

**“Haiti - Too Little Known, Too Long Ignored - A Thematic Unit”  
Voted “Best of Conference” at the 2008 NYSAFLT Annual Meeting  
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**Introduction**

For too long, Haiti has not been part of the high school French curriculum. Influenced by a series of events, we developed a thematic unit on Haiti for our French 5 Francophone World course, taught at Jamesville DeWitt High School. Workshops, political events, and literature were all sources of inspiration for the unit.

At an AATF workshop on Haitian literature at LeMoyne College, Professor Carrol Coates of SUNY Binghamton read a moving excerpt from Emile Ollivier’s book, *Passage*, describing a sinking boat of Haitian refugees. He also introduced LaFerrière’s book, *L’odeur du café*, which presented vignettes of Haitian life. At another seminar, led by Jean Jonassaint of Syracuse University, Dany LaFerrière and fellow Haitian writer Myriam Chancy read from their works. Jean Jonassaint also introduced us to the extraordinary film *The Agronomist*. Historical perspectives on Haiti were gained at AATF workshops in Martinique given by Charles Pooser, University of Louisville, and Stephen Walton, Portland State University.

Coverage of current political turmoil, devastating hurricanes and floods, and an exodus of Haitians have increased our own awareness of Haiti. In the fall of 2007, Tracy Kidd’s biography of Paul Farmer, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, chosen for the “CNY Reads” campaign, had all of central New York thinking about Haiti. The books of Edwige Danticat, *Krik! Krak!*, *Breath, Eyes Memory*, *Farming for Bones*, and *Brother, I’m Dying* gave insights into modern Haiti.

In 2008 the activities and materials we had developed to use with our students were shared at the NYSAFLT annual meeting. That workshop became part of a journey that continues today. In this article, we are going to share highlights of the workshop. As French teachers, we have discovered a unique opportunity not only to make students aware of the beauty and richness of the culture of Haiti, but also to sensitize them to the economic and political situation there. Haiti has been too little known, too seldom taught, and too long ignored. We hope that the methods and materials introduced here will inspire our colleagues to open the door to Haiti. The journey is a continuum of learning, sharing, and exploring.

## **History**

Concepts from *Understanding by Backwards Design* were used to develop the unit. The main goal is for French 5 students to develop their French language skills as they learn about the history, literature, art, music, cuisine, film, products, and practices of Haiti. In *Understanding by Backwards Design*, an essential question is an open-ended question that causes inquiry. One essential question for the Haitian unit is: “How was the economic development of Haiti influenced by historical events there?” By the end of the unit, students will understand that Haiti was the first nation in the world to become independent as a result of a slave revolution. Students will also understand that Haiti has the least developed economy in the Western hemisphere for a variety of reasons.

Introductory activities included a teacher-prepared power point presentation on Haiti, with an accompanying worksheet and a list of 25 questions in French about Haiti to be answered using the Internet. The students’ introduction to historical Haiti began with materials from the Interlude in the textbook *Discovering French Rouge*. The students answered questions based on this reading in which they learned about the significant role Louverture played in Haitian independence. A young reader biography, *Open the Door to Liberty*, clarifies and expands on the life of this historic figure. In addition to the timeline in the text, students were given a timeline on Haiti and asked to make their own timelines, choosing ten significant dates in Haitian history. They were required to write one French sentence for each date and draw a picture to illustrate the event.

## **Literature**

An introduction to Haitian literature began with the poem “Pour Haiti” by René Depestre. The poem, found in *Discovering French Rouge*, was used with the accompanying DVD as a visual introduction to this country and a bittersweet revelation of its problems. René Depestre, a self-exiled poet, writes of the beauty of his birthplace and of his anguish concerning the current political and economic issues in Haiti. After the study of this poem and the viewing of the DVD, students also reflected on Haiti by writing their own guided poems.

