

5 Learning in the open: integrating language and culture through student curation, virtual exchange, and OER

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Abstract

To address waning enrollments in intermediate 202 language courses, faculty have developed a multiphasic project. In phase one, alongside instructional designers, they created an open, connected platform where 202 students curate – search, select, and share – authentic materials online. In phase two, upper-level students help triage and scaffold the best curations into online interactive modules. Phase three sets up live, virtual exchanges during which students discuss their curations with native speakers. In phase four, open e-textbooks, framed by communicative can-do statements, integrate curations, modules, virtual exchanges, and existing Open Educational Resources (OERs) into sustainable, relevant, and student driven learning materials.

Keywords: OER, digital literacy, curation, virtual exchange.

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1. Context of the project

American colleges and universities are suffering declining enrollments in world languages (Looney & Lusin, 2018). Nevertheless, a report by the Language Flagship Technology Innovation Center at the University of Hawaii offers an encouraging vision of foreign language education: “institutions are emphasizing more active, real-world experiences that better equip students for responsible global citizenship and successful participation in professional and interpersonal communicative contexts” (Adams Becker, Rodriguez, Estrada, & Davis, 2016, p.1). It also reminds us that “[I]anguage education, by nature, is a multi-year endeavor. It requires dedication from students outside of the classroom to fully realize the unique contexts of specific words, phrases, and semiotic actions in other cultures” (Adams Becker et al., 2016, p.1). Finally, the report states that technologies that facilitate personalization and faculty development to work with such advances, are just now emerging. This project attempts to align with such a vision of student-centered, authentic language education.

In 2015, language faculty at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) identified a roadblock: the second semester of the second-year (202). Most students stop language study, expressing disappointment at their inability to communicate well in the target language. These same students, however, are highly engaged in digital communication and demonstrate a keen interest in social connections. Our task, then, was to get them to pursue language study by connecting it to their ‘real’ lives.

2. Intended outcomes

This multiphasic project connects student language learning with engaging, digital communications. Through online curation – the searching, selecting, and sharing – of target language resources, students discover personal learning paths through course themes and structures. Final curations relate language learning to future aspirations and personal interests. Students who participate in selecting learning materials show greater personal investment in learning (Oxford et al.,

2014). It also develops self-evaluation skills and critical literacy, two crucial competencies today (Warner & Dupuy, 2018). Curating provides the class with authentic materials. Those chosen as scaffolded modules loop back into the learning program. Through virtual exchanges, students explore their curations with native speakers in real time, developing linguistic and cultural acumen. The project targets digital literacy, autonomous language learning, and global citizenry.

The project continues to evolve. It began with faculty and students learning to curate. At the end of each year, upper-level students help triage curations for interest and pedagogical promise. Those become scaffolded modules for class use. Since Year 2, virtual exchanges have been added to deepen student interpretive and interpersonal communication with curated content. Most recently, the team has embarked on the creation of OER e-textbooks that weave together all facets of the project – with students and their learning squarely in the center of both process and product. What follows showcases various realizations of the desired learning outcomes, with glimpses into each phase of the process. The [supplementary materials](#) section provides student reactions to the curation phase of their learning and comments by the student researchers on co-creating modules and the OER e-textbooks with faculty.

3. Nuts and bolts

3.1. Student curation of authentic materials

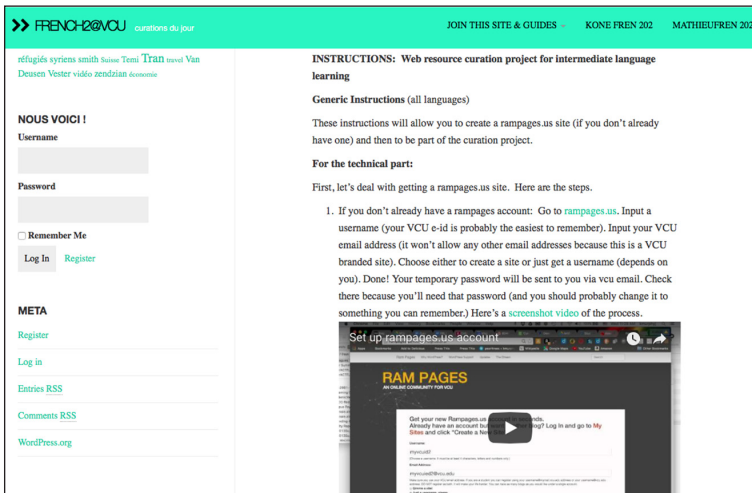
The first phase of the project asks intermediate-level students to locate online resources, documents, and/or artifacts produced by the target language community for its own use and consumption. We refer to such digital finds as *authentic materials*, as they are generated by and intended for a native audience. Language collected from authentic media provides a counterpoint to the often artificial language presented in textbooks (Gilmore, 2007). Language textbooks

