One on One with Everyone:
An Exemplary Dissolution of Distance in Distance Education

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Abstract: Learning communities develop one by one. Techniques are available that have proven effective in attracting and retaining students of all ages in all fields of interest to learn, study, chat, and do research together across international boundaries. An exemplary group of Coastline Community College online French language and culture students have remained together separately for more than 12 years; their persistence results from one-on-one work with materials designed for each of them individually for shared success. Readily available synchronous and asynchronous communication tools and research aids have proven to be the keys to student success.

Introduction: Individualization in "Distance Learning"

Serge Agostinelli, of the Université d'Aix-Marseille, cites "an affective and personalized relationship with knowledge" as being the crucial key to individualized learning at a distance. Because of the sheer surfeit of data rapidly accessible online, Agostinelli suggests, educators must teach research, if not culling, skills along with subject matter. Besides taking the role of a sort of "guide on the side", in the pattern of "Learning Paradigm" proponents (cf. Barr and Tagg, 1995), Agostinelli calls for teachers to help learners develop filtering skills, subject matter discernment. Echoing this call to action, MaMaMedia director Idit Harel (2003) has noted that material with a "personal" touch for each individual student will be more interesting; active, engaged learners will grow into student teachers, student teachers will form communities, and mini-curricula, products, and experiences will then be transmitted to others. This constructionist theory holds that no matter the age, sex, or cultural background of the learner, he will learn best if he is actively involved in his own learning process. The computer is not a place to house or store materials from texts or talking-head speeches; rather, it is a device to assist in the creation of complex projects formulated through complex, cross-disciplinary ideation that we would not be able to produce otherwise (cf. as examples "physics of sports" at http://www.mamamedia.com and more general subject-matter exchanges at http://www.eun.org/portal/index.htm).

Exemplification: Coastline Learners Discover New Worlds Online

During a period of thirteen years, learners of French language and culture online at Coastline Community College, in Fountain Valley, California, have been using computers to engage themselves actively, personalizing their progress to attain course

objectives and achieve goals in ways unprecedented before the arrival of Internet-based educational programs. Indeed, a dozen of the two thousand or so individuals who have enrolled with Coastline for online French courses since the early 1990's have remained enthusiastically involved from the beginning. The dynamic nature of their Internet-enhanced coursework seems to have incited them to have taken a proactive role in defining their interests and desires, thus helping them to comprehend themselves and accomplish what they really want. Moreover, these adult learners of French as a Second Language offer evidence that an Agostinelli-style personal affect, along with aspects of both internal and external motivation, can combine with individualized, effective learning strategies and self-instigated experiential learning to yield extraordinary achievements. Coastline students have demonstrated that the Internet can be exploited to help attain unprecedented linguistic and cultural competence as well as a broadening and deepening of worldview; the 'Net need not be the domain only of program developers in math and science, information processing and engineering. In fact, Coastline's online students of French lend support to the notion that it is curricular development in language and culture that might in fact best inform that of math and science, rather than vice versa (Kaye, 1988).

"French Topics Online" was the first completely-online course to be offered in southern California's Coast Community College District. In that era, late 1992--early 1993, "Topics" assignments and Web surfing experiences were based loosely upon the Annenberg/CPB (Corporation for Public Broadcasting) Project's "French in Action Online", which Coastline's French language instructor had co-conceived, -developed, and –taught in the previous year and whose materials had been tested for what electronic robustness existed at the time. Web surfing was cumbersome and many links unstable in the early 1990's, especially outside academe. Google did not exist; Archie, Veronica, and Gopher were the file transfer protocols of the day. The Annenberg/CPB Project incorporated part of the *French in Action* videolesson material into its initial course; "Topics" aimed to use *FiA* as a springboard. Coastline's online course goal was then and has remained to broaden and deepen students' French linguistic and cultural awareness and competence, meeting each student at his skills levels upon arrival and taking him forward by depending upon authentic, francophone-produced source/course materials on a wide array of subjects that would be individualizable to each learner's preferred modes of learning/understanding and provocative enough to induce further surfing into the beyond.

