Written Statement for ALTC Citation 2011 – Kerry Mullan, GSSSP

1. Proposed citation

For awakening a love of French language and culture in students and for proving that learning grammar can be fun!

2. Summary of particular contribution and its specific context.

I began teaching French at RMIT and the University of Melbourne in 2004; since 2009 I have been employed full time at RMIT. Students at the University of Melbourne consisted of those majoring in French and those studying French as an elective as part of their main degree, which could be from any discipline across the university. At the University of Melbourne, I taught language-only classes, as well as electives in the French department, at all years of study up to and including Honours level. Our French students at RMIT come from a variety of disciplines since languages are currently electives only at RMIT; for this reason each class consists of students at different stages of study in their specialisation. All classes I have taught at both institutions have included international as well as domestic students.

My initial teaching experience however, was in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) using the accelerated learning technique. From this method, I have retained the firm belief that being relaxed and having fun is crucial to optimal learning. Students must feel comfortable in the classroom; learning a language is intimidating, as the student’s ability to communicate is effectively removed, thereby having an adverse effect on students’ confidence levels; it has been reported that at least 50% of all language learners suffer from unusually high levels of anxiety (see Lanir, Lesley. 2010. Foreign language learning difficulties. Modern English Teacher, 19, 3: 70). Learning a language exposes learners; they need to be corrected often and can feel vulnerable in front of their peers. I believe that the teacher’s role is to put the students at ease as soon as possible and to encourage a sense of community and solidarity in (and outside) the classroom; I do this by using ice breakers and collaborative activities which are carefully scaffolded to assist the students as they begin their language learning journey. Mistakes are encouraged in my classes, and students quickly learn to feel comfortable with each other. This is achieved by encouraging an informal atmosphere in class, facilitating enjoyable pair and small group activities and peer teaching, and above all using humour. If I enjoy my classes, the students are also more likely to do so.

In preparing my classes, I keep the students’ different learning styles in mind, and I include activities which accommodate the needs of all learners; this is especially important at RMIT where our French students come from many different disciplines. This variety of activities also keeps the classes interesting and aids learning. Our language classes are usually taught as a three hour block once a week; this poses a challenge for the teachers and the students, as it is difficult to maintain concentration and energy levels for that period of time. However, students are often surprised that three hours have passed, and I see this as a sign of their engagement in the learning activities. I have found that making the classroom experience enjoyable in this way fosters a love of learning the language and culture, and motivates the students.

The peer academic mentoring program for French students which I established in 2009 has also proved instrumental in providing extra-curricular support for these students, as well as building networks across the French students of various proficiency levels, and in many cases fostering relations between international and domestic students.

3. Statement addressing chosen criteria

My response addressed the following criteria:

- Approaches to the support of learning and teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn.
- Approaches to assessment, feedback and learning support that foster independent learning.

It is my belief that students learn best when they are motivated and engaged. Learning a language can be difficult and frustrating and students are sometimes unprepared for the time involved in this process. Constant support and revision is needed to make this journey enjoyable for the students, and I see it as my responsibility to facilitate this: in class by providing interesting activities, and in the students’ own time by
providing a variety of optional worksheets and extra resources. Some of the classroom activities I have designed to encourage this include grammar and vocabulary games and competitions, many of which involve physical activity and/or solving puzzles and working out grammar rules for themselves. Some of these activities are used in the teaching of ESL (but are not as common in foreign language teaching), and some are an adaptation of well known games, such as noughts and crosses or dominoes. Student comments support the success of these activities:

- The interesting, fun nature in which Kerry teaches makes learning very easy and enjoyable. It motivates you to go away and learn more.
- She is the best language teacher I have ever had. She tries hard to make the class interactive and the course content accessible to all types of learners.
- The classroom activities, group activities that get you out of your seat make a long class go quicker. Learning by doing is more effective than sitting and reading.

