

Foreign Languages and Distance Learning: A Collaboration that Works

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THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE DISTANCE LEARNING COLLABORATIVE, now in its second year, was funded as a special initiative by the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia. The Collaborative, which consists of Darton College, Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, Middle Georgia College, South Georgia College, and Waycross College, allows the five institutions to share faculty and combine resources to expand and enhance previously limited foreign language offerings in their service areas. Through distance learning, these two-year colleges, all serving rural Georgia, are able to offer students a variety and depth of instruction in foreign languages and cultures that otherwise would not be possible.

Before the creation of the Collaborative, member schools faced two problems: too few qualified faculty members and too few students at advanced levels to make up classes of sufficient size to be financially justifiable. French and Spanish were offered at all the schools, but on an irregular basis since qualified instructors were not always available. Now students are able to complete a three- or four-course sequence in French (taught from South Georgia College) or Spanish (from ABAC and Darton) within a year. In addition, the Collaborative has allowed member institutions to increase the variety of languages offered to their students. A three-course sequence in German is being taught from Middle Georgia College this year. Darton will begin instruction in Japanese in Fall of 1997, and plans are being made for Chinese courses.

During the planning stage, members of the Collaborative recognized the challenges of offering foreign language instruction via distance learning media, especially to a large percentage of students with CPC deficiencies. Students who are true beginners in a foreign language class bring with them a good deal of anxiety and need considerable nurturing. Furthermore, true acquisition of a language requires meaningful interaction in that language and a positive connection to the foreign culture. Traditional forms of distance learning, i.e., audio, software, and one-way video programs, provide none of these elements. Class size was a concern as well. If all students were to have the opportunity to develop oral proficiency in the language, enrollment would have to be limited to allow all students to participate in class activities each day. To address these challenges, the Foreign Language Collaborative devel-

oped a model for the delivery of quality foreign language instruction that integrates interactive distance learning and computer-assisted learning support.

Foreign Language Collaborative classes are offered via the Georgia Statewide Academic and Medical System (GSAMS), a two-way interactive audio and video teleconferencing system. Members of the Foreign Language Collaborative have equipped their distance learning classrooms with a variety of tools to enhance instruction and communication including VCRs capable of operating over the network, document cameras that allow instructors to display handouts, and scan converters that connect computers to the network and allow the broadcast of multimedia presentations. Foreign Language Collaborative instructors are encouraged to use multimedia in instruction; toward this end each collaborative instructor has been provided with a laptop computer and presentation software.

To further enhance student learning, a state-of-the-art foreign language lab was opened on each campus. Designed to facilitate students' acquisition of non-native languages, each lab is equipped with 10 Power Macintosh computers with DOS compatibility, allowing maximum platform flexibility. Each computer is fully networked and has access to email, the Internet, and the World Wide Web. Access to the Internet enhances students' opportunities to communicate with the instructor and their classmates, as well as with native speakers of the languages they are studying.

Faculty use of the World Wide Web, in particular, has increased substantially since the inauguration of the Collaborative. They find it helpful in disseminating information to students at remote sites and in directing them to sources of information which may be useful in their study of the foreign culture. In fact, all Collaborative schools support World Wide Web pages for their foreign language programs. Students can view course guides and syllabi, are able to email homework to instructors, get information on lab hours, and even complete interactive lessons online. Online cultural assignments are quickly becoming commonplace in some classes.

The labs are also equipped with audio listening and TV/VCR stations for group or individual work. Desktop video conferencing technology, scheduled for full implementation during the 1997-98 academic year, will

allow instructors to conduct oral exams and one-on-one help sessions from their offices and labs.

While the technology is impressive, it is the human element that makes it work. So that real relationships can be developed and meaningful communication conducted between faculty and students in a class, enrollment has been limited to twenty-five students per class, distributed among the receiving sites. Small enrollments make possible person-to-person conversational activities and group work in which everyone is able to participate. It is vital in any distance learning course, and especially in a foreign language course, that the instructor limit lecture time and attempt to involve students directly in the lesson. When students feel too removed from instruction and too far away from the instructor, it is far too easy for them to lose touch with the material.

