Citation

Going the Distance in a *Changing* World: Distance Learning and the Foreign Language Classroom

Bridgette W. Gunnels
University of West Georgia
bgunnels@westga.edu

This article offers a critique of the lack of attention to the place of online course offerings in foreign language departments and/or distance education in general by the MLA's 2007 report on foreign language departments and their role in the academy. The article responds to how currently accessible technology (course management system platforms like WebCT/Blackboard™), already in wide use by universities and colleges across the United States, has made great strides towards replicating a classroom environment that can promote language proficiency as well as achieve the committee's suggestions for encouraging more cross-cultural awareness in foreign language classrooms at all levels.

Now that most educators in all disciplines must contend with what Warschauer (2002) calls "electronic literacies" (p. 455), where students are at ease with most everything from writing emails to analyzing and investigating online information and managing relationships in online settings, it seems that the days when the overhead projector was considered cutting-edge technology in the classroom have long ended. In 2008, universities across the United States will actively offer the use of one of several available Course Management System (CMS) software packages to students and professors to enhance various levels of interaction using computers and/or the Internet – from course management to actual delivery of content and assessment procedures (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2001). A considerable percentage of universities across the US currently use some form of instructional technology (IT) in their departments and programs (Palloff & Pratt, 2001), including several forays in foreign language instruction. Among these technologies we find the leading commercial option in the industry, WebCT/Blackboard™, as well as other free, open-source versions like Sakai, Dokeos/Docebo and Moodle. The number of foreign language distance course offerings across the US is also on the rise, adding a different dimension to the university infrastructure as well as creating distinct challenges to foreign language pedagogy (Adolph & LeBlanc, 1997; Muyskens, 1997; Warschauer, 1996, 1999). Distance learning is steadily becoming an alternative for many students seeking postsecondary education, and most universities and colleges nationwide are beginning to address the challenges as well as the opportunities in this area by offering courses in a variety of subjects, including all levels of foreign language instruction.

Notwithstanding, the MLA's 2007 report on foreign languages, "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World," makes no specific mention of distance learning technologies and their effect on the changing face of foreign language and literature departments nationwide. Instead, the committee settles for the following cursory advice: "Teach graduate students to use technology in language instruction and learning" (Strengthening the Demand for Language Competence within the University section, para. 2). As not explicitly defined in the report, the organization's definition of "technology" may include everything from antiquated models such as the overhead project to more mainstream uses of PowerPoint, for example. Yet more advanced uses of technology in the foreign language classroom may also include some type of CMS platform as a medium and facilitator for language instruction and learning besides being a tool for course management. This disregard for distance learning's role in the changing face of today's colleges and universities seems counterintuitive for a field of learning (i.e., modern languages) that is a forerunner of cross-cultural awareness.

With an ever-increasing student demand in languages, particularly post-9/11, the curricula changes addressed and advised by the MLA report categorically apply to traditional modes of learning, thus ignoring a key element in the second language acquisition matrix, increased offerings in distance education in foreign languages. This article will address the multiple manners in which current technology, including the commercial CMS platforms WebCT/Blackboard™, effectively: simulates a communicative classroom by the use of both asynchronous and synchronous voice tools and assessments; provides ample opportunities for inclusion of cultural artifacts and media into curriculum; encourages foreign language written proficiency as well as oral and aural proficiency; and fosters a unique sense of community. Measuring spontaneous speech in L2 is often seen as one of the detractors of online foreign language classes, and our discussion will begin with a description of synchronous and asynchronous tools and their benefits for the online student population studying a second language, as well as their place in technologically-enhanced language pedagogy that addresses methods to gauge language production in L2.

Language Learning Goals in the Online Classroom

Harnessing the instructional technology (IT) revolution for learning purposes is a key issue facing college and university departments today. With the average postsecondary student being more in-tune with recent technology than ever, professors must find ways to embrace the interest and energy that surrounds these "digital natives" (Prensky, 2005/2006). Taking advantage of the CMS platforms that offer virtual classrooms is an ideal manner to reach these students, many of whom show dexterity and interest in distance learning, but often this type of instruction is met with a certain resistance. The issue for detractors of foreign language distance courses is the very feasibility of reaching language learning goals, or of maintaining a communicative classroom where students are engaged in cooperative meaning-making in the language, in an online environment. Nonetheless, by incorporating all levels of the CMS, including the virtual classroom, these goals can also be met through online delivery.