I constantly experiment with new ideas and innovative activities in the classroom, and ask the students for their feedback on these and other learning activities. In week 6 of semester, students are asked to respond anonymously to the following questions:

1. What works well for you in class?
2. What doesn’t work well for you in class?
3. What would you like to see more of?

I collate the comments and then give the students feedback on their responses in the following class. I have found this an extremely useful way of finding out what students would like me to amend. If it is not possible, I take this opportunity to talk to the students about their learning, and the benefits of certain teaching methods and activities. The students respond well to this, since they understand it is a sign of my respect for their opinions, and a desire to improve their learning experiences during semester, instead of only collecting feedback at the end of the course when it is too late to implement changes. I encourage my students to be involved in their learning and to take some responsibility for the course.

Another way in which I encourage students to become more autonomous in their learning is for them to bring a short passage to class to dictate to a small group of their classmates once per semester. Students are free to choose the topic, but must ensure the level is appropriate for their peers, and must understand their passage well enough to answer any questions the other students may have. Students often bring songs, jokes or poems to share. I believe that allowing students to take control of their learning in this way is extremely effective. Not only is dictation a valuable learning tool which practises a variety of language skills, it introduces students to an integral feature of French culture. Students respond well to this activity by doing their utmost to find an interesting text for their peers.

To further encourage autonomy and support among our French students I established a peer academic mentoring program in 2009. The motivation for this came from an intermediate level class I taught in semester 1, where the students had varying levels of proficiency from the ‘appropriate’ competency up to native speaker ability. I was aware that some of the less proficient students were feeling intimidated, and consequently lost some of their confidence and motivation. I saw the mentoring program as an opportunity for these students to regain their confidence, and to simultaneously benefit other students, and this has proved to be the case. The program benefits all students; the intermediate students increase their confidence through the mentoring process, and the beginning students benefit from the peer teaching. In addition, all students learn more about their own learning styles and start to become more effective independent learners. The extra weekly practice outside of class time also provides additional exposure to French, an essential element in language learning.

The feedback received from the students is overwhelmingly positive; they consistently confirm that the mentoring program has helped them learn, increased their confidence and motivation, and increased their enjoyment of learning French:

- A brilliant initiative with effective outcomes that plays as much a role in aiding the mentees, as it allows for personal reflection of knowledge and further education in the mentor.
My approach to assessment is that provided this is aligned with the learning objectives of the course, this should be as varied as possible to cater for all learning styles. For this reason, my courses include a variety of formative and summative assessment. For one of the assessment tasks for higher level language students, I offer the chance to work together on projects creating magazines, recipe books, tourist brochures etc., or individual essays for those who prefer to work alone. I believe that by allowing students the choice to find a topic and method of assessment which appeals to them, they respond by producing their best work. My aim is to foster a love of French language and culture in the students by encouraging them to be creative, and by not being prescriptive with all the assessment tasks. This has the added advantage of minimizing the potential for plagiarism, and of encouraging learner autonomy.

In 2010, a colleague from the University of Melbourne and myself designed two collaborative tasks for our similar cohorts of intermediate students – the first being a debate, and the second a group project where the students were required to create a film or present a play. The quality of the works created by the students was testament to the success of this project, which my colleague and I have analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The results were presented at a recent conference and are in the process of being submitted for publication, and will be used to inform our teaching and improve future courses.

It is also my belief that by encouraging collaboration and support around assessment, students are motivated to do their best. For this reason, I ask students to discuss their answers to assignments before they hand them in; I offer students the opportunity to alter their answers based on the advice of a peer. (Students sometimes amend their answers to an incorrect answer based on a peer’s advice, but this is a chance they must take! This encourages real discussion and collaboration in the classroom.) On occasion, I also offer students the chance to mark their own or each other’s work. In the latter case, I ensure the assessment is anonymous, then help students to mark another’s work. Students invariably tell me how useful they find this process, as it is a valuable learning experience for them; they discover a lot about their own level and that of a peer, as well as the process of marking.

