the best way to learn a language is to immerse yourself in the culture in which the language is spoken. How to do that in the classroom? Visit Croquelandia, a virtual Spanish world. Students must ask for help, apologize, and shop at the market, for example, interacting with several Croquelandia characters in the process. Each interaction requires students to choose from options that are grammatically correct but pragmatically different. That means they have to learn the culture as well as the language. Funded in part by a Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) grant, the project has been led by Julie Sykes, a Ph.D. candidate in Spanish and Portuguese.

You can be a tourist yourself by checking out Sykes’s blog and linking to the trailer: http://www.jmsykes.net/2007/11/croquelandia-trailer.html
Speaking of Language

It’s your first visit to the home of your new Iranian acquaintance and you can’t wait to try some of that terrific rose-water-infused cuisine you’ve heard about.

Politely, your host offers you something to eat. You’ve been studying your Persian dictionary for just this moment, and you’re ready. “Wow, thanks,” you say in Farsi, smiling broadly in the interests of international understanding. “I’m starving!”

Congratulations. You’ve just revealed yourself to be a social barbarian, completely unversed in the elaborate rituals of taarof, the Persian social code that governs virtually every aspect of behavior in the highly nuanced world of Iranian hospitality.

“If culture is the prism through which we view the world, language is our attempt to order that world and give it meaning,” says Mahmoud Sadrai, instructor of Persian and linguistics. “A different language is not just another vocabulary; it’s a different vision of life.”

A different language is not just another vocabulary; it’s a different vision of life,” says Mahmoud Sadrai, instructor of Persian and linguistics. As a teacher of Persian, Sadrai believes that his job is to teach the culture as well as the vocabulary.

Persian is just one of the nearly 40 languages taught at the University of Minnesota. Every one of them holds the promise of introducing a new world and a fresh perspective on life, but only if the learner understands one critical point: When it comes to learning a language, your grasp of grammar may be impressive, your vocabulary large, and your accent native-like, but, if you don’t understand cultural practices like taarof, you haven’t learned the subject.

Sadrai defines taarof as an elaborate “system of politeness strategies.” He explains the social misstep involved in accepting food too quickly. “In Persian culture, you are obligated to offer food,” he says, but it’s also rude to accept too quickly. “You can’t accept until the third offer,” he says. A brash American might note inwardly at that point that the food is getting cold, but he would be missing the point. Sadrai says, “Even though you know your position in the social hierarchy, you must go through the ritual of self-effacement. Part of taarof is saving face, and allowing others to save face.”

An all-encompassing system that covers every social encounter, taarof explains why, for example, it might take an hour to bid your Iranian host a polite farewell. Noting that taarof helps define and enforce social hierarchies, Sadrai says, “It’s a way of giving deference, but the politeness need not be sincere.”

By Judy Woodward

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as well as linguistic competence is no easy matter. Tarone points out that there are times when a student’s native culture can consciously or unconsciously sabotage the learning process. Take the delicate matter of what Western society defines as plagiarism. American students are raised to be individualists, accustomed from their earliest school days to reformulate and synthesize assigned reading “in their own words.”

Not so for students from some Asian cultures, says Tarone. “They may come from a culture where the learning model is to memorize from the experts,” she explains. “They say, ‘I am not worthy to change this expert’s words.’” For these students, putting something in their own words is not the sign of healthy engagement with the subject matter, but the mark of a presumptuous usurpation of scholarly authority.

Such difficulties are not confined to Asian students striving to master English. Tomoko Hoogenboom, who was a lecturer and lead teacher in the U’s Japanese Program in Asian Languages and Literatures last year, knows her American students have extra difficulty mastering the elaborate forms of keigo, the Japanese system of honorifics used to establish formal social relationships. “In Japanese culture,” she says, “there are so many ways of politeness. You need to find out where you belong.”

