

ISSUE 1 · DEC 2021

# RLL IN THE CLASSROOM

Featuring RLL instructors, teaching resources,  
and other events of interest

## ¡Our first number is out!

Welcome to RLL in the Classroom! This is the debut edition of our new monthly newsletter, designed to highlight the great teaching going on around RLL, share ideas and resources, spark discussion, and build community around teaching in the department.

We hope you enjoy!

Juan Arias and Luca Politi  
Bok Pedagogy Fellows in RLL



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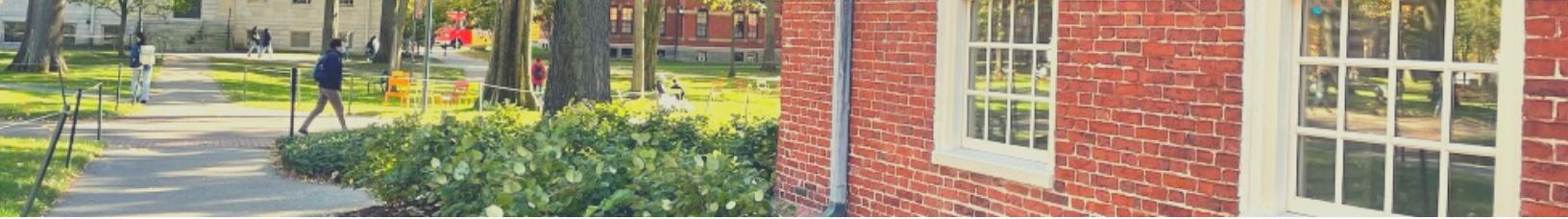
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## Spotlight of the month

AMANDA GANN

Each issue of the “RLL in the Classroom” newsletter will feature a spotlight interview from a current TA or TF in RLL. For the inaugural interview, Juan and Luca had the pleasure to sit down with Amanda Gann, a TF in French for French 40 “French through Cinema” with a particular expertise in artistic practice, including theatre and film.

Some of the topics we touched on include how she incorporates her backgrounds in theatre and performance into her classes, strategies for building connections among the students, evaluating students' progress through creative projects, and more!

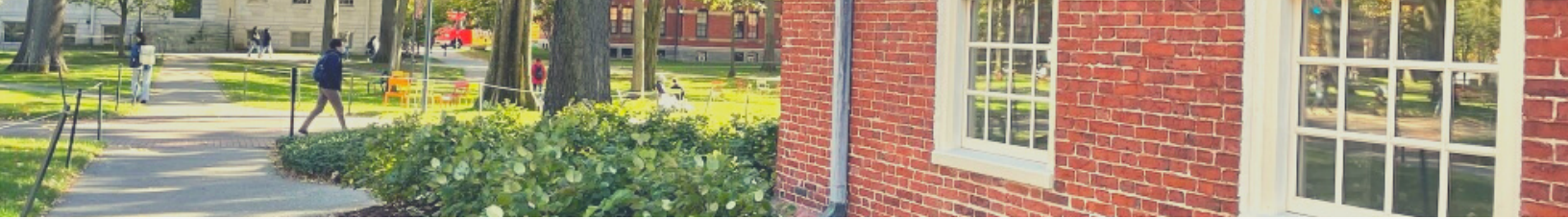
Amanda wrote down her responses to our questions. The interview is reproduced below and was slightly edited for clarity and length. We hope that by reading the interview, you can find inspiration for your own experiences “in the classroom.”

### **How did you arrive at teaching French? What were you doing before? What other teaching experiences have you had in RLL or at Harvard in general?**

My first French teaching experience was not terribly promising. I was working as a receptionist at an Alliance Française, and one day a teacher quit precipitously. Someone decided that I seemed like a person who could teach, and with almost no training, I was sent to wrangle a bunch of three- to five-year-old children in an immersion class. We ended up singing a song about frogs nearly 20 times in a row because it was the only thing I could get them to do. The experience did pique my interest in language pedagogy, however. During my time at RLL, I have had the opportunity to learn from some passionate and innovative language teachers – Stacey Katz Bourns, Nicole Mills, and Ericka Knudsen, to name only a few.