I also offer students the chance to have a draft of their essay corrected prior to submission; this gives students the confidence to challenge themselves, knowing that I will guide them towards areas requiring revision before the final version is marked. I simply point out areas of language which need to be corrected, without indicating the exact problem. This has also been successful in discouraging plagiarism and/or the use of online translating tools, as students feel sufficiently supported and do not feel the need to resort to other measures to improve the standard of their work. The lack of explicit correction means that the students are required to work harder themselves, and thus benefit from my guidance. Work corrected after submission is not as effective a learning tool, as students are not as attentive of feedback at that stage.

4. Statement identifying the ways in which the contribution has influenced student learning, engagement and/or the overall student experience, been sustained over time and been recognized by fellow staff, the institution and/or the broader community.

Since I began teaching French in 2004, my course evaluations surveys at both institutions have always been outstanding, and students almost always take the time to write additional comments on their experience in my classes. Students regularly comment on the atmosphere and activities in class:

- Kerry Mullan has been fantastic. She is very understanding of any difficulties we may be having with our study …. I feel comfortable having a go even if my answer is wrong! We are pushed to do our best in a great environment.
- I really did appreciate your classes and teaching method this semester. You made everyone feel comfortable enough to speak in class, made classes interesting, were always helpful and seemed genuinely interested in our doing well.

Whilst having fun in the classroom does not in itself equate to learning, the following student comments from both RMIT and the University of Melbourne indicate that real learning is taking place:

- What a wonderfully taught program. One would think a 3 hour block would make for boring learning but Kerry keeps us on our toes with a brilliant variety of teaching techniques that contribute to making this class not only incredibly enjoyable but also extremely productive.
• I know that everyone loves your classes and I have heard nothing but praise from other students. I missed a few classes after dad died and when I was revising for exams, I found that the material I understood the least was what you had covered in the classes I missed. This showed how effective your teaching is. We have a lot of fun in class and we learn very effectively through all the language games we play. Thank you for your efforts.

Many of my classroom activities and the informal mid-semester feedback are now used by my colleagues. I presented at the annual RMIT Language Discipline staff professional development days in February 2010 and 2011, where I shared my ideas for successful learning activities. The mentoring program has also proved so successful that it is to be used as a model for similar programs to be implemented in 2011 for four other languages. I will be also publishing an article on this successful experience in 2011 in the *Local-Global Journal*, Special Edition: Globalization, Linguistic Diversity and Sustainability.

Both RMIT and the University of Melbourne conduct regular evaluations of learning and teaching. While no statistics are available from my evaluations at the University of Melbourne, the following data collected from RMIT since 2006 attest to the quality of my teaching. The Course Experience Survey (CES) includes an Overall Satisfaction Index (OSI) and several questions which contribute to a Good Teaching Scale (GTS) score. My available CES scores are shown below, aggregated and averaged over 2-3 courses taught each semester. They are compared with the outcomes on these measures for the school in which I teach – the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning (GSSSP). I believe that these data illustrate the effectiveness of my approach to teaching and student satisfaction.

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In addition to my consistently high CES scores, I very often receive messages of thanks for my teaching from students; it is particularly rewarding to hear that I have been able to instil my passion for the French language and culture into so many others over the years.

• I would just like to thank you formally for such an enjoyable first time French learning experience. The way you made me love French will stay with me forever – and I’ve no doubt that the same sentiment applies for the rest of our class. Teachers like you don’t come around all that often so I want you to know that your patience, kindness, humour and care were appreciated from the bottom of my heart.

My contribution to teaching and learning at RMIT has been recognised by:

• Certificate of Appreciation (Teaching), RMIT University in 2005
• spontaneous Teaching Awards from the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning for Excellence in Teaching in 2009 and 2010
• RMIT Teaching Award in 2010

In her letter of acknowledgement for my 2010 RMIT Teaching Award, the Vice Chancellor wrote:

• The Panel was particularly impressed by the range of activities, diversity of topics and approaches demonstrated … the strong focus on students was evident in all applications and the student feedback cited indicated that students are actively engaged in the learning experience.