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Learning a Second Language Teaches More than Language Skills



Lucie Viakinnou-Brinson, Ph.D., French and Francophone Studies Coordinator and Professor of French (second from left) enjoys a sweet treat in Aix-en-Provence with study abroad students Bee, Katherine, and Nala.

A recent conversation with Lucie Viakinnou-Brinson, Ph.D., French and Francophone Studies Coordinator and Professor of French, revealed just how busy she is teaching, conducting research, advising the French and Sowers of Knowledge Student Clubs, and directing the Africa/Europe study abroad trip each year. However, the real story is how these activities help her students hone their language skills and open their minds and broaden their geographic horizons.

Leveraging a \$1000 CETL grant, Viakinnou-Brinson conceived a learn and serve writing project to help her students improve their reading and writing skills by writing children's books for a real audience. Working through the Seeds of Knowledge, a 501 (c) 3 she founded while still in graduate school, she delivered her students' books along with other textbooks and school supplies to students in Benin, West Africa. This initiative led to then student Mia Schwob creating the Sowers of Knowledge Student Club in 2012.

Today, the Sowers of Knowledge Student Club creates book templates and invites other students on campus to participate in illustrating the books and binding them for distribution. The learn and serve project has also been implemented across many universities (KSU, UGA, Clayton State, Savannah State, Emory, Spelman, Oglethorpe, University of Arizona), high schools, middle schools, and an elementary school. To date, more than 2000 books have been distributed to francophone countries in Africa and the Caribbean.

Books created in her classes are digitized and made available online to students in schools in the US and abroad. Students' connection to this writing project is so strong that several of her students have stayed in touch and continue to expand the project, including one student who five years after graduating, returned and expanded the number of children's books available via the online library. In fact, some of her former students who are now French teachers themselves direct their students to this library resource. Some have also implemented the same writing project in their own classrooms. Each year she looks for students who are willing to volunteer to digitize that year's children's books so they are available going forward.



Lucie Viakinnou-Brinson, Ph.D., French and Francophone Studies Coordinator and Professor of French passes out books created by her students to children in Benin.

Dr. Viakinnou-Brinson is passionate about the book writing project, and that same passion is evident when she talks about the Africa/Europe study abroad program. She said, "So often, French Language students think of only going to Europe, France, and Paris in particular, to further develop their language skills," but she tells them that there are more francophone countries in Africa than any other continent and that they should consider broadening their global geographic horizons. "One day, you might go to Paris on your own and see the Eiffel Tower" she tells them, "but probably not to Benin or Aix-en-Provence unless you take advantage of Education Abroad programs."

Through her Africa-Europe (Benin in Africa and France and Monaco in Europe) study abroad French immersion program she strives to expand her students' worldviews and perspectives. Students gain unique experiences conducting experiential learning projects and more. They write children's books prior to the trip and read them to students once in Benin. They also visit major historical cities in Benin (Porto-Novo, Abomey, Ganvié, Calavi, Ouidah, Grand-Popo), southern France (Aix-en-Provence, Nice, Cannes), and Monaco. The experience changes how her students think and see themselves in the world. Returning from the trip, she recalled one student who said, "We learn about differences; not that differences are bad, they are just different people doing things differently in other places, whether it be in France or whether it be in Benin. Different. And it's Ok to be different."

Dr. Viakinnou-Brinson expounded on this idea saying, "It really broadens their linguistic, cultural, and geographic horizons." There is value in being globally minded, open minded, adaptable, flexible, and a life learner, all things the humanities deliver. Employers are clear that critical reasoning and communication skills are highly valued in the workplace, and the humanities and social sciences are where KSU students sharpen these skills.

She emphasizes that these skills are developed in language programs through the Five Cs: communication, communities, comparison, connection, and culture, and points out that not everyone in the global workforce is American, so understanding 'the other' is vital. The collaboration and leadership skills learned in WLC language programs, honed via the study abroad opportunities and extra-curricular activities she supports, enable students to develop skills in these five areas, which serves them well in their careers.

Dr. Viakinnou-Brinson is clearly passionate about her work and her students. She summed it up best saying, "I truly love working with my students. That's why I never really get tired of working with the French and Sowers of Knowledge clubs and doing activities with them." Like a parent, there is a sense of pride and gratification when her students do well, regardless of the career path they choose. She says, "I just stand behind them, cheer, applaud, and say 'well done!'"