**“For many students, it seemed that French allowed them to process discoveries they were making, about themselves and the world around them, in that time of upheaval”**





I took time off in the middle of my PhD to train and work professionally as an actress, and since returning to Harvard in 2018, most of my teaching has involved courses with an artistic practice component. In RLL, I have worked as an instructor for French 11 and French 40, a TF for upper-level performance-based French literature classes (all with the remarkable Sylvaine Guyot), and a thesis tutor for two inspiring undergrad seniors. In TDM, I have worked as a TF for several visiting artists, as well as developing and leading a junior tutorial in the concentration.

At the moment, I am also a TF over at the Divinity School, which has consistently challenged me to think deeply about how to adapt my teaching to serve the needs of different communities of learners and how to hold space for difficult conversations. Teaching in RLL and within Harvard has been a very rewarding part of my PhD experience. I don't have to rely on frog songs anymore, but I'm still learning every time I step into the classroom.

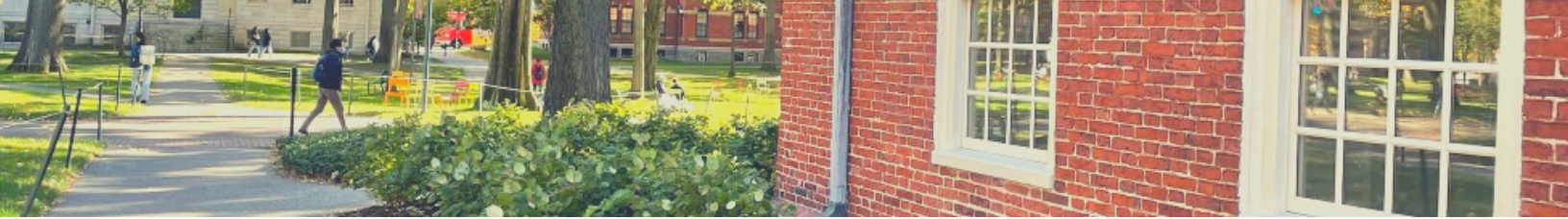
## **You are currently teaching French 40 (advanced French I). Can you give us a high-level overview of the course and what students are doing?**

The class focuses on contemporary social issues as represented through film. We have a syllabus of engaging and very recent films, curated by our course head, the dynamic Claire-Marie Brisson. Through close analysis, students discuss not only the social issues raised but also how representations get constructed, produced, and circulated. We pay great attention to the aesthetic, social, political, and ethical stakes of image creation.

As a final project, students create their own films in French, using the cinematographic techniques we have observed and analyzed. Inspired by some of the films we have seen, the students have chosen to tackle issues they care about and interrogate some dominant representations of cultural belonging, immigrant experiences, beauty norms, mental healthcare (to cite a few of their projects).



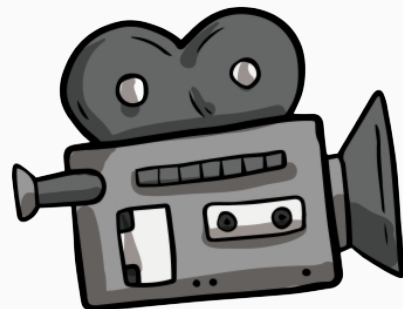
Still from *La Haine* (1995),  
one of the films discussed in French 40