Individualization for Retention: Persistence at a Distance

During their thirteen years of continuous involvement with online study of French, the twelve most active Coastliners, all of them adults and all but one with at least one college degree, have participated year-round and non-stop in a sequence of Internet-delivered courses designed according to logic-and-analysis-based teaching and learning standards of francophone countries. Most of their work has, therefore, required reading, independent study, and research, reported upon in e-mail and in essays in French. As is common in European classrooms, no specific "due dates" have ever been given in Coastline's online French courses beyond the end date of each term; neither have any

"right answers" ever been sought, except in interactive grammar quizzes; effective argumentation in French and the use of proper documentation have been key. The idea has been that the achievement of linguistic/cultural fluency will be expedited if coursework is presented through an independent, "social learning style" characteristic of francophone countries and if materials are immersed in a francophone "electronic paralanguage" with no Anglophone-typical distractions. Rather than attempting to force learners of French as a Second Language to change their preferred learning patterns so as to "become more French", the effort has been to present everything in a francophone-cultural way so that responses, interaction, and coursework in general could take place more expeditiously if executed *à la française*.

One-by-one progress in French language and culture has arisen in an atmosphere of exploration, experimentation, and collaboration. Web activities from around the francophone world have been integrated into Coastline's coursework; most of the course assignment pages look more like Word documents than they do like Web experiences until each of the myriad embedded links is clicked. Students are asked to surf at their will and then report upon, evaluate, and explore with the sites of their choosing. No textbooks exist; research pages include links to online encyclopedias and dictionaries, thesauri, and libraries (http://dl.coastline.edu/classes/internet/french186/websites.htm) as well as news resources on diverse subjects from around the world (http://dl.ccc.cccd.edu/classes/internet/french186/news.htm). Hot links, some of them suggested by students, are added each week in a "Flashes Nouveaux" area; old links are archived as well (http://dl.ccc.cccd.edu/classes/internet/french198/weeklywebsites/). The course calls for and promotes autonomy; the student who needs a fixed schedule and a hard-copy text for reference will find the freedom to be frustrating, if not excessive.

The aforementioned Agostinelli (2005) points out six features defining distance learning experiences that use individualization effectively. First, like Learning Paradigm-directed courses, they separate teacher from student horizontally, rather than vertically; instead of being a superior font of knowledge who permits bits of information to trickle down in a programmed manner into the student's head, the teacher is a facilitator, an escort into the electronic. Second, the institution housing the Website and electronic data banks for the student is merely an administrative holding zone, rather than a place where doors open at 8 am and students gather in rectangular classrooms to receive information; indeed, the student's computer is more useful to him in a good online course than is the school building where his records are stored. Third, an effective Internet course will take advantage of multiple media; students studying French online at Coastline have the option to click on sound and video files, Flash media and films, or they may alternatively just read course content questions and click on a few images or links. Fourth, quick access to instructional assistance must be available; tutors may be necessary to help with math or science queries, and an electronic help desk should be accessible; Coastline's distance learning courses use a listserv and a cadre of tutors who can check an electronic mail bin to see which student questions demand what kind of action. Fifth, intra-class communication must be fostered, so that, as Agostinelli states, "exchanges become natural between students"; Coastline's online French students have found that their electronic bulletin board reveals who shares what interests, and collaborative projects

have resulted. Finally, the sixth element defining distance learning courses that would promote productive individual thinking and progress is that of plasticity. Since the Internet is constantly changing, with Websites altering their form, and information in perpetual flux, students' learning materials must be able to evolve with them; although Coastline's Web designers like course materials to be ready for posting weeks before a new semester begins, some flexibility must be incorporated into the administrative process so that the instructor can add, subtract, or modify materials. Indeed, the continuously changing rich breadth of information available on the Internet may increase student motivation by enabling teachers to structure learning experiences so that students can pursue topics of particular interest to them, something that Coastline's online French language learners have found easy through E-mail questioning to each other and their instructor, through live discussion during electronic chat sessions, and through telephony.