Since the foreign language educator encourages speaking in the target language, conducting class online with the same results as face-to-face instruction might seem challenging, as Adolph and Le Blanc (1997) summarize: "Our goal of communication requires personal contact. We get to know our students. We do not just lecture faceless masses. We teach our students to speak in the target language" (p. 26). Notwithstanding, the combined, regular use of

asynchronous and synchronous voice tools provides the same type of interaction and has proven to elicit similar results from students (Beauvois, 1997; Kern, 1997).

Asynchronous-based technologies generally refer to electronic bulletin board or discussion board systems, as is the case in the WebCT/Blackboard™ platform. Students can access and post to the bulletin board/discussion board at any time, making collaborative, simultaneous participation of students unnecessary (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2001). Synchronous-based technologies, or 'chat' sessions, allow for dynamic, real-time discussion with little or no delay between postings. All participants must meet in the online classroom, and the exchange between instructor and student(s) is captured either by using a textbox or, in the most recent development, by listening through audio equipment (Beauvois, 1997; Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

The most compelling facet of the WebCT/Blackboard™ CMS is the virtual classroom. In their study entitled, "El Español…¡A Distancia!: Developing a™ Technology-Based Distance Education Course for Intermediate Spanish," authors Rogers and Wolff (2000) comment that

> [d]istance education can provide clear advantages for some language learners, by allowing for self-directed and individually paced learning, greater time for reflection, and more emphasis on skills mastery, but it may also present language instructors with new and difficult challenges. Perhaps the greatest of these is the reduced opportunity for cohort-based learning and immediate, personalized feedback. (p. 2)

Since the date of publication, the learning platforms available to most institutions supply some form of virtual classroom that includes both asynchronous and synchronous deliveries. Both types require specific gear on part of the instructor and the student, including headphones with microphones, as well as a minimum DSL level of internet connectivity for uninterrupted service and quality.

For example, in the WebCT/Blackboard™ software's synchronous platform (Horizon Wimba™), students who are logged in can hear the instructor's voice in real-time and have the opportunity to text back with questions and responses or actually speak back using their personal headsets, which include headphones and a microphone. For example, Figure 1 illustrates a typical virtual classroom that consists of a major portion of the computer screen dedicated to a whiteboard-type portion in which charts, PowerPoint, media, film clips or audio files such as podcasts or music files can be uploaded for viewing, as well as a box that reproduces all text-chat from students and/or instructor, and an attendance list.
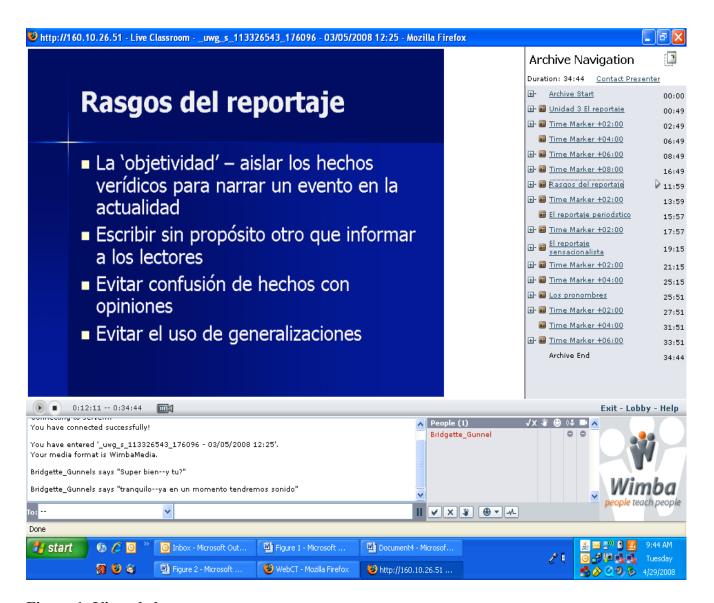
Figure 1: Virtual classroom