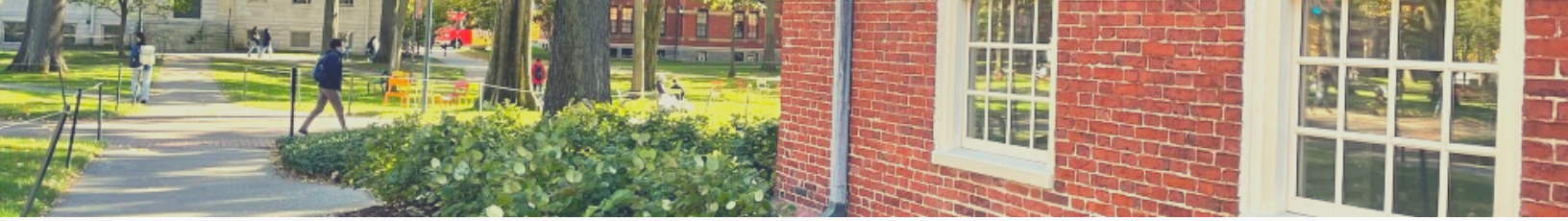


## How have you integrated different media to inspire and support language learning throughout your teaching?

I use audio, visual, or audiovisual media to anchor every class session, for the simple reason that I think language learners (and indeed humans in general) can benefit from practicing how to look closely and listen carefully. Although I sometimes use questions to orient their experience of the media, I often use a variation on a technique which I first saw Debra Levine do with her undergrads in TDM. In round one, the students describe what they saw. This may sound like a basic question, but it is surprisingly difficult to do without already offering interpretations. Students of all levels seem to enjoy this; those with more limited skills can usually still participate in the first-order descriptive process while students with more advanced skills can challenge themselves to work on nuances of expression that deal with the difference between description and interpretation. In round two, the students get to talk about what meanings arose for them in what they saw. In round three, they watch the piece of media again, focusing this time on an element that one of their classmates brought up in round one but which they hadn't noticed before. We then discuss how their interpretations changed between the viewings.

I have also developed activities to connect students with media when they're outside the classroom, in the hope that French will become more a part of the texture of their daily lives. For these activities I often use media with episodic structures, so that they can devote a little time to it routinely. One year, for example, I did an online activity around the Netflix show *Dix Pour Cent*, where students watched episodes each week and experimented with different types of writing to express opinions on the issues brought up in the show. It gave them a fun way to dialogue with one another, and I would often arrive to class and overhear them discussing it. One student reported that all her non-French speaking roommates had become "obsessed" with the show and were now watching along with her. I'm very interested in the idea of audiovisual media as a way for students to share what they love about French-speaking culture with the other people in their lives. This also extends to the media that students develop themselves; I'm always delighted when students choose to subtitle their final project films in English so that they can send them to family and friends, and when we had live performances, their eager, Anglophone fans always came to support them.



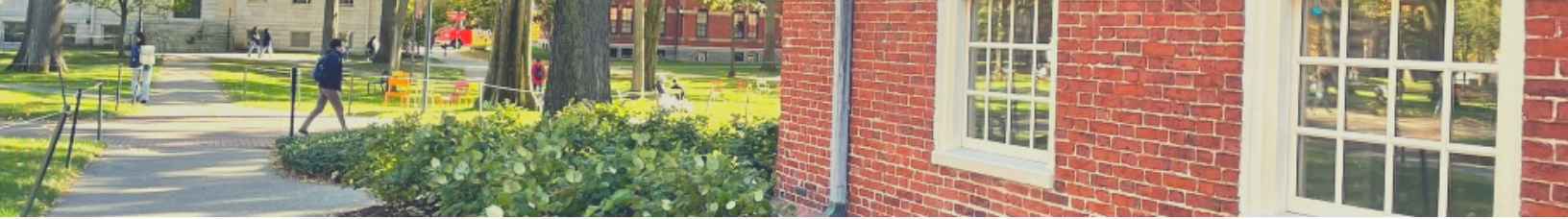


**Last year we were all forced to go online for teaching due to the pandemic. How did you manage to migrate to the virtual classroom? How do you integrate things like theatre and cinema into remote learning?**

I was teaching French 40 when we made the transition, and I worried that we would lose one of the most beautiful aspects of the class, the collaborative final filmmaking project. In the end, some of the students ended up being able to work together; three had to stay on campus for the remainder of the semester, and two other grad students found a way to collaborate remotely. The others chose to create their work individually (although one student did use some plastic dinosaurs as interlocutors), but we held a mini festival to screen all the films. I paired the students so that they would see at least one other student's film in advance, and they introduced each other's work. It was moving to see how generously they shared and received some very personal pieces. For many students, it seemed that French allowed them to process discoveries they were making, about themselves and the world around them, in that time of upheaval.