At Coastline, the aforementioned twelve persistent students of French online have remained engaged in electronic activities for a handful of principal reasons. For one, they are computer-savvy; more than half of them have been working with computers for more than two decades, and a third of them are engineers, with the rest defining themselves as "geeks." Second, they are mostly adults who have chosen to take the course, rather than young people who have been forced by circumstances or "breadth requirements" into an extra one-unit class in a foreign language. They read French newspapers, even if only cursorily, and they rent videos in French and go to French films. Because the course is an elective, it has attracted genuine Francophiles who do not mind homework in French, and because the one unit of earned credit is obtained only after a large quantity of work is performed, those who sign up are motivated to learn. Most of them have studied French for at least two years before enrolling, and nearly all of them have traveled numerous times to francophone countries. These learners know from the beginning that the course will require a lot of time; since most students of foreign language at Coastline are retired or self-employed, they are able to meet the challenge.

Coastline's Distance Learning Department requires that each online learner fill out an interactive "Letter of Agreement" indicating that coursework has been examined and requirements understood. In addition, the online learners of French are asked to send E-mail or post bulletin board messages within the first week of class defining their reasons for taking the course. "Ageless learner" learning styles assessments have been carried out on occasion (cf. http://agelesslearner.com/assess/learningstyle.html), but since the French attitude is that all human reasoning takes place within an analytical network (cf. Knowledge Manager Concept Maps: http://www.conceptmaps.it/KM-ExperienceRome2004-fr.htm, and Agostinelli (2005)), and since Coastline's French students are supposed to be learning French-style reasoning as well as language and culture, it is direct questioning between instructor and student that has led to the best customization. This requires a lot of time at the beginning of each semester, but it results in high retention rates and student satisfaction.

Internationalization: Taking Advantage of Free Resources

Internet technology facilitates the process whereby students can make meaningful connections with each other and their instructor regardless of physical proximity, and the multimedia capabilities of Internet technology, such as sound, video, and hypertext, can bring subject matter alive in many ways for many individual students. Happily enough for Coastline's online learners of French, more than 50 francophone governments have joined the *Organisation internationale de la francophonie* (OIF) to promote international communication and cooperation in the interest of dissolving the digital divide; OIF papers and projects have been incorporated into Coastline coursework. Because Coastline's online French language and culture courses have been advertised worldwide through France Télécom, USAN Burundi, and Harissa Tunisia, among others, students have been offered the services of freely accessible Web hosting services and E-mail from around the world (cf. http://www.malihosting.com, http://www.francophonie.org/index.cfm, http://www.hebergement-gratuit.com , http://www.chez.tiscali.com for hosting and http://www.voila.fr, http://www.genaisse.zzn.com for E-mail), Open Source software and tools, along with data bases and resources. The Canadian Office de la Langue Française selected Coastline to beta-test course development tools (http://www.classebranchee.com), and Northern Africa's Dromadaire used the College as a test for international connectivity.

And these European, African, Polynesian, and other native-speaker-produced features of Coastline's online-delivered French as a Second Language course materials have been tailored to each learner's wishes. Women's rights, winter sports, travel, engineering, physics, cooking, cinema, cycling, and cats are some of the subjects of interest, and francophone Websites exist that are devoted to each. Communication over E-mail, on the course bulletin board, or through real-time telephony provides students with unprecedented opportunities to find people and electronic connections with interests, questions, and experiences with which they can identify.

Conclusions: A Conceptualization of an Uncommon Kind

It has become clear during the thirteen years that Coastline has offered French language and culture courses online that a new style of second language development is occurring in cyberspace that is unheard-of in the traditional classroom. That is, besides their extraordinary persistence with their coursework, these adult learners are producing in E-mail, in their assignments, and most obviously in their electronic live chat sessions a dialect of their secondary language that is neither entirely-English influenced nor entirely French-colored. Most remarkably, the hermaphroditic dialect of the online learners is more "native-like" than is the ordinary "interlanguage" exhibited by traditional second-language learners.

