

## Très chic! French Language and Culture with un clic

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**Abstract:** “Linguistic relativism” leads people of different cultures to define, explain, and even see reality in images framed by their diverse languages. The most readily available and commonly used online educational materials are often scaffolded in Americanocentric course management and learning management systems, however; these render subject matter design and delivery, as well as assignment formulation, scheduling, and grading, difficult for educators hoping to imbue their materials with the atypical, alternative view of reality. Resolutions to these problems must be conceived if education is to proceed smoothly and effectively in a culturally diverse world.

### Introduction

“Linguistic relativism” depends upon the notion that, for instance, “We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages” (Whorf, 1956); that is, observers of reality who speak different languages will define and describe that reality in divergent ways. Moreover, reality itself is expressed, viewed, and valued in a manner convergent with linguistic expression. In the United States, educational materials delivered online are almost always embedded in Americanocentric interface, using English-language buttons, top-down models, and shapes and colors that harmonize with an American point of view (Marcus and Gould, 2000). The educator who would teach a “foreign”, non-English, language or culture online in the United States must, therefore, work to infuse his small sector of cyberspace with systems that encourage learners from the outset to think, to reason, to write, to do their assignments and research in new ways. At Coastline Community College, in Fountain Valley, California, online learners of French language and culture are encouraged from the beginning of each course term to see and to reason through a French perspective integrated into their American coursework, employing the College’s course management/learning management system (CMS/LMS) as a portal into things not so much foreign as alternative. Students start right away to see how to conceive things not just hierarchically, but vermicularly, *à la française*.

### A Cultural Conundrum: A Bicephalous Problem with a Bi-Cultural Solution

Online learning at Coastline Community College, like Web-based education at most institutions, is embedded in systems. This is reality online in America. And Americanocentric course management and learning management systems present problems to the educator who would imbue his materials with a non-American, linguistically/culturally fitting interface, an essentially alternative reality. In addition, United States institutional requirements make course design, assignment formulation, scheduling, and grading difficult for the instructor who would value unconventional viewpoints of these aspects of learning as part of the target language/culture

learning process. Thus, for example, it remains difficult in the United States to teach French language and culture through a francophone perspective incorporating the French worldview as it appears in francophone institutional interfaces. Even so, francophone thinking is integrated online into Coastline College's self-designed *Seaport* CMS/LMS as much as possible in French language and culture courses, so that learners discover with only a few mouse clicks that their target language defines in detail a culture dependent on history, interested in the written word, argumentation, the prolix. Learners are encouraged from the outset to think, to reason, to write, to do their assignments and research in an unsymmetrical manner, without attention to "due dates", *à la française*.

It should be noted that two principal, opposing factors affect full, satisfactory resolution of the problem of how best to teach a non-American mode of thinking and reasoning online in a country that depends upon American systems. That is, institutional control, identity, and contextualization must be addressed, while unique-to-the subject matter identity and contextualization must also be considered. This somewhat bicephalous question turns, therefore, on whether it is recognizable institutional markers that are most important, or whether it is, alternatively, cultural or linguistic features of a language/culture learning site that are most important.

### **Encouraging a force de frappe: Integrating Systems for Cross-Cultural Solutions**

Answering the aforementioned question requires integration of four sets of concerns, including those of an institution's technological staff, its students, its instructional designers, and its management.

- Technology concerns: The technological question of language learning online has much to do with what technology in the Usa will permit from other linguistic/cultural backgrounds, from scripts and accent marks to text-v.-image-v.-open page area questions, color, font, line thickness and straightness, and the like, not to mention the effects of these technological features upon cognitive/learning styles (Holzl, 1999). Many CMSs and LMSs fabricated in the Usa do not permit "foreign" accentuation or writing systems, not to mention right-to-left or top-to-bottom script. Too, although Coastline's *Seaport* system has met many student and instructor demands for the malleable, it remains "Microsoft-centric", rendering it difficult to access from either Macintosh equipment or from computers using Mozilla Firefox or Google Chrome, for example.
- Learner concerns: Rarely do students have a role in deciding what they want to learn and when and how. At Coastline, most Distance Learning Department students are self-selected self-motivated, -directed adults; they want to learn as much as possible as fast as possible, whatever it takes. Notably, however, thousands of these learners are not native speakers of English, and so the language of the electronic interface should not impede their learning; indeed, they do not attend fully to the effects that an Americanocentric interface might have upon learnability.
- Instructional design and teaching concerns: Instructional designers prefer model consistency for practical reasons; it is easier to fix technical problems if there are only a few limited options. Institutional designers are generally tasked to set forth an institutional air; all courses delivered online at a particular institution bear a kind of electronic signature, a college identity. Moreover, technical designers know how much

each element of Web design costs in time and money; they make decisions with this in mind, as well as with an eye on ADA requirements, federal standards, and the like. For their part, the teachers who must use these institutional designs tend to want two competing things: On the one hand, they would like to have to create from scratch as little as possible, enjoying the ease of template use; but on the other hand, they want to be able to customize their courses, giving them a personal or subject-matter imprint.