The instructor has the advantage of uploading material for viewing/discussion and has several tools to facilitate student responses: electronic survey (yes/no), immediate pie graph construction of multiple-choice response (for use in the review process), as well as the selective ability to privately chat with any member in the virtual audience. Using specific activities, this format simulates a communicative classroom, where the dissemination of material begins with the instructor but production is student-centered. The study by Beauvois (1997) of the relationship between written and oral communication in an online setting of a group of fourth-semester French students confirmed that the synchronous 'chat' sessions were "highly conversational, lighthearted" (p. 103) and that

> exchanges take place among students as well as with the instructor. The fact that there is no turn taking allows students to communicate at will and gives the instructor a wide spectrum of ideas to explore with them. (Beauvois, 1997, p. 103)

Communication, "at the heart of second language study" (ACTFL, 1996/2006), takes place in this electronic setting freely. In Beauvois' pilot study, this communication was written, but in the case of the WebCT/Blackboard™ Wimba classroom, the oral production could be measured as well, since students can respond through the microphone on their headsets.

Additionally, in the WebCT/Blackboard™ Wimba virtual classroom, the students can all hear one another and the instructor. The instructor can call on any student logged in and hear a response as well as answer any question posed from a student. This effectively allows for immediate feedback from instructors to students. To allow for the lack of visual that might result in many students trying to answer at once and creating cacophony in the virtual instructor's headphones, a hand-raise system is electronically in place whereby the student clicks on the hand icon to signal that he/she is ready to respond. Communication in L2 occurs and, at times, with more participation from students who would otherwise not speak, as many have stated previously (Beauvois, 1997, 1999; Kern, 1995; Payne, 2004; Warschauer, 1997).

In response to the challenge of group work, the virtual classroom offers multiple breakout rooms. The students can click on the assigned room (the list often appears on one side of the virtual classroom entry page) and another window automatically opens for those who have chosen to enter the room. The students can either text chat or use the headset to continue in group or pair work. Of course the instructor has privileges to enter all rooms for monitoring. Although not considered face-to-face work with fellow students, the breakout rooms offer one of the best manners in the virtual classroom to foster community among students online in the target language.

Taking *Realia* to a New Level in the Virtual Classroom

By taking advantage of both asynchronous and synchronous tools, working with a WebCT/Blackboard™ Wimba classroom can imitate to a great degree most aspects of a communicative foreign language classroom, and even introduce elements that further enhance the cultural component of a class, like the constant inclusion of authentic media in the form of film clips, immediate SCOLA™ streaming, music files and/or interviews from international news agencies. Rogers and Wolff (2000) concur in this argument by stressing that

> one of the fundamental paradox[es] of classroom language instruction has long been the artificiality of the foreign language interactions between instructors and students, or among students themselves. […] In fact, language learners often leave meaningful contact with the target language behind them as they exit the classroom. (p. 44)

By incorporating constant auditory *realia* in the online classroom, the student will feasibly not only begin a linguistic journey, but also one that contributes to his/her awareness of cultural diversity. Instructors can go beyond the readings provided in textbooks and CDs to include live clips. Imagine a culture component on traditional flamenco music and dance in a Spanish class that, instead of beginning and ending with the pages of a text, starts with audio streaming of music and performances and ends with interviews with dancers. The possibilities for dynamic interaction between language learners and cultural artifacts of the target language, and even native speakers, are endless.

For example, in my online class on 20th century Hispanic American novels, we read a narrative that depicts the environmental degradation in Mexico City, Mexico. To add to our discussion of how the current environmental state of Mexico City has affected its inhabitants, I invited one of my acquaintances who currently lives in Mexico City to visit our virtual session

and talk to the students. The class was an upper-level course, but one of the first required for our students. Before the arrival of our virtual guest, I cycled through a PowerPoint presentation prepared for display in the whiteboard that included images of historic Mexico City through the ages. The use of these photographs elicited students' written and oral responses that practiced preterit/imperfect as well as vocabulary related to the environment. Our guest then arrived and, as we cycled through the images again, the students asked various questions, ranging from concrete questions like "Do you live near this square?" to more complex queries about the environmental status of my colleague's home and the congruence between the guest's experiences and those of the protagonists in the novel under study. This mini-lesson describes how I used an online forum to accomplish what most certainly could be done in a traditional classroom, that is, discussing the relationships between a fictional space and a real one, but incorporated a native speaker who could speak to the actuality of our lesson while providing students the opportunity to authentically use their Spanish skills.