“‘have become more and more like tourist brochures’ (Kramersch, 2014, p. 308), with glossy photos, stereotypical topics, and quickly outdated

information. [...] Textbooks typically do not provide exposure to the evolving array of online genres for reading and writing. [...] This is particularly problematic at a time in which most of the reading and writing in our students’ personal and professional lives will be online (Chun, Kern, & Smith, 2016)” (Godwin-Jones, 2018b, p. 146).

Typical second-year course thematics (e.g. travel, city life, environmental issues, politics, etc.) frame the topics that students research and collate, some of which may later be used to support online modules (see section 2 below). Faculty members have worked with instructional designers to create an open and connected curation platform⁶ where students syndicate their finds, as well as learn aspects of digital information retrieval and manipulation (e.g. categorization/tagging, syndication/aggregation, and copyright/copyleft). The platform offers written instructions as well as video tutorials for students to set up their accounts (Figure 1), guide the selection and curation processes (Figure 2), and articulate a narrative about the submitted materials in the target language.

Figure 1. Instructions for setting up student accounts in WordPress



6. Language-specific curation platforms: rampages.us/french2atvcu, rampages.us/chinese2atvcu, rampages.us/russian2atvcu, rampages.us/spanish2atvcu, rampages.us/italian2atvcu, rampages.us/german2atvcu.

Figure 2. Instructions for curating: part of the student guide

SEARCH FOR:

Search

NOTRE NUAGE DE TAGS

Algerie anti-noir B sacco calais Cinema culture
 Cummins FREN 301 curation 2 documentaire enfants
 exploité film France France 24 Hamner Harkis
 immigration islam KMI Raffale Dreyfus L'impressionnisme
 la France La santé des réfugiés en France les droits de
 l'homme les harkis MATHIEUFREN 202 meccann
 MJ MJ 2017 MJ2017 musique Paris réfugiés
 réfugiés syriens smith Suisse Temi Trian travel Van
 Deussen Vester vidéo zendzian économie

NOUS VOICI !

Username

Password

WHAT MAKES A GOOD CURATION?

Curating is an important 21st century communications skill. For learning a foreign language, it's even more critical. In learning a language, you can't just stick with the classroom experience to increase your proficiency and fluency; you HAVE to immerse yourself daily in its sights and sounds and acquire a level of learning autonomy.

Although you may have a class assignment for a specific topic (like food or travel), don't let this stop you from finding and sharing really cool sites that tickle your fancy. Those are the ones that make a good curation for you.

Starting points: Where do you start? With a topic. Next, you open a search engine (google, duckduckgo, etc.; eg., <http://google.fr>) for a Francophone country (see country codes [here](#)) and key in a search command in target language (eg., "meilleurs rappeurs de 2017 "). If your list is too vast, try adding more keywords ("meilleurs rappeurs de 2017 au Maroc"). Now comes the fun: check out several of them, learn about the topic from within the language and culture you're learning. When you finally find a site that really 'speaks' to you, curate it. Still, decide if it has broader appeal for people learning French at your level, if not search around for one that you still like but that will engage your classmates. Curate it, too (you can curate as many as you'd like!). Tell us why it's cool and important, what resonates for you. Categorize it so we can find it; tag it to provide even more depth and discoverability.

