

Engaging the Twenty-first Century Foreign Language Student: the Validity of Hybrid E-learning and E-portfolios in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

Most foreign language instructors hailing from bench-mark institutions in the U.S. do not employ e-learning in performance courses from the beginner to the intermediate level, with very little exception. The supporting rationale is that beginner through intermediate foreign language courses set the communicative foundation for the student, fostering the highly interpersonal skills of speaking and listening, along with what are believed to be the less social and more "passive" skills of reading and writing. Research however has pointed to the anonymity of the online setting as a most liberating environment that at times may be less intimidating to foreign language students than the more conventional face-to-face modality [Lanham 1994; Turkle 1995; Jones 1995; Herring 1996]. Further research points to the American student's penchant for computer mediated communication, rendering the modality a highly engaging mode of communication for the American student's sensibility [Beauvois 1998]

The reconciliation of the needs of the foreign language student and the efficacy and appeal of the online settings may be reconciled in the hybrid modality. Indeed as students progress through their target language study and move beyond performance level courses, the employment of asynchronous online learning, in the hybrid modality, may prove to be beneficial. The latter mode affords the instructor an asynchronous online meeting, complimented by a synchronous face to face class meeting, ensuring that all four skills are fully addressed vis `a vis the classroom and the online setting. The hybrid modality may indeed be a key medium in negotiating the almost inevitable paradox at hand when confronting an online setting, that of alienation versus effective, interpersonal communication.

The creation of the social virtual space and the element of virtually sharing opinions, thoughts and experiences through online forums as well as through e-portfolios can be a very empowering experience for students and thus a valuable tool in the foreign language classroom.

This paper will explore my first-hand experience at employing the hybrid modality in foreign language teaching in the American University system, specifically in non-performance courses, as well as the validity of the e-portfolio as a complimentary means of virtual sharing beyond the classroom setting.

1. Introduction

The national director of the Modern Language Association recently visited my campus in Queens, New York, where successful language teaching strategies were discussed. The use of the hybrid online modality fares high on the suggested strategies encouraged by this reputable institution that promotes and defends foreign language instruction in the USA.

It should be explained that the hybrid platform affords the instructor a traditional in-class meeting with an alternating AS-L online meeting. Thus it is considered a didactic middle ground between traditional asynchronous learning (herein referred to as AS-L learning), where students may experience a sense of cyber alienation, and the standard face to face in-classroom setting. The latter, though it remains the golden mean of foreign language instruction in the US, can itself present pitfalls at times in the foreign language setting. An example of an ever-growing obstacle for any class where even minimal interaction is required is the intimidation experienced by the technologically embued, text-friendly students, many of whom have become increasingly socially-challenged. These students may show a greater reluctance to actively participate in class discussion in a face to face modality, no matter how hard the instructor tries to foster a "safe" classroom environment in which students are free to communicate, as well as allowed to make mistakes, without suffering the shame that many feel vis `a vis their peers in these instances.

Most traditional foreign language instructors however, in the pursuit of enforcing the four skills of the foreign language classroom, tend to shy away from AS-L in performance classes (levels 1-4); and this is in fact the policy at my institution and at most benchmark institutions in the US. However, when it comes to teaching courses that are non-performance in a foreign language, the use of the hybrid



modality can serve to bridge the needs of the instructor who strives to be ever more appealing to students of the 21st century and the sensibilities of the technological savvy American foreign language student. I believe that the great balance that the hybrid modality insures is that balance between the pros and cons of technology and those of the traditional classroom. In this talk, I will demonstrate some of the successful curricular decisions made in my foreign language section which have enhanced active student engagement, despite what would seem to be counter productive delivery, that of the cyber platform..

Another trend purported by the Modern Language Association, in light of the virtual dissolution of the foreign language requirement in most colleges and universities in the US, and in light of the risky future, hence, for foreign language programs and teachers in the US, is that curriculum and classroom strategy decisions must meet the needs of the American undergraduate student, who, given the crisis of the Humanities and more germane to our discussion, of foreign language, has become a commodity for programs seeking enrollment for survival in order to avoid the risk of dissolution. According to the US News and World Report, 70% of graduating seniors in the US will accumulate roughly \$30,000 US dollars of debt upon graduation. [1] Student debt and therefore the need to compete in the job market as soon as possible has become the number one concern of students and their parents even before entering the auspices of any University. While career centers have become a source of job placement for students, the honerous task of job queries has been increasingly entrusted to the professor. Courses in my own section's curriculum have become increasingly targeted on student outcomes in the work place and thus, the e-portoflio has become part of the arsenal of many instructors, as it can complete basic didactic needs, while having students showcase the work that they have done during their tenure as an undergraduate, which immediately could be shown to a potential employer. Today's discussion will also relay my own personal successes and pitfalls of this tool in the foreign language classroom..

Before beginning to share my findings, I should say that my section of Italian is represented by a healthy student body of 700 undergraduate students of Italian who enter our door annually. Our Italian Section is comprised of students who presently need to fulfill the language requirement for certain colleges within the University. Our student population consists also of students who wish to go beyond the language requirement and who opt to major or minor in the language. The findings that I will relate are based on this student body.