Such dialogue answers one of the greatest challenges to foreign language online course offerings, the generally accepted conclusion that language acquisition requires a *live body*, so to speak; that is, face-to-face instruction is considered crucial for real learning to take place (Rogers & Wolff, 2000). Payne (2004) writes that "[f]indings from recent research suggest that the cognitive processes required for spontaneous foreign language production in a text-based chat room develop the same cognitive mechanisms underlying L2 speech" and confirms that "[f]oreign language chat has also even shown to be a useful medium for negotiating meaning with native and non-native speakers" (p. 156). A definite advantage to online delivery is the ease with which an instructor can create moments for encounters with native speakers from all over the globe, as demonstrated previously with my personal example. Students like mine who participate in a WebCT/Blackboard™ virtual classroom have possibilities for engaging in conversations on multiple levels: from merely listening and understanding, to chatting back (thus improving written competence) to actually speaking (taking advantage of the latest in virtual classroom setups, as described below).

These benefits can be tangibly recorded in a foreign language chat room (see Beauvois, 1997) where students interact by writing and are potentially exponential in the newest CMS platforms that offer synchronous voice chat in which all students can hear an instructor as well as other students (leaving only the physical presence of students and instructors out). The optimal plan is to approach the virtual foreign language classroom by combining all the elements available: asynchronous discussion boards and voice boards for assessment; pre-class activities and community building; the online break-out chat rooms for group work; and the synchronous virtual classroom for teacher-led instruction and dynamic discussion. The culmination of the virtual foreign language classroom is the formation of community between students which fosters spontaneous communication in the target language, a language learning goal that generates the type of cultural awareness that the MLA report requests that foreign language educators strive towards.

Generating Community with the Discussion Board and Virtual Classroom

As mentioned previously, the discussion board is a crucial tool to the online classroom. Earlier the authors of "El español…¡A distancia!" (Rogers & Wolff, 1999) were concerned with the lack of community in the online environment. In the courses that I have offered online, the discussion board was vital to the creation of community. By requiring participation by every

student in the discussion board, students simultaneously keep up with their fellow classmates' opinions on the matters covered, build relationships with other learners and forge similar connections that a face-to-face environment affords, but sometimes inhibits. In Figure 2, we can see how a threaded discussion board can result in communication between students that in turn generates community online by encouraging cross-posting and written 'discussion' of topics.
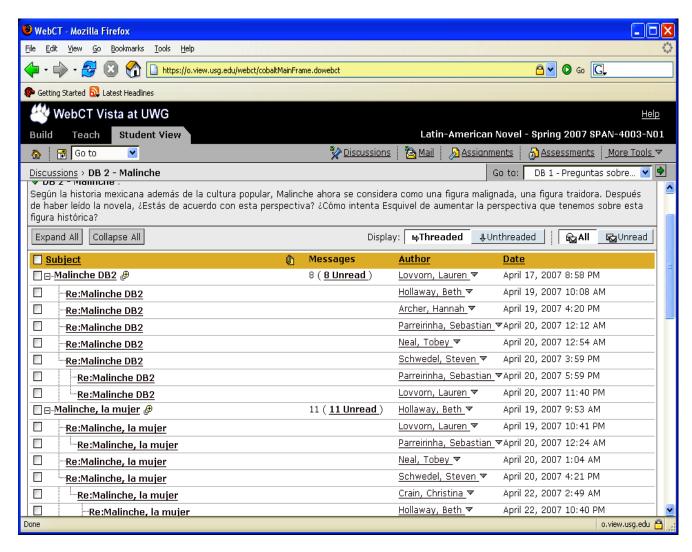

Figure 2: Threaded discussion board

In a foreign language virtual classroom, the discussion board is a pivotal element for students to practice and present written production for the sake of communicating with fellow students. One of the benefits of using the discussion board in the online foreign language classroom is that it can enable the less extroverted student ample opportunities to participate at one's own pace (Beauvois 1997, 1999; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 2001). Students are able to plan ahead, make multiple drafts of responses and proofread their own work for corrections. This type of response is not always possible in the traditional classroom. To make the absolute most of this approach, a tandem use of asynchronous production with synchronous is most beneficial.