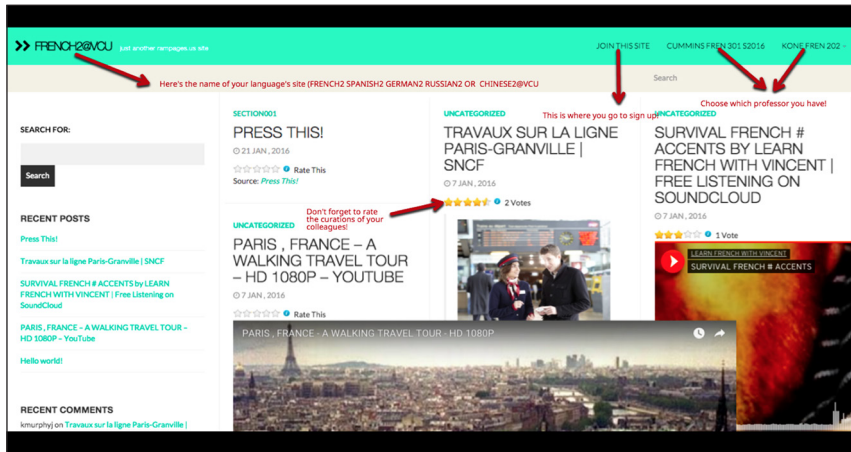
Voici un Français qui en parle (mettez les sous-titres s'il parle trop vite; les 2 premières parties sont les plus importantes):

Each student is asked to find and curate a prescribed number of online documents or sites, and write a short paragraph or two accounting for the source and nature of the selected document(s) (text, video, ad, blog post, news article, etc.), as well as a rationale for the selection. Students learning the same world language are also able to see their peers' submissions and rate them using a five star scale (Figure 3). This feature has proven to be particularly valuable when determining the merit of these documents as the basis for selection as online modules (see section 2 below).

Students now curate for their professional aspirations, connecting language learning with future careers in sciences, arts, commerce, etc. to promote language acquisition beyond formal instruction. Because many of our students are destined to join professional fields where knowledge of another language may not be foregrounded in the US, increasing awareness of and exposure to a multilingual world may persuade some to view linguistic capital as an asset worth continued investment (see the [supplementary materials](#)). Some students

may not readily see the value in pursuing language study, but envisioning themselves in a “community in which [they] might belong and use the information [they] are learning” (Murphey, Chen, & Chen, 2005, p. 98) may encourage them toward more meaningful, ongoing participation in learning (Norton, 2001).

Figure 3. Annotated screenshot of the loading page of rampages.us/french2atvcu as instructional guide



3.2. Student OER module co-creation and design

The second phase of the project recruits advanced students to work with faculty to select highly rated, pedagogically valuable curations from the current corpus. Given the volume of submissions from the curation phase, the student-faculty team first establishes a set of criteria (based on textbook thematics, students’ ratings, and cultural and linguistic pertinence) to narrow down the stock of materials for possible online module creation. In language teams, we then scaffold the vetted, authentic media so as to guide the intermediate learners through linguistically and culturally appropriate interpretations and knowledge. Student researchers work with faculty members to devise these supportive

learning environments, relying on OER and interactive tools⁷ (for instance, H5P⁸ for interactivity).

We initially started with one undergraduate student per language, but within the span of a year, some languages were able to recruit more. Various opportunities enable advanced students to partake in this phase of the project by way of university-internal grants or assorted independent study courses. Undergraduate research and experiential learning is a hallmark of a VCU education and better prepares students for their respective careers⁹. For these students, working in tandem with a faculty member means increased exposure to and performance in the target language beyond what a typical classroom offers. Ultimately, the modules show how to navigate authentic texts on one's own, regardless of the context and with guidance toward more critical reading and greater intercultural sensitivity (see the [supplementary materials](#) for student testimonials on module co-creation and design).