2. The advantages of the Hybrid or the blended learning modality

I will never forget hearing feedback about online learning from a colleague who shared the experience of her students expressing their wish to meet in cyber space prior to the first day of school, though the class had an exclusive face to face platform. This incident only reinforced for me what Beauvois stated in his research, ultimately that the American student's penchant for computer mediated communication renders the modality a highly engaging mode of communication for the American student's sensibility [2]

Even more encouraging to the foreign language instructor embarking on the blended learning mode are the works of Lanham, Turkle, Jones and Herring, all of whom indicate that it is the anonymity of the online setting that is that most liberating environment that at times may be less intimidating to foreign language students than the more conventional face-to-face modality. [3]

On a practical level, another perk to this modality lies in those who want to build a strong language section, specifically in course numbers and in student enrollment. Administrators have supported faculty's use of this modality in a motion to decrease physical space use on campus and potentially, to increase enrollment, given the hybrid modality's greater "flexibility" for the working American student. Indeed 70% of students polled said that they enrolled in a class that was at least partially online because the flexibility built into the course allowed them to "choose the time and place to participate in the course". [4] As regards enrollment and student performance, it has been my experience that enrollment for the "at risk courses" within my Section, given the scarce number of advanced students has only been under-enrolled twice since the inception of this modality in my section four years ago. This is a great finding, as many face to face classes, even if they are not cancelled by the administration due to under-enrollment, ultimately lack in classroom spirit and participation during the semester, when small advanced class may experience absences that decimate the sense of group spirit. Online, I have yet to find this to be so, perhaps this is due to the fact that at least in the online encounter, students can choose the time when they can offer their best work. I have found that student participation increases during the semester in class often only after students begin to successfully post on discussion boards. Their confidence often begins to grow in class after postively recieved postings. Often the modality forces the student to exhibit their best work. Here a simple psychological factor may come into play. When students post their assignments to a discussion board,

knowing that their work will ultimately be viewed by someone other than the instructor, namely a peer whom they will then encounter in the subsequent face to face class encounter, this tends to ensure that more attention is dedicated to assignments. In my experience, unsuccessful and less confident students tend to post late to the discussion board when they know their work is not up to par or they may email the instructor their work privately in order to avoid peer viewing.

In my teaching career, I have adopted the hybrid or blended learning modality for advanced courses of Italian, namely: a translation course primarily from Italian to English, a course on Italian civilization, and a course on the history of Italian opera. Two out of three of the courses were exclusively taught in the face to face modality for several years prior. I would like to illustrate the advantage of a hybrid modality applied to the latter course.

A course on the history of Italian opera, when taught for non-afficionados doesn't always promise success, regardless of the zeal of the professor. The lives of the composers, the historic, social and cultural trends that inform the operatic world guarantee the instructor a lot of material to cover in the classroom. In a normal classroom setting, the material would be covered in the face to face delivery mode and the potentially most truly engaging aspect of the course, the shared operatic experience would perhaps in the interest of time constraints, be relocated to an in-class opera DVD viewing, or a single class trip to the opera. The outcome would nonetheless be an informative course, with very little experiential learning and lively appreciation of the medium studied.

The same course delivered in a hybrid platform allows for assignments to be done online, guided by the instructor and the face to face aspect is relocated to experiential learning outside the classroom. Students in my hybrid opera course must attend at least 4-5 full operas either in person at theaters or live in HD with a live broadcast from New York's Metropolitan Opera House (or an international opera house which broadcasts in HD). That is indeed an achievement for the average undergraduate. Students attend same or different performances and they often share and discuss their opinions online in a very engaged, and at times, visceral manner.

My hybrid opera course models itself on the antecedent of the hybrid modality, a long-standing tradition in higher ed, the integration of field studies into coursework for effective learning. Indeed the world becomes the classroom in such cases and studies indeed show that students learn better when, as Jason Allen Snart observes: "Basic course goals are folded into what can often be intensive learning experiences. Beyond meeting basic course objectives, students grow emotionally as they bond with their instructor and with classmates, and they mature through the self-knowledge that often comes with experiential learning of this kind. The hybrid model, understood in this broad sense, can provide a much richer learning experience than can traditional classroom instruction alone." [5]

3. E-portfolios further enhance student engagement

T. Cooper and Love define electronic portfolios as an organized collection of documents, images, podcasts, audio files, powerpoints and other artifacts that demonstrate the expansion of knowledge and achievements of the person who has compiled them and the meaning of the compiled documentation. [6]

In the case of my translation class, I have used e-portfolios to encourage students to publish compiled work they would be proud enough to show not only to their instructor, but to a third party, their classmates, and ultimately to a fourth party, their potential employer. It is this chain of greater reception that creates a different, more engaging experience when using e-portfolios. Indeed studies show that it is the technological aspect to e-portfolios that sets them apart from standard hard-copy collections of work. E-portfolios surpass the traditional hard copy genre as they support more fully skills such as linking, deeper thinking and the superior sharing that is publishing.

Students in my translation course have shared their translations of a given text regularly in the classroom, with the use of e-portfolios as work in progress. As with the hybrid modality, the frequency of reception and the target audience, that of peer (and beyond that, of potential employer reception) is an important factor. Thus students' different takes on a piece to be translated can be more readily compared. I close with my comments on an e-portfolio handout which I now distribute to the audience.



References

- [1] Bidwell, Allie. "Average Student Loan Debt Approaches \$30,000. US News and World Report, November 13, 2014.
- [2] Beauvois, 1998.
- [3] Lanham, 1994; Turkle 1995; Jones 1995; Herring, 1996.
- [4] Smart, Jason Allen. Hybrid Learning: The Perils and Promise of Blending Online and Face-to-Face, 10.
- [5] Ibid, xiv.
- [6] T. Cooper and Love, 2007.