When Sylvaine Guyot and I collaborated to retool French 80 (French Theater Across Time and Media: An Introduction to Performance, or Why Theater Matters) for Fall 2020, we decided to go bolder. We paired the students to work closely together throughout the semester; they took turns working on small monologue projects where one served as “performer” and the other as “director/collaborator”. I used to run bi-weekly theatre practice ateliers in the previous versions of the class, and I wanted to keep this live aspect. Drawing on Anne Bogart’s Viewpoints technique, I developed practical themes –La contrainte de l’espace, la gestuelle, la voix, le rapport à l’autre– that I thought could still be explored expressively, even in the tiny boxes. We worked with Bogart’s Viewpoints – Spatial Relationship, Kinesthetic Response, Shape, Gesture, Repetition, Architecture, Tempo, Duration, and Topography – in different ways, with adaptations offered to make the exercises accessible for all. A lot of the students were excited for the chance to move about and take an experimental attitude toward the spaces in which they had been trapped for so long. The creative work that they produced turned out to be tremendously rich, and they collaborated quite closely and sensitively, even though they had never met.

# VIEWPOINTS

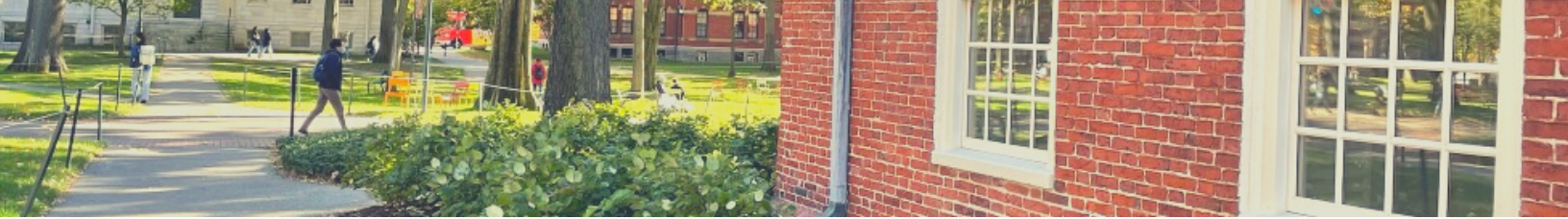


**Theatre has been explored as a pedagogical tool for fostering group dynamics and participation (for example, the Theatre of the Oppressed of Augusto Boal). Have you been influenced by any pedagogical models involving theatre? Have these models been successful? How have students reacted?**

In addition to Anne Bogart's work, I often draw on physical and vocal techniques that I was exposed to in my MFA training. My students may not know that they're making sounds or moving around in a particular way because of Kristin Linklater or Jerzy Grotowski, but I do employ lots of theatrical techniques even when the context isn't necessarily constructed as theatrical. As for the question of group dynamics and participation, I usually find that if I can help students find freedom in their physical, vocal, and imaginative expression, they quickly seek each other out and begin to work together. If I succeed in awakening their desire to see and be seen, to speak, to listen, to play, then group dynamics emerge quite naturally, and sometimes in surprising ways.



Anne Bogart, American Theatre Director

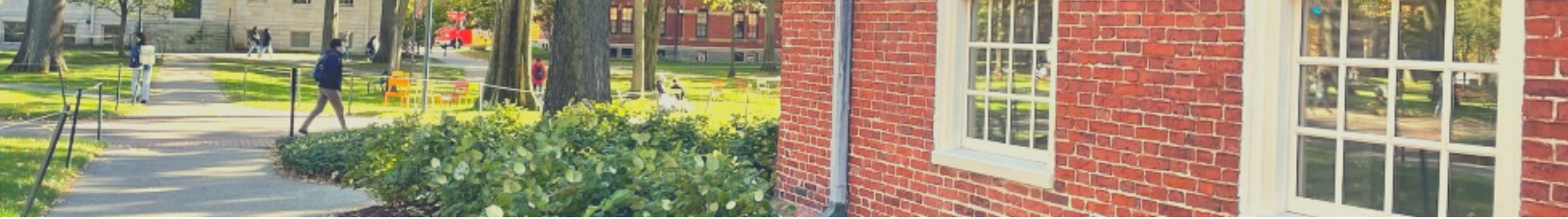


**We know that you put a lot of work into your classes and you truly care about your students. What do you think are the roles of empathy and care in education? How do you foster empathy in your classes between both instructors and students?**

I suppose the first part has to do with humility. I try as much as appropriate to let students see me as I am; I know some things but not others; I try hard to do my job well; I strive to be present, positive, and compassionate, but I also have flaws, limitations, and struggles. A little vulnerability goes a long way, especially among a population of students who often feel pressure to perform a persona of total competency. They need space to make mistakes, ask for help, and admit when they're in over their heads. I often find that space opens up if I let them see that I too have said something silly, had a tough time, or fallen short of my own expectations. When they talk, I listen. I ask questions about their lives because I care about the answers. I'm curious about their feelings, interests, and goals for themselves. We laugh together often, which probably does the most good of all.