One Spanish-language module¹⁰ serves here as an example of content development appropriate for intermediate-level instruction. As part of the initial phase of authentic materials collection, a fourth semester student curated on the scientific benefits of napping, a culturally important aspect of daily Spanish life, and uploaded it to the curation website to share with classmates. In the second phase, a Spanish program faculty member mentored two advanced-level students about potential pedagogical applications of such an article. In particular, the advanced students learned about the value of both pre-reading activities (to engage readers by applying their background knowledge to the topic), and post-reading activities (to check comprehension and provide an opportunity to write personal reflections in the target language). The advanced students, applying this new knowledge, created exercises that

7. Examples of language-specific modules: Chinese module: <https://rampages.us/chineseoer/modules/moi/>; French module: <https://rampages.us/frenchoer/modules/je-veux/>, <https://rampages.us/frenchoer/modules/menace-de-mort-youssoupha/>; Italian module: <https://rampages.us/italianoer/modules/tradizioni/>; Russian module: <https://rampages.us/russianoer/modules/головой-вагон-и-возвратных-глаголов/>

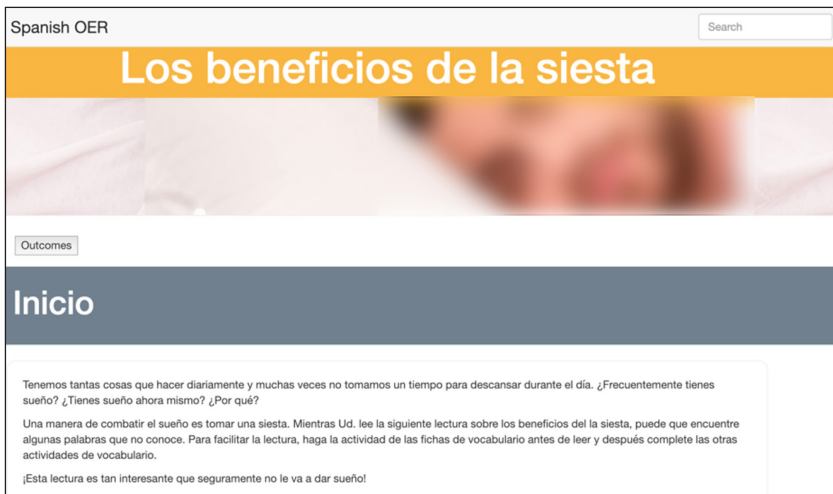
8. See <https://h5p.org>

9. See <https://provost.vcu.edu/academic-affairs/real/>

10. See Spanish Module <https://rampages.us/spanishoer/modules/los-beneficios-de-la-siesta/>

encourage intermediate-level students to (1) read strategically for vocabulary comprehension, (2) promote their understanding of the article, and (3) deploy the newly-acquired vocabulary to their lives as sleep-deprived college students (Figure 4). For example, the pre-reading vocabulary task includes culturally and physiologically important verbs and phrases (e.g. *padecer*=to suffer (e.g. insomnia), *echar una siesta*=to take a nap, and *las alteraciones del sueño*=sleep changes). A post-reading activity quizzes students about the health benefits of a good night’s sleep with true/false questions like *¿La siesta reduce el grado de estrés y las tensiones físicas?* (do naps reduce stress and physical tension?). Finally, the advanced students created a series of questions that range from very short ones like *¿Usted las toma?*, *¿Con qué frecuencia?* (do you take naps? How frequently?) to more open-ended queries about students’ sleep habits, like *¿Cómo se siente después de tomarlas?* (how do you feel after a nap?). In this particular module, each question is designed to elicit specific structures with which the average intermediate student still struggles (direct object pronouns, reflexive verbs, and use of infinitives with prepositions).

Figure 4. Screenshot of an OER module on the benefits of *siestas* with interactive reading



The next stage of our ongoing project is to fully integrate these learner-generated modules into language courseware delivered via open e-textbooks. Again, upper division students contribute significantly to this effort by co-creating materials alongside faculty members. Thus, they are engaging in ‘participatory action research’ (Zuber-Skerrit, 2002), helping to find and create materials likely to be of interest to their peers.

3.3. Student virtual exchanges with native speakers

To complement students’ experiences of curating authentic materials in their target language, two virtual exchange formats have been introduced: Teletandem¹¹, an online exchange program that partners students with peers at overseas institutions of higher learning, and Talk Abroad¹², a private company that partners students with paid native tutors in target countries. The addition of this component to the curation part of the project enables intermediate-level students to participate in a community of native speakers with a high reality quotient since the conversations revolve around their curations. It allows students to appreciate, explore, grasp, and navigate both the linguistic and cultural content of their curated documents directly with a native informant (see the [supplementary materials](#) for student testimonials on virtual exchange)¹³.