Every public encounter in Japanese involves establishing oneself as a member of an in-group or an out-group, says Hoogenboom, and using specific language prescribed for each role. She explains that so apparently simple an exchange as entering an office and asking to speak to the boss can involve an exhausting linguistic calculus for those not comfortable in the intricacies of keigo.

The person who enters the office makes it clear that he or she is a member of the “out-group” by referring to the boss with special honorific forms. The staffer to whom the question is addressed must underscore his or her own “in-group” status by referring to the boss in what Hoogenboom calls “extra-modest” language.

Add to this ritual the fact that there are separate language forms reserved for men and women, and it’s no wonder that Hoogenboom has her teaching work cut out for her. To help her students, she says, “We create role-playing situations. Each student gets a status card.” When the cards are reshuffled and the student gets a new one, “[he or she] needs to change the style of speaking.” Hoogenboom says, “Most of my students are fascinated by the differences from American culture.” But that doesn’t mean they find them easy to understand. Tarone and her colleague Noriko Ishihara have written about the discomfort that some American students feel when they are expected to use keigo to superiors. “It’s difficult for Americans to do this,” Tarone says, citing an as entering an office and asking to speak to the boss can involve an exhausting linguistic calculus for those not comfortable in the intricacies of keigo.

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American student who remarked that he couldn’t understand honiostics until the recipient “had earned his respect.”

Such a student may master the grammar and vocabulary of Japanese, but isn’t really learned to communicate in the language. Says Hoogenboom, “A student who wants to be included in Japanese society needs to acquire that skill. If a person says, ‘I won’t use those honorifics,’ other Japanese won’t feel comfortable with him.”

Cultural discomfort can also result when Arabic and American social codes collide, says Hisham Khalek, director of the Arabic Instruction Program in the Department of African-American and African Studies. Khalek, who has just published a new Arabic curriculum, Exploring Arabic, notes that Arabic attitudes toward social discourse go back to nomadic Bedouin life. “A visitor to the tribe was received for three days before he was asked his purpose,” he says. By conducting general conversation with the strangers, tribesmen could assess character and behavior before the purpose of the visit was raised.

According to Khalek, that leisurely approach still prevails in Arabic business circles, to the frequent incomprehension of straight-to-the-point Americans: “If you have only an hour for lunch with an Arab businessman, the first 45 minutes will have nothing to do with business.”

Some scholars contend that language not only provides the vehicle through which we engage the world but also actually shapes the thoughts we are able to express, either completely or absolutely. That idea, known to linguists as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, gives rise to some fascinating speculations. Can an English speaker appreciate the finer points of hierarchical courtesy, limited as we are by a language that has only one way to say “yes”? Is a bean-counter’s perspective possible for speakers of the Brazilian Indian language Pirahã, which counts “one, two, many”? In other words, does language drive culture, or is it the other way around?

What is the essential relationship between language and culture? “At core,” Sadrai says, “we develop language to comprehend our experience and to deal with the world. We experience the world through our senses but we give it meaning through language.”

American issues, he says, are “distinctly different than in general meaning,” he says. As a translator, he believes his job is to “communicate the particularities of a certain text or speech…Translation from Ojibwe is not a matter of translating cultural essence. Cultures are anti-essential. A text is fixed. It stops moving. Cultures are complicated, and always in flux.”

Still, Treuer finds himself mildly impatient with the whole notion of capturing the essence of a culture in any neat formulation. “As a novelist, I’m much more interested in nuance than in generalizing.” He believes that to emphasize Ojibwe’s linguistic singularities after the model of Sapir-Whorf is to condemn it to the fate of a self-consciously “ancient” tongue, automatically disqualified from expressing the complexities and concerns of modern life. And that’s a crucial concern, because maintaining the vitality of the Ojibwe language is critical to the entire culture, Treuer says.

“Those are lots of things in a culture,” he says. “Kinship, ceremony, and history, but language is the most important. In the Ojibwe context, it links and connects all those other things together. Language provides a sense of solidarity.”

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