Many of the theatre exercises and analytical practices we use when working with media focus on how to go beyond quotidian forms of representation. My hope is that this work allows them to think about the relation between performance and the self more deeply, and to consider how they might be able to bring more of their own humanity to the table in order to connect in a novel way. I also hope that it encourages them to look beyond those representations of others that are most readily available to view. This curiosity, when combined with depth of feeling, can allow them to encounter one another with an openness and attention that sets the stage for empathy and care.

**"They need space to make mistakes, ask for help, and admit when they're in over their heads"**



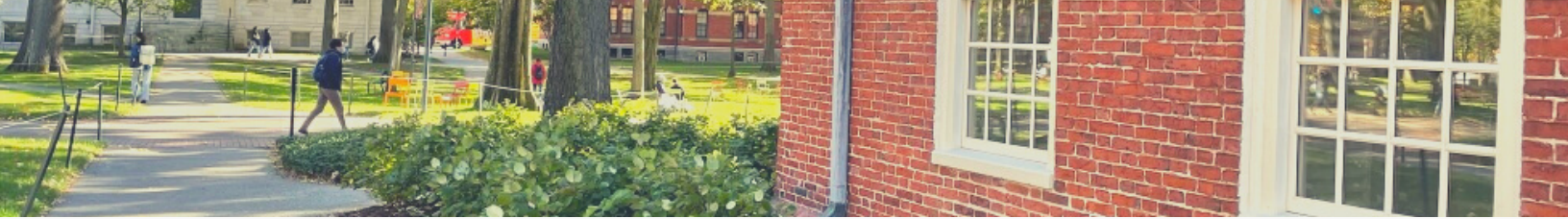
**Teaching languages through theatre, performance and film is especially innovative when students are not just consumers of media, but also producers. We are curious to know what parameters you use to evaluate student work and linguistic progress when you use these media?**

I've never learned to love evaluation, and I can't say that I'm particularly adept at developing rubrics, though I understand their value. In general, I try to identify linguistic functions that pair well with a specific creative project, to avoid forcing students to stuff their ideas into language that feels arbitrary or artificially create a scenario where certain kinds of things could plausibly be said. I think I measure progress in quite a holistic way.

Can they get more things done with words than when they started? Are they taking more risks and sticking the landing? Can they size up a linguistic context and work within it, or take action to shift the context if they can't? Are they able to create meaning and coherence for themselves and their interlocutors? These are the sorts of questions I ask when I look at that type of student work.



Still from *Moose Jaw*, a short film produced by Harvard student Ethan Schultz for French 40 in the early pandemic (click [here](#) to watch the film)



**With the precautions in place due to COVID such as masking and social distancing, have you needed to make adjustments to the class format? Can you tell us a bit about your experience teaching in person again this semester?**

Things started out a little rigid, because I wasn't certain exactly what kinds of activities the students would feel comfortable doing. There was a little less moving around, no touching of any shared objects. And of course we had to do a bit more initial work to practice articulation and vocal projection, but most students are making themselves understood quite well now. I do have to listen very carefully. It's a more demanding task for me when they're wearing masks, but it's getting easier. I think all the stir craziness of the pandemic has also made me eager to take advantage of outdoor spaces. We had this absolutely glorious day where everyone clearly just wanted to be outside, so we all went out and they grouped up to practice different image capture techniques in situ. They came back, and we had a sharing of what they had made.