Instructors stay in touch with students by email and by telephone, both at the office and at home. They make remote site visits as often as possible, and they have found it important to have students in the classroom with them at the home site to avoid feelings of isolation and alienation. To avoid such feelings on the receiving end and to ensure instructional integrity is maintained, all remote sites are required to have a facilitator in the classroom. Facilitators monitor students, proctor exams, and serve as liaisons between the instructor and the students. They are trained to operate the equipment used in the distance learning classroom and provide technical support, but they also must have empathy for the students and a desire to see them succeed. In some cases, facilitators are also able to provide assistance to the students in the foreign language. Though their role requires that they be as invisible as possible, their contributions are crucial to the success of instructors and students.

Lab personnel are the final ingredient in humanizing the technology. They help guide the students past the hardware into the heart of the language and culture under study, beyond the drill to the exploration of different worlds and world-concepts.

Foreign language instruction via GSAMS was initially viewed with skepticism by instructors, in part because foreign language courses are proficiency-oriented and stress real communicative abilities, and in part because having an instructor in the classroom is always preferable to an electronic substitute. However, experience with the technology has shown some advantages over instruction in the traditional classroom. In fact, some instructors have grown so accustomed to the technology of their distance learning classes that they miss it in their traditional classes! Not only are student-student and instructor-student dialogues from one site to another as practical as the same interactions within a traditional classroom, but student-student interactions between sites add the motivating factor of school rivalry while bridging physical distance and facilitating the development of a class esprit de corps.

Two aspects of GSAMS technology have enhanced

the delivery of instruction: the zoom lens and the document camera. A close-up makes the instructor larger than life and allows in-your-face techniques that are helpful but might be intimidating in the traditional classroom. Students are able to clearly see the mouth of the instructor demonstrating articulation. The document camera with its zoom capability replaces chalkboard, overhead projector, slide projector, and the traditional method of hand-to-hand passing of items of cultural interest. The equipment allows for a great deal of flexibility and creativity. Students at a remote site may view any combination of images on the monitor, including instructor, instructor and students, individual students, items displayed by the document camera, computer-generated visuals, and videos.

Students may hear live or recorded sound. The instructor is able to control and facilitate this entire learning experience with the touch of a button. With adequate training and practice, he becomes his own best cameraman, smoothly switching from camera to camera, from angle to angle, from wide to tight shots, and from student to student, as the focus of instruction and activities changes during each broadcast. Skillful use of the cameras helps to reduce distractions and to create an environment that will foster easy exchange between classmates.

Assessment of Foreign Language Collaborative courses is conducted each quarter, and an overall evaluation of the entire Collaborative is made annually. Two instruments are used to gauge student satisfaction: a Student Evaluation of Faculty and a Distance Learning Survey. Results of student evaluations show high satisfaction with the quality of classroom instruction, as well as the use of distance learning. In the first two quarters of instruction by the Collaborative, the student success rate averaged 79.5%, while success rates in traditional classes range from 63% to 80%.

To our own satisfaction, through our collaboration we have filled a serious gap. We have seen an increase in the number of foreign language majors, and we are able to better serve them, as well as majors in other disciplines, by offering a consistent sequence of courses through the intermediate level before they transfer to four-year institutions. The second year's evaluation will soon be completed, and it is expected to show positive results, but statistics alone do not adequately convey the success of a program.

We believe that we must also consider, again, the human element. In one class, students at one institution banded together to support a classmate at another when she suffered a family tragedy.

Time and again, students in Collaborative courses take initiative to plan end-of-quarter socials where they can meet their classmates face-to-face. During class time, they use the foreign language to make jokes with each other and arrange to meet later by phone. Taken together, all of these evaluative factors reflect the fact that learning, distance or no, is taking place, and that our collaborative efforts are working.