In the VCU Russian language program, for instance, Teletandem has allowed VCU students to communicate with their peers at Moscow State University since 2013 (Figure 5), and with Moscow Pedagogical University students since 2016. These online exchanges are particularly well suited to the study of foreign languages because students have the chance to communicate with native speakers over the course of the semester through synchronous online interactions. Such an arrangement is highly effective in providing students with authentic and meaningful opportunities for immersion and practice in their respective second language, even more so when the partners are discussing an

11. <https://media.worldstudies.vcu.edu/teletandem/what-is-teletandem/>

12. <https://talkabroad.com>

13. See this YouTube video of a French student engaging with his Belgian teletandem partner in a negotiation of meaning over the concept of a ‘food desert’: https://youtu.be/JD3-6Qd_5_E

interesting curation. Students are motivated to practice new vocabulary, forms, and ideas drawn from their research and to explore cultural factors coloring their interpretation of the curated media. It thus widens their cultural knowledge and makes them reflect on their own language and societal norms, increasing their intercultural competence.

Figure 5. Russian 202 class interacting with Moscow State University students via Teletandem



In the Talk Abroad venue, a paid service, each student benefits from either 10 or 30 minute live sessions over the course of the semester. Upon registering on the site, students first select a speaking partner, listed by country of residence along with a short biographical profile, and subsequently schedule their conversational sessions at their own convenience. Overlooking some initial apprehension at the prospect of interacting with a native speaker (an unfamiliar exercise for most intermediate-level students), at the end of spring 2018, the majority of students surveyed expressed a genuine appreciation for this challenging yet rewarding and empowering task. One or more of the Talk Abroad sessions are designed to elicit discussion of student curations so that learners can expand their linguistic and cultural interpretation of their chosen authentic materials. One student, for instance, relied on a curated article about the use of henna in Tunisian weddings to connect with her Talk Abroad partner from Tunisia and enrich her understanding of that cultural practice, all the while aptly maneuvering across some uncharted linguistic terrains. During these audiovisual interactions, students often manage to go beyond rudimentary conversational routines to

deploy concrete conversational strategies (such as circumlocution of linguistic gaps, negotiation of turn-taking and communication breakdowns, topical shifts, and maintenance) to achieve meaning-making usages of language. In sum, in addition to fostering their grammatical and sociolinguistic competence, students also actively engage in developing a nascent ‘strategic competence’ (Canale & Swain, 1980) in their second language.

3.4. Merit of the project

This multifaceted project in world languages offers a dynamic framework for students to develop appropriate intermediate-level language skills capable of sustaining more advanced language acquisition. With a committed focus on students’ academics, personal interests, and professional lives, it aims to provide them with a critical foundation in meaningful language study and growth. In essence, this project endeavors to encourage student enthusiasm for continuing investment in language study, whether in or out of the classroom environment. Chief among the merits of the project, are:

- **Engaging students across the language curriculum.** From the curation of authentic materials by intermediate-level students to the co-creation of online modules by advanced-level students, the project is inherently learner-driven yet supported by faculty expertise and oversight. Furthermore, attention to students’ interests and professional aspirations personalizes language study far beyond the mass-market textbook, thereby granting students ownership of their language education.
- **Language study via discovery learning, fostering a spirit of inquiry and learner autonomy.** The intrinsically exploratory nature of the curation and virtual exchange parts of the project enable students to uncover a world of non-English products, practices, and perspectives, broadening their horizons, and enriching their intercultural competence. By tapping into students’ interests, this project nourishes intellectual curiosity and professional ambitions, all the while fostering their ability to learn autonomously.