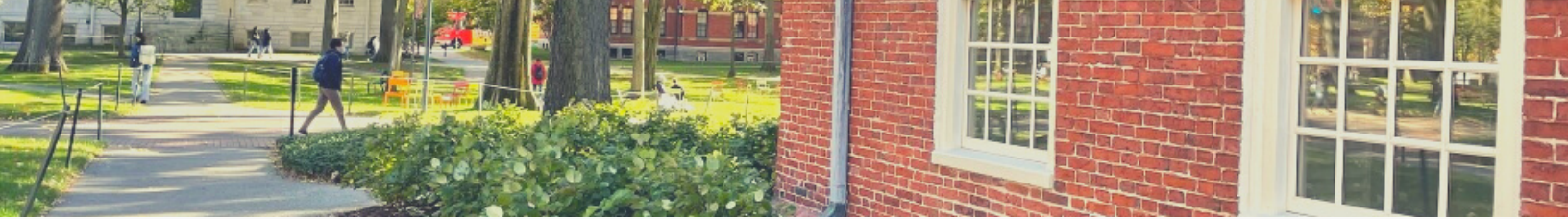
**Students often have different expectations or goals when studying languages. Has French 40 been successful in attracting students who may not be interested in film or theatre? To what do you ascribe that success?**

I'd say that usually less than half of my students have what they would call an 'interest' in film or theatre. All of them, however, consume a ton of media, and they have lots of opinions whenever they encounter media. In most cases, it's the process of close watching that gets them excited. Once they start to understand what techniques contribute to the creation of which effects, they become more interested in making, in using verbal, physical, and visual languages for their own significations. Or even if they never get quite to that point, sometimes they excitedly tell me about how they went to a film over the weekend and saw how the latest Avengers film was using a très gros plan to make a particular character sympathetic. So I think some students are developing new interests, or are at least approaching media in a more interested way.

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**What takeaways do you have for teachers in RLL?**

I hope only that we all continue to ask ourselves the tough questions. How can we serve our students better? How can we make language learning more accessible and rewarding for all learners? And more broadly, why does what we do matter? Are we doing it in ways that enact the values we hold?

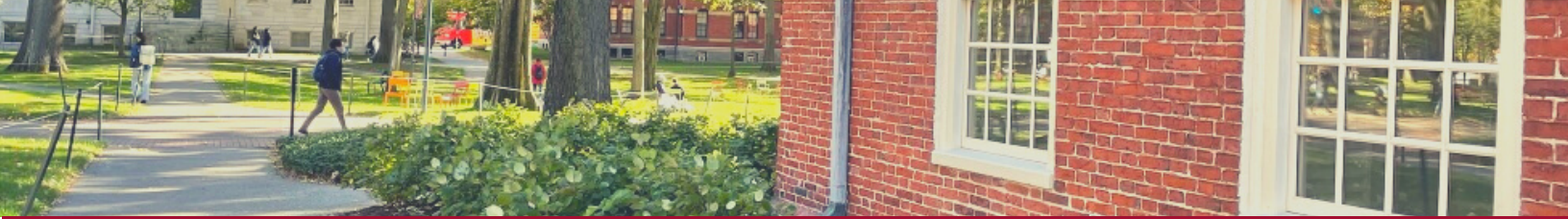


If you would like to see another example of a creative project by a student of French at Harvard, click on the link below:

<https://youtu.be/FNRq8g4dDbU>



Stills from *Scapin 20*, created and performed by Harvard student Lux Zhao for French 80



# Some relevant resources from the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning

## Preparing for the job market



The Bok Center offers consultations for all PhD students on job market materials! Any PhD student can sign up to meet about teaching statements / portfolios / on-campus demos through the link on this page:

<https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/job-market>



## Assigning and grading

Are you assigning or grading writing? Visit the Bok Center's new resource on writing across the curriculum at Harvard College!