Just as students of math or biology, physics, or art history pass through predictable phases of understanding during their learning processes, so do all second-language (L2) learners have their own language systems, which linguists call "interlanguage" and French language students call "franglais". These predictable variants are patterns of parlance that

are neither genuinely L1 (students' mother language) nor correct L2 (the new, foreign language). Interestingly, the online Coastliners appear to produce proper L2 forms more readily than might be expected. Moreover, their interlanguage period seems to have been truncated online. Unlike traditional classroom students' efforts, in which a careful style is marked by native-language-influenced errors and little pragmatic awareness, the electronically transmitted assignments and queries submitted by "French Topics" onliners show far less influence of L1, their native tongue. In fact, a significant number of the onliners have come to produce more performance-level mistakes in syntax and semantics than competence-level errors; they are producing "goofs" of the kind a speaker with native- or near-native competence might produce. Thus, they write words that sound like one another but may not be the right words, and yet they place those words in a native-French-like order. In addition, with the freedom to surf a vast array of sites in whatever order they wish, for however long or short a time they wish, textual competence is more complete in onliners' writing than it generally is among classroom students; perhaps because they are awash in genuine francophone texts, onliners seem to know better than their classroom counterparts do how to use intersentential links, such as the French translations of "for example", "however", "while", and the like. In sum, again perhaps because they are encouraged to write whatever they wish whenever they wish, the onliners tend to produce more writing altogether and to offer more questions and comments about their writing and reading than do students in class. As a result, though classroom-based learners may achieve high levels of "grammatical competence", knowledge of lexical items and rules of phonology and syntax, onliners, perhaps because of exposure to authentic French data provided by authentic francophones on a daily basis, are able to attain some degree of "discourse competence" as well, an ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse in varying contexts and form them into a meaningful whole. Indeed, it is as if the francophone online environment presents particular cultural norms and expectations that have rendered learning more efficient.

As the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (2000) has pointed out, learning changes the functional organization of the brain, permitting greater and more efficient use of the cerebrum. And it is quite possible that Internet-transmitted data may be exploiting a medium that could be stimulating more of the brain than ordinary classroom material can do. The aforementioned types of error production and styles of linguistic expression generated online may have helped Coastline's adult French language students to overcome the cerebral "field independence" that frequently impedes adult progress in L2 acquisition, especially among Americans. That is, while children tend to treat new data in context, absorbing input in its surroundings in a "field dependent" manner, people beyond the age of puberty, and Americans in particular (Hofstede, 2003), have learned to select data from a set, to develop rules and to fine-tune those rules from experience. Adults' brains are generally more "compartmentalized" than are children's; adult gray matter centralizes certain functions in certain cerebral sectors. But the colors and movements and dynamism of electronic data force learners of any subject matter to attend to multi-modal context, to be aware of the "field" in which their course information lies.

 It is also very possible that francophone Internet data may be more stimulating to the adult learner than anglophone data are, simply because of the way the French sector of the Internet is designed. Besides the fact that the average age of the Internet businessman in France is at least a generation above that of the American one (Boucq, 2000), and besides the fact that the French have taken their entry into cyberspace as a serious educational endeavor, rather than as a simply commercial one as it has become during the past decades in the US, organizations such as the United Nations *Institut de recherche pour le développement social,* the French *Centre national de l'enseignement à distance* (CNED) and the pan-African *Réseau africain de formation à distance* (RESAFAD) are uniting to bring sophisticated adult engineering skills from countries where technology has become a part of daily living to young school children everywhere. Serendipitously for second-language learners of French, child-geared Websites are easy to understand and navigate; in addition, they provide a wealth of information about geology, history, the arts, sciences, and math that adults who already know these fields can enjoy in a new tongue. Coastline's French students are seeing in real time how, as the African *Observatoire sur les Systèmes d'Information, des Réseaux, et les Inforoutes au Sénégal* (http://www.osiris.sn/) has asserted and reasserted, the language of the Internet worldwide need not be English.

Understanding of international points of view, perspectives on history, sociology, the sciences, and the arts, can be profoundly broadened through understanding of more than one mode of expression; awareness of what it means to have an artist's eye or a mathematician's sense of exactitude, an engineer's sense of organization or a historian's long view can be enhanced in an international arena in which each of us learns about another one by one.

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