Students should use the discussion board in preparation for the language production expected in the virtual classroom. Payne (2004) offers that

> [t]he asynchronous discussion is conducted outside of class time and serves as preparation for synchronous interaction. The rationale behind this sequence is to provide students with ample time to select the most appropriate lexical items and syntactical structures needed to express themselves accurately. (p. 158)

Additionally, Payne comments on the production offered in the asynchronous environment as exhibiting "more confidence" (p. 159) and the lack of physical presence "seems to be less intimidating for students and make[s] them less apt to revert to off-task discussion in L1" (p. 159). Additionally, to cite Beauvois' (1997) study again, the fourth semester French students exhibited "positive elements" such as "freedom of expression, full class participation, openness and honesty of messages" (pp. 106-107). The use of asynchronous and synchronous tools repeatedly helped not only to address grammatical points, but also encouraged spontaneous language production that ultimately improved the overall oral proficiency of the students in L2 (Beauvois, 1997). To this end Kern (1997) ascertains that

> [t]he point of using synchronous conferencing is not at all to replace talk but to supplement it with discussion that is governed by a different set of conventions and constraints in order to open up new possibilities for an alternative, or even oppositional, discussion. What synchronous conferencing offers is an entirely different medium of interaction that offers participants the possibility to voice their thoughts at will without interrupting other participants' thoughts or expression. (p. 59)

Conclusions

Instructional Technology and the Future of Foreign Language Curriculum Development

There is no denying the role of instructional technology in postsecondary curricula nationwide (Adolph & LeBlanc, 1997; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2001). Generally speaking, students are more apt than ever to take advantage of online course offerings for a variety of reasons, including ease of scheduling, alleviating graduation pressures in the case of fulfilling degree requirements, and economic factors related to the fact that most online offerings are billed at different rates than traditional courses (Warschauer, 2002). Additionally, the general momentum of postsecondary education includes the administration of multiple facets of the student experience online (registration, fee administration, grade reporting, advisement, etc.), and offering courses online seems a natural progression. The importance of recognizing rather than rejecting this trend is paramount.

In the specific arena of foreign language courses, instructors as well as administrators should take full advantage of this momentum to adapt to the changing face of postsecondary instruction. Hybrid class models, where an instructor spends a certain percentage giving class face-to-face, but then supplements with online sessions, are an excellent first step towards the integration of technology and the foreign language classroom, and the fully-developed online classroom is, as I hope to have shown, a definite possibility for developing multiple proficiencies in L2. Embracing these elements of change instead of ignoring them will assure that the methodology, as well as the pedagogy, of foreign language learning will continue to address the actual needs of the ever-expanding (and changing) student body. Perhaps then, foreign language programs across the United States can begin to effect the 'change' that the MLA committee stresses:

Unless this kind and degree of change happens over the next ten years, college and university departments of foreign languages will not be in a position to provide leadership in advanced language education. Lack of change will most likely carry serious consequences for both higher education and language learning. Language learning might migrate to training facilities, where instrumental learning will eclipse the deep intellectual and cultural learning that takes place on college campuses. (Collaborance and Governance: Transforming the Two-Tiered System section, para. 4)

The irony in the MLA report is precisely that the comments offered respond to what they denominate a 'changed' world, instead of a *changing* one; the importance of developing distance learning pedagogies that speak to the dynamic nature of virtual classrooms is vital in a world in which the virtual campus is a tangent of the physical one.

