

by Maura McRobbie August 2006

Le Francais en Ecosse

There are currently so many CPD opportunities for teachers in Scotland that it is difficult to know what to choose from, what would be of most value to your classroom practice, to your school, and of course, what would develop you both personally and professionally.

As a French speaking primary teacher in West Dunbartonshire, I recently opted to participate in a week's training course in Salignac, near Sarlat, deep in the Dordogne. The aim of the course, run by Les Francais en Ecosse, was to improve and update primary teachers' French language skills; to develop cultural awareness of contemporary France and to provide participants with materials and ideas suitable for the teaching of French at primary level, including the use of ICT. Funded through the British Council, around 20 teachers from Scotland, Northern Ireland and England undertook morning and afternoon language sessions, cultural excursions and social activities all in the medium of French.

Richard Tallaron, Director of the Edinburgh based 'Les Francais en Ecosse', and course tutor stated, "This course is fabulous for teachers who are apprehensive about speaking French, even though they may teach it at primary level. After a week of total immersion, they come out smiling, and much more confident about speaking the language and being understood."

Over five full days, the lessons consisted of a rich variety of spelling games, guessing games, fun maths activities, outdoor games, research and reference skills and, of course, a focus on grammar and pronunciation delivered at two levels, for the more and less advanced speakers. There was also the opportunity to exchange ideas for use in the classroom.

But it was not simply about the immersion in language that made this course so valuable; it was also about the appreciation of French culture. Deep in the Dordogne, far away from other earthly distractions, it was impossible not to be impressed by the medieval town of Sarlat, totally conserved with its fairy-tale like roof-tops and beautifully lit town-square. Their reverence to the goose and duck was evident in statues, plaques and in the *pate de foie gras* which was on sale in shops and restaurants everywhere. Rocamadour, another excursion, was to a little medieval town with seven churches built into a limestone rock, the most sacred being the chapel of Notre Dame. This town was named after its "love of rock" - 'roc amour' and it was easy to see why. It was a beautiful light, white chalk-rich rock which had been easy through the centuries to build, carve and sculpt with. The little town below the rock, with its tiny winding streets full of shops and cafés, had originally developed as a town for pilgrims to visit in the middle ages. The monks were renowned for their herbal remedies grown from the abundant species of plants and shrubs that grew, and are still growing in the surrounding hilltop areas today.

Rock was also important to prehistoric man of the cro-magnon period. Living 40,000 years BC, they were not as primitive as our visit to the Cave at Lascaux proved. This excursion was a lesson to us all on just how sophisticated, intelligent and talented our forebears of Southern Europe were. The Fred Flintstone, club-wielding, wife-dragging stereotypical neanderthal man was instantly killed stone-dead here at Lascaux. Our early modern ancestors had been true masters of the arts. Like entering a sacred cathedral, (it is a replica of the original, as the real cave is now only open for archaeological and research purposes) more than 1000 paintings cover the walls of the dry, partially lit cave: above, below, around – we were totally immersed in an ancient art form that provides both mystery and clarity.

The mystery was why did they only paint certain animals? Why were the animals always moving? What did the symbols found in other caves as far away as Russia represent? And why were only four colours used? Who painted them? - Surely not a primitive club-wielding man? The clarity of the drawings is remarkable: the graceful, refined images of horses appearing through the mist – their whole bodies are never seen; the strong, forceful bulls and the distinguished deer, with beautifully detailed antlers. These paintings all indicate a calm and civilised man, with an eye for beauty and a talent beyond belief.

And if the cultural excursions were inspiring, the food was even better. Three balanced meals were served each day, with thought and consideration for nutritional value, texture, colour and taste. Our breakfasts were light and continental; our lunches long and leisurely with a variety of salads and soups (amazing potato and cauliflower); an array of main dishes (cote de veaux in crème fraiche and leek sauce; duck a l'orange), selected cheeses and favoured gateaux of the local region. Our evening dinners were equally appetising, served with wine and conversations, as we tried out each new dish and heard about specially prepared recipes by the cook, (all in French of course), flowed. Even although we ate like kings, some of us lost weight by the end of the week. The secret? No snacking between meals, no crisps, biscuits or cakes or fizzy drinks.

And what is good CPD all about, but to relax and make friends? After lessons each day, around 4.30pm, we shared aperitifs by the pool. We swapped stories of life teaching '*chez nous*'. The Irish participants had all heard about the much esteemed Scottish education system, particularly 'A Curriculum for Excellence' and were in awe of its emphasis on creativity and education for work skills. The English delegates were beginning to be trained in formative assessment strategies and had heard about Assessment is for Learning. They were all impressed by the teaching and learning styles encouraged by the team from Les Français en Ecosse and the Scottish emphasis on teaching primary pupils to speak French and other foreign languages at an early age.

So in one short week, we learned an amazing amount. We gained confidence in speaking French, we were exposed to a wide range of activities that would help our pupils to listen, talk, read and write French and we were inspired by the French way of life - their love of cuisine, their ability to show restraint when eating and drinking – and their ability to never overdo it! We learned to laugh at ourselves as we made mistakes, and to be open to new ideas and the wealth of teaching resources that are available on the internet. Surrounded by such rich historical beauty from the cave at Lascaux to the 12th century pilgrimage town of Rocamadour, we cannot fail to go back to our schools and classrooms inspired by the rich talents and skills of our fellow-men both past and present.

As I left the Dordogne, and headed south towards Montpellier, I was rewarded with the most spectacular view of 21st century-man's engineering feat: the almost 4 kilometre high Bridge of Millau with its stupendously high pillars and its suspension cables spanning like rays from angels' wings. All within a hundred miles from the cave paintings of Lascaux. This 35 hour CPD course has confirmed in me, not only my ability to speak French fluently and with greater confidence in the classroom, but it has also reinforced a sense of wonder in the creative genius of man as an artist, scientist, cook, engineer and linguist. His capacity to shape and learn from his own environment is limitless. This was not simply a French Immersion course, but a course for life.

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