Students read Haitian stories from *Contes et Légendes du Monde Francophone* and *Contes et Fables des Iles*. After reading the stories, students wrote summaries of them and answered questions about the stories. One could also have students illustrate the stories.

The fable “D’ici on ne sort jamais” provided students of all levels access to Haitian literature. The fable could be read at a literal level—who, what, where, when—or it could be understood and discussed as a metaphor for the evolution of an independent nation. Previous knowledge from timelines, Toussaint Louverture’s biography, and Internet research gave them insights into the origin and meaning of the fable.

Students were introduced to Dany La Ferrière’s book, *L’odeur du café*. They read, translated, and illustrated eight to ten vignettes such as “La Bicyclette Rouge.” LaFerrière’s work is accessible to students because it describes simply a vivid, colorful boyhood with his Haitian grandmother in the summer of 1963.

## **Art**

Once again, *Discovering French Rouge* provided a springboard to a study of Haitian art. Students read “En Haiti l’art c’est la vie” from the *Discovering French Rouge Interlude*. Haitian artists, Obin, Philippe-Auguste, Duffaut, and Hyppolite are introduced, along with descriptions of their styles. Students then viewed the video *Art in Haiti*, by Mark Mamalakis. The video clearly shows how the religion of voodoo united the slaves and provided unity and support for the slave revolution. It also shows how voodoo art was incorporated into Christian religious art. This video meshed very well with the text and gave insights into Haiti’s complicated past.

We also used Haitian tin-art and Haitian pictures as speaking prompts. Items from Haiti, such as tin-art, paper-mache bowls, silk-screened scarves, and dolls, purchased at a fair trade store, were used as speaking prompts. At this point Dany Laferrière’s work was used again as students read excerpts from *L’odeur du café* and created their own chef-d’oeuvre in Haitian style. Watercolors, crayons, markers were provided as they put on “canvas” their visual impressions of Haiti inspired by Dany LaFerrière’s writing.

Another resource for Haitian art was found in the children’s storybook, *Haitian Days . . . Tijo Remembers*. This book is illustrated with bold Haitian drawings and is written in English, French, and Creole. Students follow a typical week of a young Haitian student. The book has an accompanying cassette on which the narrator reads the story in all three languages and introduces them to Creole. After the first reading in French, students were given a cloze passage and asked to fill in the missing words as they listened. In addition to the story, this book describes the Cap-Haitian style of art and each page is illustrated in that style.

## **Music**

Music is an integral part of the study of any francophone area. It provides students with an immediate connection to the culture being studied. Haiti is no exception. Students listened to traditional Haitian music, such as, “Haïti Cheri.” It was often playing as they arrived in the classroom. Much of it is in Creole, but music that speaks to the heart and connects to the culture is always worth the time. Music sung by diaspora artists such as Wycleff Jean, Terri Moïse, and Luck Mervil provide lyrics and music students can enjoy, remember, and sing. Songs that sing of the need for compassion and understanding of world people in jeopardy, such as Yves Duteil’s “Pour les enfants du monde entire,” evoke moments of reflection and discussion. Much of the music is now available on YouTube and I-tunes.

## **Cuisine**

Haitian cuisine is wonderful. From the standard rice and beans to vegetable and fruit salads, students were provided with recipes and invited to prepare a recipe at home and bring it to class to share. This was done at the end of the unit as we celebrated what we had learned. Students gave a guided explanation of what they made and were graded on the dish and the oral presentation. Haitian music was played as we enjoyed the Haitian dishes. Food and music provided a powerful, immediate, and memorable connection to the culture.

## **Film**

Shown as the final activity for the unit, the film *The Agronomist* had the most impact on students. This documentary, by Jonathan Demme with soundtrack by Wycleff Jean, reached them at so many levels. The seemingly insurmountable economic problems, the effects of corrupt governments, and the challenges of the geography and environment are depicted as the story of the martyred radio broadcaster Jean Dominique unfolds. As a previewing activity, students read a synopsis of the film. As students viewed Part I of the movie, they wrote questions in French, which were collected, corrected, and typed on a worksheet. A review activity was prepared from these questions and was completed before viewing Part II.