- **Enhancing digital literacy and skills.** Twenty-first century students are immersed in a world of readily-accessible information, yet, digital natives appear to grapple with the ability to discern the validity or veracity of that information critically (Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega, 2016). By learning to curate and justify their choice of certain documents, students engage in deeper reflection about the texts and their sources that they encounter. Curating, after all, is information gathering and sorting. Likewise, by appraising the pedagogical value of various second language curations, advanced students develop an intellectual acuity for interpreting foreign digital design and content.
- **Sustaining meaningful language learning activity (in and out of the classroom).** Disenfranchisement in second language learners is commonplace, especially at the intermediate-level, when students' proficiency levels tend to plateau (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Only by providing genuine opportunities to practice language skills authentically (e.g. reading and writing via curations; listening and speaking via virtual exchanges) can faculty hope to instill interest in further language acquisition.
- **Developing relevant, current, and affordable OER course content.** The growing use of and reliance on open access multimedia compels educators to reflect on the value of static, expensive, proprietary materials like traditional textbooks, however much they may be modernized by technological bells and whistles. Although relatively young, the OER movement increasingly challenges traditional educational practices and materials while emerging studies indicate that OERs perform as well instructionally, if not better, than traditional ones for student learning and engagement (Weller et al., 2015). Recent studies of OER use have indicated that student reception is positive, with students appreciating the lower cost, but also the option of content customization (Hilton, 2016). This project aims to create modular OER textbooks, enabling others to use only those modules or e-book chapters that fit personal or curricular needs (Dixon & Hondo, 2014).

In its focus on encouraging both language and cultural competency, this project aligns with recent emphases in second language acquisition research on the responsibility of language educators to also help students develop a sense of global citizenship (Byram, Golubeva, Hui, & Wagner, 2017; Hennebry, 2017; Warner & Dupuy, 2018) and to encourage them to find ways to integrate language learning into contributions to the social good (Dasli & Diaz, 2016; Larsen-Freeman, 2018). The recent inclusion of the LinguaFolio e-portfolio (based on the European model) as the pedagogical and proficiency based framework for the development of the e-textbooks aligns with the emphasis on student responsibility for reflection, engagement, and autonomy, with students charting their own progress and targeting their own learning goals (Little, 2009; Moeller, Theiler, & Wu, 2012; Moeller & Yu, 2015; Ziegler, 2014).

4. Conclusion

This project aims to encourage and enable American students to become engaged language learners and digital global citizens, appreciative of other cultures, and knowledgeable about opportunities for continued language study. The hope is that a substantial number of students engaged in the project will continue their target language study formally or informally. Increasingly, the latter is becoming the norm (Godwin-Jones, 2018a; Kusyk, 2017). These online resources will likely be the means for most students to connect language learning with their future professional lives. While that is already integrated into the curation process, the language team plans to reach out to professional units of the university to explore collaborative opportunities. The importance of knowledge of a second language across disciplines is delineated in a 2017 report published by the Commission on Language Learning at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017)¹⁴.

Another anticipated direction for the project is integration into university-sponsored study abroad programs. Teletandem and Talk Abroad participation

14. See <https://www.amacad.org/project/commission-language-learning>

may serve to enhance student interest in directly experiencing the target culture. That might occur through individual initiative but could also lead to participation in organized study abroad. Research has shown that creation and use of locally developed language resources geared to study abroad locales increases participation in programs as well as in student enrollment in language study (Goertler, 2015). There is also the opportunity for students abroad to contribute to the project themselves by filming local resources, conducting short interviews, or engaging in other means of gathering and curating language/culture-related materials (Godwin-Jones, 2017). This encourages students abroad to think of themselves as ethnographers, chronicling and reflecting on personal experiences in the target culture (Roberts, 2001). Of course, participation by students in the project in itself should prove helpful in building linguistic and cultural competence that will be beneficial to study, work, or leisure abroad. Thanks to two student research funds, we currently have two students, one in Russian and one in French, contributing their experiences and research abroad into modules for the e-textbooks.

Finally, second language learning is especially important in largely monolingual cultures like the US, where only 25% of ‘mainstream’ Americans have studied a foreign language at some point in their lives (Devlin, 2015) and only 20% of students at the secondary level enroll in language classes (American Councils for International Education, 2017). As Ortega (2017) remarks, this has had an unfortunate by-product in terms of acceptance of diversity in the US: “It is in great part marginalized monolinguals who are blamed for the rise of authoritarian populism in the West and the disaffection for human solidarity and human diversity ideals” (p. 308). Foreign language study creates more positive attitudes toward those who are different, a much-needed orientation throughout the world today.

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Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/o86o6t87wildyvjrs4etvkr4in6j9bt8>

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