- Management and organizational concerns: The managerial question in online course development, design, and presentation at Coastline has often to do with *hierarchy*: Is it the institution's administration, the Web design and technical staff, or the instructor who gets to choose how what kinds of materials are to be presented in a course? The organizational question in online-delivered French language and culture courses has to do with cultural values: Is material to be presented in a beads-on-a-string, American-design fashion, with assignments delivered at set times and withdrawn later, for example, or is it to be presented all in a mass, with no timeline, calling upon students to learn to schedule themselves as they must do in French institutions? Are assignments to be designed with ease of scoring in mind, largely in the objective mode, or are they to be open-ended, reflective, demanding individual attention to their subjectivity? And is grading to be done in an add-up-the-points-for-the-parts manner, or is it to be a more holistic affair, incorporating the way in which students have arrived at their answers, rather than just the answers themselves? Are the questions of cognition and learning style to be addressed, incorporated, or even made subject to change?

### **A Method Harmonious to Address the Bicephalous**

The problem of how best to train learners to move about in a new reality, using an alternative cognitive style, a new mode of thinking in a language other than English, has led to a solution of compromise. That is, at Coastline Community College, the institutional CMS/LMS is retained, but it is used mostly as a portal to elsewhere.

Page design is rendered as subject-matter friendly as possible, with images exhibiting francophone-style curved lines and harmonious colors, for instance, integrated into the College's *Seaport* CMS/LMS. Students are directed immediately from their *Seaport* homepage into francophone-designed alternative areas, where all buttons, hyperlinks, directions, and the rest are written in French. (pages clickable from here: <http://dl.coastline.edu/coursewebsites/fren.cfm>)

Indeed, use of as much authentic francophone-sourced material as possible in an online learning environment has proven productive at Coastline.

In order to encourage the timeless, serendipitously teachable-moment nature of learning online, French language and culture course assignments are presented from semester Day One altogether as a mass for students to schedule as they wish; no due date is assigned but the end of each course term. E-mail messages are scheduled weekly from the instructor to encourage students to design their own work plans, as is done in francophone institutions.

Coastline online learners of French language and culture have, during the past fifteen years of participation in online courses in French at the College, learned to appreciate francophone

reasoning and perspectives as they have improved their technological skills and their linguistic awareness, including fluency. Students report being “able to think in French”, finding themselves “thinking of that word in French”, “imagining (themselves) seeing this from a French point of view”, for instance. Use of the French interface in E-mail and in assignments has led to reduced distractability; rather than being invited by familiar Anglophone advertising or interfaces, students remain “on task” while immersed in francophone cyberspace.

Alternatively, the use of Anglophone materials can be useful as a guide into the francophone, but it poses the risk of being a crutch. As *Converge* magazine states in its 14 July, 2009, issue, immersion is still the *nec plus ultra* of learning models, and as Coastliners have found, immersion is easy to perform online. The francophone resources available in cyberspace are vast, and most of them are free.

### **Implications and recommendations**

Three particular lessons have been learned through Coastline’s integration of “foreign” language and culture into an American CMS/LMS, each with implications leading to recommendations: One must, in online learning environments....