The MLA Has Yet to Recognize Its Role in Curriculum Development

As an influential body in postsecondary educational trends and their dissemination, the Modern Language Association has a distinct opportunity to investigate the tendencies found in distance learning models and their results. As the 2007 report on foreign language curricula reported, globalization is a positive force to be acknowledged: "In the current geopolitical moment, these statements are no longer clichés. The MLA is prepared lead the way in the reorganization of language and cultural education around these objectives" (Background section, para. 3). Yet this body of educators has yet to acknowledge the power and promise of the virtual learning environment. Globalization is possible largely in part to the overwhelming technological advances seen in nearly every camp that touches our lives: economics, education, commercialism and trade (Warschauer, 2002). To ignore technology's role in the changing face of college and universities nationwide is a dangerous path for a discipline that is a harbinger of cross-cultural awareness, learning, and, finally, understanding.

Education and Instruction are Vital to Harness the IT Revolution

Notwithstanding all comments, it is paramount to foreign language departments to take responsibility for the course content and methodology used in all foreign language offerings. Instructors at all levels, from adjunct to tenured faculty, should educate themselves in their respective universities' CMS platforms and its inner-workings in order to maintain high-quality content and streamline the administration of these courses. Instead of taking the stance that ignores the online environment as inferior and sub-standard, it is more beneficial for foreign language departments to harness the momentum offered by the online world and use it to their advantage, thus making certain that any student who ventures to register and take a foreign language distance course will end up with the same curriculum and content exposure as any other student who takes the equivalent course in the traditional manner, with the same or even better results. In the midst of our changing world, foreign language educators should lead the way to help form new pedagogies that reflect the present, as well as form the future, of distance learning in L2.

Bridgette W. Gunnels is Assistant Professor of Spanish at the University of West Georgia in Carrollton, Georgia. Her research interests include interdisciplinary approaches to Modern Latin American literature, especially narrative, as well as distance learning technology and its ramifications in foreign languages.

References

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). (2006). *Standards for foreign language learning: Preparing for the 21st century*. Retrieved October 30, 2007, from http://actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3324 (Original work published 1996)

Adolph, W. & LeBlanc, L. (1997). A revolution from above: The race for technology in foreign languages. In J.A. Muyskens (Ed.), *New ways of learning and teaching: Focus on technology and foreign language education* (pp. 19-35). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Beauvois, M. (1997). Write to speak: The effects of electronic communication on the oral achievement of fourth semester French students. In J.A. Muyskens (Ed.), *New ways of learning and teaching: Focus on technology and foreign language education* (pp. 93-108). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Kern, R. (1997). Technology, social interaction, and FL literacy. In J.A. Muyskens (Ed.), *New ways of learning and teaching: Focus on technology and foreign language education* (pp. 57-92). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Lomicka, L. & Cooke-Plagwitz, J. (Eds.). (2004). *The Heinle professional series in language instruction. Volume 1: Teaching with technology*. Boston: Heinle & Thomson.

Modern Language Association. (2007). *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World*. Retrieved October 20, 2007, from http://www.mla.org/flreport

Muyskens, J.A. (Ed.) (1997). *New ways of learning and teaching: Focus on technology and foreign language education*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Palloff, R. & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Palloff, R. & Pratt, K. (2001). *Lessons from the cyberspace classroom: The realities of online teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Payne, J. S. (2004). Making the most of synchronous and asynchronous discussion in foreign language instruction. *Heinle Professional Series*, 155-161.

Prensky, M. (2005/2006). Listen to the natives. *Educational Leadership 63* (4), 8-13.

Rogers, D. M. & Wolff, A.B. (2000). El Español…¡A Distancia!: Developing a technology-based distance education course for intermediate Spanish. *Journal of General Education 49* (1), 44-52.

Sanders, R.F. (2005). Redesigning introductory Spanish: Increased enrollment, online management, cost reduction, and effects on student learning. *Foreign Language Annals 38* (4), 523-532.

Warschauer, M. (1996). Computer-assisted language learning: An introduction. In S. Fotos (Ed.), *Multimedia language teaching* (pp. 3-20). Tokyo: Logos.

Warschauer, M. (1997). Computer mediated collaborative learning: theory and practice. *Modern Language Journal 81 (4), 470-81*.

Warschauer, M. (1999). *Electronic literacies: Language, culture and power in online education*. Manwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum & Associates.

Warschauer, M. (2001).*Technology and social inclusion: Rethinking the digital divide*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Warschauer, M. (2002). A developmental perspective on technology in language education. *TESOL Quarterly 36* (3), 453-475.