<https://genedwrites.fas.harvard.edu/>

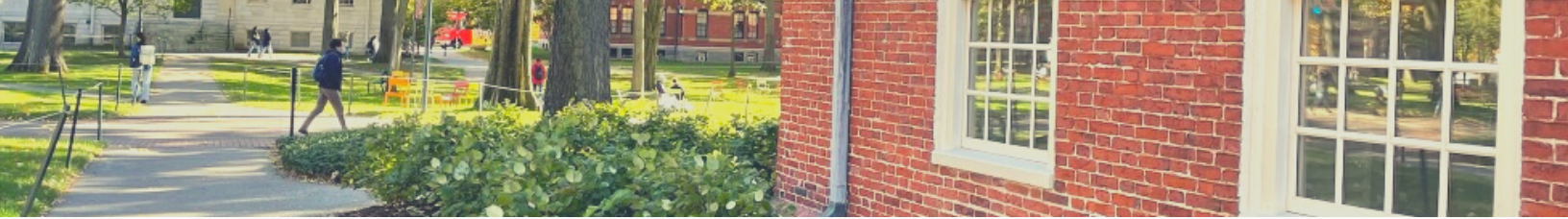
Check out this page for grading and responding to student work:

<https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/grading-and-responding-student-work>

And here is a publication for non-traditional assignments:

<https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/bok-publications#Non-traditional>





## RLL "Future Thinking" Discussion Series

The second half of the "Future Thinking" discussion series will be held this upcoming Spring! In the Fall, the themes discussed were "The Future of Translation" and "The Future of Interaction." Tentative topics for Spring include "The Future of Textbooks" and "The Future of Assessments." Stay tuned for more information!

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## Annual Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning (held at Harvard in April)

The "Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning Symposium" will be hosted by Harvard Language Center on Friday, April 29, 2022.

The Consortium is an association of eight institutions of higher education (Brown University, the University of Chicago, Columbia University, Cornell University, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton University and Yale University) established in 1986 and dedicated to the study and instruction of second languages at the post-secondary level (<http://languageconsortium.org>).

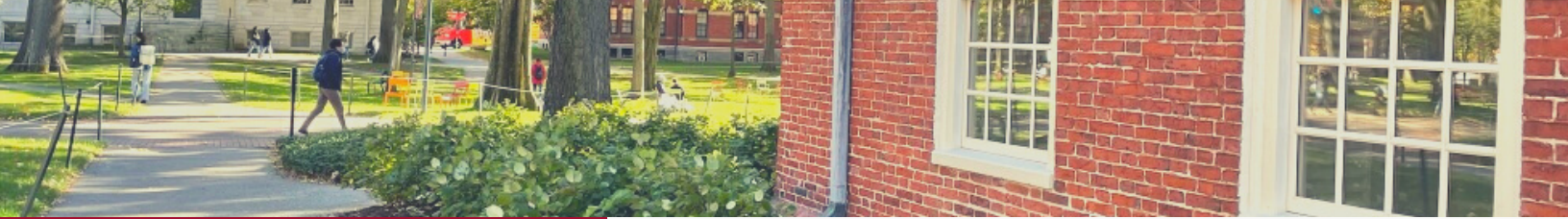
The theme for 2022 is "Future Thinking on Language Teaching and Learning." The past two years have presented extraordinary challenges and new opportunities for the teaching of languages, literatures, and cultures across the world. Educators have adapted methodologies to meet learners' needs, innovated with the help of technology, and are emerging from this latest phase of the pandemic crisis looking toward a future state of the pedagogical environment that will leverage resources, techniques, and other affordances in new ways.

# Upcoming events of interest

## In the Area

The fourth Boston Area Pedagogy Conference, "Envisioning the Future of Learning and Teaching of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Cinema", will be held virtually on Friday, March 18, 8:30 AM - 5:00 PM. If you are interested in learning more about the conference or submitting a proposal, more information can be found [here](#)





Interested in being featured in a future edition of “RLL in the Classroom?”  
Wish to nominate a TF/TA?

Please reach out Luca Politi (lpoliti@g.harvard.edu) or Juan Arias (juanarias@g.harvard.edu).

# RLL

## Join us for our bi-weekly social events!

Stay tuned for announcements about the bi-weekly gatherings for TAs and TFs in RLL!

Below is a photo taken at our last event, where we enjoyed pastries and hot chocolate!



## We’d love your input...

What’s on your mind lately regarding teaching? Do you wish to have a breakout discussion session to float an idea or discuss a recent teaching experience? We’d love to hear about your challenges, successes, or open questions.

No matter how small the comment, we encourage you to submit this form (anonymous responses are welcome). Your responses will help Juan and Luca to plan events, conversations, or future forum mailings. If it’s on your mind, chances are it’s on another’s as well!