- *Use “the system”*: Find the advantages, the things that work for you, the instructor, and poll students informally and regularly to find out which features of the course/learning management system work best for them; use those most often. Frequently, learners from varying sociocultural, economic, and/or linguistic backgrounds will address and interact with institutional systems in diverse ways, as Dong and Lee (2008), among others, have reported, noting that the information to be transmitted online may be affected by the way in which the users interact with it, both visually---do they look at it in an analytical, sequential way or in a synthetic, holistic manner, for instance---and cognitively---are they influenced by a high-context, high risk-averse society or a low-context one, for instance, and is their time orientation a long-term one or a short-term one? Dong and Lee (2008) and Marcus and Gould (2000) suggest that customizing an institution’s CMS/LMS for easier, more effective interaction may be necessary, offering students more than one version of the CMS/LMS designed by technologists from more than one cultural background. Open Source materials are popular in many countries; Scandinavian-based ones are some of the many that may be used easily and free, without automatically changing instructor or student work into English with an Anglophone text editor, for instance; this latter process has been demonstrated to be not only awkward, but often offensive to non-English speakers (Paulsen, 2003). Remember: Students’ evaluation of systemic requirements may be different from your own.
- *Tweak “the system”*: Find out how much wiggle room is available within the system, so as to customize it as much as possible. This may mean that the aforementioned alternative versions of course sites bear different looks, various arrangements on a Webpage of the same course content, not just translated from English but transmuted into an authentic alternative that harmonizes with alternative cognitive styles (Holzl, 1999). Moreover, either alongside such alternatives or in addition to them, embedded links may be necessary to lead learners to areas where materials have been created by

technologists who see and interact with the world in complementary ways; it may mean that surfing experiences to far-away Web sites or to institutions employing vastly distinct CMSes or LMSes may be required. As Paulsen (2003), among others, has noted, online education across borders can be rendered difficult by a country's citizens' strong preference to use their own language, as well as their own cognitive patterns. Best practices in this realm warrant examination. It may mean collaborating not just within an institution but everywhere, including with institutions across the globe and with students from one's own institution and beyond; students may already know more about tweakability than most educators do. Indeed, as Indiana University Instructional Systems Technology professor Curt Bonk (2009) has stated, "Collaborate or die...socially responsive learning (and) global partnerships... transform learning environments in local as well as more global ways." System-tweaking within an institution may mean that test elements or assignments will be summarized within the system and then detailed outside the system, in a course blog or wiki or E-mail.

- *Never stop integrating*: As Scandinavian researcher Morten Flate Paulsen (2003) has pointed out, learners from diverse backgrounds, especially adults, have learned how to learn in varying ways, some preferring formal or informal oral communication, others preferring collaborative learning, and still others favoring individual research or coursework by correspondence. Indeed, educators would do well to remain constantly aware of their goals: Does the principal effort comprise, as Holzl (1999) summarizes it, an attempt to meet the student in his own realm of learning preferences, or does it, alternatively, entail an endeavor to change a student's cognitive style into one that conforms with either the institutional worldview or the perspective of the educator? Holzl (1999) holds that *constructivist learning environments* may be the best suited to the integration of the alternative, approaching the sort of cognitive flexibility that would at once meet learners where they are mentally, and lead them into a new domain with realia. Both Holzl and Paulsen note that very little concrete research has been done in the application of such theories; Holzl cites Australia's Deakin University as at least one place that is making such a replicable effort, however; that institution offers business training in environments malleable to the multi-cultural. In the world of language and culture training, exploitable for business or for other practical reasons, *Converge* magazine cites in its 14 July, 2009, issue two confirmations of twenty-first century linguistic/cultural immersion techniques using electronic media, including audio and video capabilities; integrating these along with the perpetually-self-renewing features of electronic and social media, such as live news feeds, podcasts, wikis, and blogs, can keep coursework new and fresh while at the same time training learners in the technologies and in the discursive manners of reasoning that define many non-American societies. And at Coastline Community College, new and creative discursivity has been spawned online within virtual spaces inviting participation in the rich vermicular argumentation models of the francophone.

## Conclusions

It has been said that the past is prologue. In online learning of foreign language and culture, the future shall be epilogue. That is, in a world that is increasingly multi-cultural, the end game should be mutual understanding. And the principal lesson learned in French language/culture course design, development, and delivery is that compromise and mutual respect must be sustained among all parties, if education is to take place. Notably, it might be recalled, although Web-based, online learning has increased the speed of communicability and transfer of data, written communication has not changed nearly so much. We still use plain text, and we still wait for computers to power up, to enable E-mail, and to facilitate our reading, writing, and interacting with the world through words, no matter the language they express. The work done to implement a successful program in French language/culture delivered online in California should have local and global long-term impact: Locally, other area foreign language instructors can use this work as a *manuel d'études*, a study guide, on the one hand, and as a warning of pitfalls on the other. Globally, institutions worldwide can use this reported sequence of events as a classic case study, not just for the teaching of foreign languages but for the customization of course materials to fit a particular subject matter in a particular marketplace of ideas, of human interaction.

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