

Foreign Language Faculty in the Age of Web 2.0

Technological skills and understanding how to employ Web 2.0 tools to successfully support pedagogy are vital for foreign language faculty today

By **Edwige Simon**

Along with extensive teaching experience and promises of excellent scholarship, foreign language job candidates are asked by an increasing number of higher education institutions to have proficiency in instructional technologies. A keyword search for the word “tech%” and “computer” in the Modern Language Association (MLA) job list¹ returns over 43 relevant ads out of 236 job postings (as of November 20, 2007): “familiarity with teaching-related technologies” (tenure track in Spanish, Missouri); “experience with technology in the classroom” (tenure track in French, Michigan); “ability to use technology effectively in teaching and learning” (tenure track in Japanese, South Carolina). The wording varies slightly from one ad to the next, but the message is the same: job candidates are well advised to have an answer ready when asked how they use technology in the classroom.

This isn't a fad. Foreign language instruction has always had a close relationship with technology. In the early days of foreign language pedagogy, the first computers turned out to be excellent for language drills. Today, foreign language acquisition is seen as a fundamentally communicative process catalyzed by students' exposure to authentic language, material, and audiences. For those students who cannot travel to the target country to immerse themselves in the culture and the language, the Internet is a valuable alternative that not only delivers authentic content but also communication capabilities. Emerging applications such as video conferencing

software or social networking platforms (such as Blogger or Ning) provide affordable ways to bring the target culture to the classroom.

Integrating technology into teaching requires the combination of adequate technical skills and sound pedagogical foundations. The history of educational technology in higher education provides ample support for the claim that technology should never outstrip pedagogy. The 2004 Duke experience with the iPod is a good reminder of the necessity to establish clear instructional strategies that incorporate the chosen technology and therefore ensure that it delivers the desired learning outcomes.² Bad experiences feed the argument of technophobic educators who believe that computers and other electronic gadgets do not belong in the classroom, and it leads skeptics to turn their backs on educational technology. This is unfortunate because many Web 2.0 applications are powerful socialization and communication tools. As such, they have an incredible educational potential for foreign language instruction.

Sadly, this potential often fails to be realized because of the widespread belief that these tools are somehow inherently educational. The iPod *might* have an instructional potential, but it is the educators who arrange and structure instructional events around it to make learning happen, not the instrument itself. To realize the instructional potential of technology requires a set of skills that can only be acquired through adequate instruction and practice. Just as speaking a foreign language is not a qualification to teach it,

knowing how to use a technology does not mean that one knows intuitively how to use it as a teaching tool.

Adequate training is needed to help spread good practices and to better prepare graduate students for the needs of the current job market and of the job itself. In addition to enhancing teaching and learning, technology literacy will allow future faculty to better connect with a generation of undergraduate students that depends largely on technology to function on a daily basis. As a matter of fact, a recent MLA report on the status of foreign language instruction in higher education³ underscored that most incoming foreign language faculty would be teaching at the undergraduate level. The report calls for the integration of technology training in the graduate curriculum, asking departments to “take the necessary steps to teach graduate students to use technology in language instruction and learning.” The report, which called for drastic transformations of foreign language academic programs nationwide, also emphasized the importance of providing graduate students with a good pedagogical basis.

Unfortunately, graduate students interested in becoming acquainted with relevant instructional technologies have a limited number of options. Few graduate programs include such training as a part of the curriculum. As a matter of fact, pedagogy itself often represents a negligible fraction of graduate program requirements. The University of Minnesota offers excellent training through its summer institutes,⁴ but access is an issue.

Most IT departments offer training sessions on how to use the university course management system, build a web page, or create a PowerPoint presentation, but technical training is not enough. Because the field of language technology is at the crossroads of technology, instructional design, and languages, it calls for the close collaboration of experts in each area. Today, language centers are the only campus units where such a wide range of expertise can easily be found.

The role of language technologists goes beyond teaching what a blog is and how to set up a browser to display Japanese characters. It includes sorting through novel technologies, evaluating their instructional potential, researching current educational uses, and sharing findings with educators. The most promising applications available today were not designed for instructional use and do not come with an instruction manual. To use them in the classroom requires the ability to redirect their intended purpose and, more importantly, to think through possible consequences of doing so.

For those graduate students and faculty interested in developing instructional material, university language centers can provide the scaffolding necessary to develop sophisticated, professional-quality projects. Such cross-departmental work experiences will better prepare future faculty to communicate effectively with IT professionals once on the job. Language technologists can also help graduate students locate high-quality instructional materials and clarify how copyright laws, fair use, and the TEACH Act⁵ apply to the use and distribution of digital media.

By working in close collaboration with foreign language departments, IT professionals, and librarians, language centers can contribute to the professional development of future faculty and better prepare them to face the challenges of foreign language instruction in the age of Web 2.0. *e*

Endnotes

1. From the Modern Language Association's job information list, http://www.mla.org/login&xurl=jil_search_fl.
2. Brock Read, "Duke U. Assesses iPod Experiment and Finds It Worked—in Some Courses," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 1, 2005, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v51/i43/43a02801.htm>.
3. MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World," May 2007, <http://www.mla.org/freport>.
4. Summer programs are offered through the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota. CARLA is one of the U.S. Department of Education's Title VI National Language Resource Centers. See <http://www.carla.umn.edu/>.
5. Resources for the Technology, Education, and Copyright Harmonization (TEACH) Act are available on the EDUCAUSE site at http://connect.educause.edu/term_view/TEACH+Act.

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