Building a Model for Online Distance Courses Through Social Media and Networks

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the affordances of social media and networks for online Elementary German courses that have been taught at the University of Pennsylvania since 2010. These online courses were created to provide students the opportunity to take Elementary German as part of the language requirement for Penn credit during the summer months when students are away from campus. Like their face-to-face counterparts, the online courses are grounded on the principles of communicative language teaching and learning but clearly reveal the potential of these principles to maximize participation, promote learner autonomy and influence student outcomes when applied to collaborative online learning spaces. This paper explains the pedagogy behind the online courses, outlines their relationship to the face-to-face language classroom, and describes how student interactions are key to the learning process. It considers the importance of electronic and digital literacy (Warschauer, 2006) to the growth of new methodologies, materials development, assessment, articulation, intercultural competence, and student progress. This paper also compares the instructor’s experiences of teaching in the online environment with those of the face-to-face classroom and discusses how these distinct and separate learning spaces are in many ways related and can inform each other. Finally, the author considers new possibilities for language learning through emerging technologies.

Keywords: Articulation, Assessment, Collaborative Learning, Communicative Language Teaching, Digital Literacy, Intercultural Competence, Learner Autonomy, Linguistic Competence, Social Media

“Classroom techniques and procedures used to teach languages have reflected responses to a variety of historical issues and circumstances.” Richards and Rogers (2000, p. 14)

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A recent Horizons Report (Johnson, Smith, Willis, Levine, & Haywood, 2011) describes the effect of increasing globalization and new technologies on the way we work, collaborate, communicate and interact. Academia and in particular language educators are likewise feeling the impact of new and emerging technologies on classroom practices (Costa, 2011). Over the years, we have seen a number of online formats for teaching foreign languages that have sprung up from recent trends in the area of especially mobile and digital technologies. On the one hand, an online course can be as conventional as a didactic lecture, in which teachers are the main source of information in

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a web conferencing or videoconferencing session, or it can be as high tech as online gaming, in which multi-players interact with each other in a self-directed virtual world for achieving a specific goal. The German online courses @ Penn fell between the two extremes in which the instructor strove to create a learning environment, in which students were able to develop their language competency through meaningful social interactions in the target language and in a pedagogy-driven course design that was congruent with the practices, goals, and expected outcomes of the face-to-face-classroom. It is important to also note that the German online courses were not correspondence courses, nor were they conducted by videoteleconferencing, which uses the physical setting of the traditional face-to-face classroom. In videoteleconferencing sessions, the physical classroom can be communicated simultaneously to two or more classroom locations in two-way video and audio transmissions. By contrast, the German online courses utilized social media and networks, which can incorporate visual collaboration but are not dependent upon it. Furthermore, students do not need to be sitting in a classroom equipped with videoconferencing equipment but rather can participate from home or from any remote site through a dependable Internet connection. In this case, classroom participation is replaced by participatory networking.

As Garrido (2005) maintains, the design and implementation of any language course, especially online courses, constitutes a complexity of issues ranging from learning theories, teaching methods to the various stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning process. Teaching online distance courses effectively with social media and networks depends on tackling these issues and on teachers who understand the use of the Internet to achieve the learning objectives and goals they establish for their students during the conceptualization process.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the online courses were identical with those of the face-to-face courses. Students were expected by the end of online courses to handle a variety of day-to-day needs in a German speaking setting and to engage in simple conversations about topics pertinent to themselves, their family and friends. Furthermore, they were expected to develop reading and listening strategies for understanding and discussing news articles, short literary texts, and film clips. In addition to being able to express themselves in the present, students would be able to speak about events that happened in the immediate past and express plans for the future. Because cultural knowledge is an integral part of the Elementary German sequence, students also learned about practical life in Germany with a focus on Berlin and its depiction in literature and film.

TEXTBOOK

The textbook selected for the online course was Deutsch Interaktiv, an online course designed by the Deutsch Welle (DW) with a focus on listening and reading. The program consisted of authentic videos, slideshows and audio texts and gave a contemporary overview of the culture and language in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The audio, video and written texts from Deutsch Interaktiv provided the content for class conversations and student interviews. They also provided topics for essay writing and assignments on Facebook.

The DW course was attractive not only for its content and structure but also for its built-in assessments, developed in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for proficiency levels A1 and B1. Vocabulary and grammar were implicitly incorporated and presented in a series of 20 activity-oriented lessons with each lesson divided into 5 parts. The goal of the first 20 lessons was for the students to achieve the level of A2 proficiency for reading and listening, which correspond in part with the proficiency expectations for listening and reading for Penn students by the end of the second semester of Elementary German.
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