As a culminating activity, students reflected on what they had learned and wrote poems based on their five senses. They were given the following sentence starters:

*Quand je pense à Haïti.....*  
*Je vois.....*

*J'entends.....*

*Je sens.....*

*Je goûte.....*

*Je touche.....*

Students wrote their poems on a collage with pictures that illustrated their thoughts. They also presented them to the class.

Directions for another final activity are as follows:

*Après avoir regardé le documentaire il y a plus de questions que de réponses. Faites 5 questions qui concernent le Haïti d'aujourd'hui. Qu'est-ce que vous voulez savoir?*

*Apportez vos 5 questions de Haïti... Nous allons les réviser et créer une affiche! Vous recevrez une note pour ces questions -- la formation et le sujet. Il faut réfléchir sur ce que vous avez vu, avez lu, avez entendu pendant notre étude de ce pays énigmatique.*

Their questions were profound and thoughtful, provoking meaningful discussion that reflected critical thinking about the historical and political issues facing Haiti today.

### **Closing Thoughts**

The opportunity to share our thematic unit and to spotlight Haiti had an unexpected benefit. It has increased our resolution to learn more and to connect in an active way with Haiti.

Haiti is no longer unknown and can no longer be ignored. In fact, it is now part of our journey as life-long learners. We are much more aware of this nation so close to our own. New resources for classroom activities and a sharper awareness of Haiti have opened doors and possibilities. As a result of the workshop on Haiti, we were put in contact with Bob Hood, a developer from Cazenovia who has been volunteering in northern Haiti. Bob put us in contact with the teachers at St. Joseph School in Dubré, Haiti. A partnership has now been formed between French teachers in central New York and the teachers at St. Joseph School. The Haitian teachers asked if we could help supply French books for a small library they would like to start. Already 150 pounds of French books have been shipped to St. Joseph School in Dubré. We were able to obtain monetary donations from area French teachers to buy the books in Canada and in France. A local church

paid shipping costs. It is our hope that the Haitian teachers and the New York teachers will soon be able to meet and share methods and ideas for teaching. We have much to learn from each other.

## RESOURCES

### Video

**Discovering French Rouge DVD Program** McDougall Littell Publishers ISBN 0-618-34529-9

**The Agronomist (DVD).** Amazon.com ISBN 0-7806-5050-6

**Art of Haiti (VHS).** Mark Mamalakis. Amazon.com

### CDS

“•Haiti•” Air Mail Music

“French Caribbean” Putumayo Presents

“Caribe! Caribe!” Putumayo Presents

“French Playground” Putumayo Presents

“Welcome to Haiti 101” Wyclef Jean

“Luck Mervil” Luck Mervil

### Books

**Discovering French Rouge** Valette Valette. McDougal Littell. ISBN 0-669-43528-7

**Contes et légendes du monde francophone.** Andrée Vary. National Textbook ISBN 0-8442-1209-1

**Haitian Days Tijo Remembers** Marcus Plaisimond. Sundance Publishers and Distributors - ISBN 1-56801-360-4

**L’odeur du café** Dany Laferrière ISBN 2-89295-159-3

**DICO/KFE- Dictionnaire en images.** ISBN 2-912006-33-3

**Contes et Fables des Iles.** McGraw-Hill Publishers

**Artisans of Haiti/ Artisanat d’Haïti** ISBN 0-9670899-1-3 -- available at Fair World Marketplace

**A Taste of Haiti** Yurnet-Thomas ISBB 0-7818-0998-3

**The Art and Soul Haitian Cooking** The Haitian Institute ISBN 0-945-30604-0

**Haitian Culture Curriculum Guide** K-5 Broward County Public Schools (This is a wonderful resource with background information, lesson plans, and materials found on the Web.)