Chapter 5
Building a Model for Online Distance Courses through Social Media and Networks

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ABSTRACT
This chapter describes the affordances of social media and networks for online Elementary German courses that have been taught at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) since 2010. These online courses were created to provide students the opportunity to take Elementary German as part of the language requirement or 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 learning outcomes when applied to collaborative online learning spaces. This chapter illustrates the pedagogical principles 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 in the online class. It considers the importance of electronic and digital literacy (Warschauer, 2006) to the growth of new approaches, materials development, assessment, articulation, intercultural pragmatic competence, and linguistic progress. This chapter 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 discusses potential implications for future language teaching and learning through emerging technologies.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4611-7.ch005
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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)

A recent Horizons Report (L. Johnson, Smith, Willis, Levine & Haywood, 2011) describes the effect of increasing globalization and new technologies on the way we work, collaborate, communicate and interact. With the continuing advancements in technology, online / web-based teaching is an ever growing domain in language education, as in education in general. In the 1980s, correspondence education held the place of what we are now familiar with as distance learning (Thompson, 1990). Reflecting specifically on language education, Garrett (1991) presented a seminal article on technology used in language pedagogy. It presented an analysis of trends and issues at that time examining the use of video tape, tape recorders and software used with computers. Those technologies were relatively new at that time and beginning to be adopted and used regularly in the practice of language teaching (as reported in Levy, 2009). Much has changed since then with the digital revolution, and now learners’ and educators’ everyday lives are conducted with the use of smart objects and tools for instant communication. Static learning materials are used less and less, and some have projected that current students are the last generation to open a bulk pack or a textbook on a daily basis. Classes are often conducted using materials or tools available on the Internet. Functioning alongside traditional classrooms held in school buildings, virtual classrooms are becoming a common phenomenon.

Accordingly, academia generally and language educators in particular are becoming more and more aware of the impact of new and emerging technologies on classroom practices (e.g., 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. At first glance, new technologies have the potential to provide rich opportunities for promoting learner communication. However, an online course can be as conventional as a didactic lecture, in which teachers are the main source of information, in which teachers provide lectures on language about language, or meta-language driven sessions. Although this type of didactic lecture has potential for teaching conceptual knowledge about language, it fails to provide opportunities for learners to use language. As has been repeatedly stated in the history of language learning studies, the use of language by the learners themselves for communicative purposes is central to their language learning experience (Brumfit, 1979; Gass, 2004; K. Johnson, 2003; Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Long, 1991; Ortega, 2007 among others). Language learning emerges as the result of getting to know what words signify, by grasping their meaning in use (St. Augustine, 389 quoted in Kelly, 1969. Italics added).

Meanwhile, online learning experiences can be based primarily on communicative activities among learners such as in a web conferencing or videoconferencing session or mediated through technologies like online gaming, in which multi-players interact with each other in a self-directed virtual world for achieving a specific goal. While these highly interactive videoconferences and games can serve well for the content learning of subject matter or for achieving the goals of the games, learners could fail to achieve language learning objectives due to the speed of language use and the high content-driven nature of these tools.

The German online courses@Penn reviewed here fell between the two extremes of meta language-driven sessions and solely content-driven learning experiences. 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.