French in Cyberspace: An Online French Course for Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the development of an online French language skills course, “French in Cyberspace,” for undergraduates at Hollins University. It reviews the desirability and feasibility of conducting an online foreign language course for resident undergraduates as well as advocates a special niche in the instructional cycle that such a course might optimally occupy. The author also considers the “no significant difference” research that suggests that distance learning courses are equivalent to traditional face-to-face classes and concludes that the technoconstructivist advantages offered by an online French language skills course represent unique, important, and meaningful benefits for students seeking to improve their language skills. The course itself is described in detail and provides a potential blueprint for constructing and conducting an online French language skills course. The author furnishes a step-by-step account of all aspects of the online learning experience including student orientation to distance learning, suggested web resources that accommodate the various learning styles of the students, online activities that promote language skill development, and an evaluation rubric for the course.

KEYWORDS
Online Language Instruction, Technoconstructivist Pedagogy, French Language Skills, Distance Learning, Online Course Design

INTRODUCTION
The number of online courses for adult and graduate-level populations has been increasing exponentially for several years now. Courses in French language studies have been no exception. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, for example, offers a French Professional Development Certificate where all the courses are conducted completely online. Courses in fulfillment of the certificate program range from “Techniques in Translation” and “Commercial and Economic French” to more specialized topics such as “Techniques in Scientific Translation” and “Lexicology.” The University’s Academic Outreach Programs and Courses for Teachers of French for Fall 2002 included “History of the French Language”
and “Techniques in Translation I.” With this notable availability of distance learning options for French being offered at the graduate level, the author began to wonder whether an online course for French language instruction would be right for undergraduates on the campus of her university. Would undergraduate students, the majority of whom would be in residence on campus, even want to enroll in an online course? Given today’s technology, its opportunities and its limitations, is there a role for online foreign language instruction at the undergraduate level? Would an online course be capable of handling foreign language skills development? Would there be any advantages to offering a French course online? What would an online French language skills course look like? How would it function? The investigation of these questions, among others, served as the basis for the development of the course “French in Cyberspace” for students of French at Hollins University.

**Would Resident Undergraduate Students Want to Enroll in an Online Course?**

To begin the consideration of an online French language course for undergraduates, it is important to define terms precisely. Every course the author teaches has a class web site, using the Blackboard course management software, where she posts the course syllabus, assignments, and announcements. In all of the undergraduate French courses that the author offers at Hollins University, she also incorporates technology in a variety of ways, from PowerPoint presentations to integrating material from selected web sites into class activities and discussions to email assignments and discussion board classes. Given the inclusion of so many technological elements, much of the current literature on distance education would refer to the author’s classes as online classes. However, she considers the term online to represent something else. She views the courses that she currently teaches as technology-enhanced, hybrid classes where there is a mixture of online, computer-enhanced or computer-integrated elements but where the face-to-face aspect of the course is still the mainstay of the class. The “French in Cyberspace” class departs from this path. It is a French language course for undergraduates carried out completely online using a variety of computer applications facilitated by the extensive features of Blackboard.

Without the exigency of distance at stake, would undergraduates respond favorably to such a course? Clearly, the vast majority of today’s students have grown up in a digital world. Incoming freshmen for the year 2002 are the first generation to have gone through their entire educational experience using computers in their schools. A survey of college students from across the United States released on September 17, 2002 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project “found that 86 percent use the Internet …” not only for academic purposes but for daily, routine tasks as well (Roanoke Times, 2002, p. A1). It is becoming widely recognized that “… one of the major external changes for colleges and universities is the arrival of waves of students who are not only computer literate, but actually technophilic. For these students, online services and online learning are not only appreciated,
they are expected” (Cini & Vilic, 1999, p. 38). Felix (1999, p. 88) describes contemporary students in this way: “we are dealing with ‘children of chaos’ (Rushkoff 1996), nonlinear thinkers used to negotiating complicated intuitive computer games, and comfortably navigating cyberspace communities and resources.” Given the extensive technological background of the majority of those entering college, undergraduates today are certainly ready for an online French language course.

With respect to a desire for online courses on the part of on-campus students, the experience of the University of Colorado’s distance education program illustrates a growing movement in higher education: “What university administrators here found … was that a surprisingly large proportion of students who were already enrolled in regular classes were eager to ease their schedules by taking courses on line. The number of such students has been growing every semester: This spring, the distance-education program enrolled a total of 609 students, of whom more than 500 are also taking regular courses in the campus’s classrooms” (Guernsey, 1998, p. A29). The situation at the University of Colorado is mirrored at institutions of higher education across the country.

In Oklahoma, Rogers University at Claremore now offers 66 distance-education courses, and two-thirds of students enrolled in them are taking courses on campus, too. In the State University of New York’s on-line program, SUNY Learning Network, as many as 80 per cent of the registrants are full- or part-time students on SUNY campus. At Arizona State University … only 3 per cent of distance-education students live in another state (Guernsey, 1998, p. A29).

Another encouraging trend that supports the creation of an online course for resident undergraduates is that “some institutions that offer on-line courses are finding that students are not only local but also younger than expected. At Seton Hall University … officials say 30 to 40 per cent of those who have enrolled in the courses appear to be traditional-age students—in their teens or early 20s—who live on or near the campus” (Guernsey, 1998, p. A29). These developments point toward the success of an online French language course for undergraduates.

If undergraduate students are signing up for online classes on the campuses of the universities where they are attending face-to-face classes as well, an important question to consider before the design phase of an actual online course is what is their motivation? With particular respect to undergraduate students, there appears to be a great deal of validity to Saba’s assertion that “‘Distance education’ is more about time than about distance!” (2000a, p. 1). Resident undergraduate students are not interested in online courses for the same reasons as older, graduate-level students might be. They are not especially concerned about learning at a distance because they cannot find the types of courses that they want and need at an institution close to them. They do not opt for online learning opportunities in order to balance family responsibilities with a desire for continuing their education. They are not enrolling in distance education programs in order to acquire credentials to
further a career. “The overwhelming reason—cited by students around the United States and Canada—is convenience” (Guernsey, 1998, p.A29). From the point of view of undergraduates themselves, the major advantage of online courses is that they provide a way for students to budget and control their limited resources of time. It is primarily the asynchronous nature of the online course that attracts undergraduate students. “French in Cyberspace” would provide students with just such an asynchronous environment for expanding French language skills.

Is There a Place for Online Foreign Language Instruction at the Undergraduate Level?

With evidence that there is an increasing interest in online courses among resident students, the next step is to determine whether there is a place for online foreign language instruction at the undergraduate level. With respect to building basic language skills at the beginning levels, the overwhelming consensus among foreign language education professionals is that, for students to acquire a fundamental facility with the language, they need a large amount of face-to-face social interaction in order to replicate communicative situations where the language will be used in the real world. As Glisan, Dudt, and Howe (1998, p. 49) remark, “One has only to glance at the existing literature in foreign language distance education or talk with language educators in order to understand the caution with which language professionals approach the issue of what role, if any, distance learning can play in today’s language programs.” As a result, it is almost uniformly accepted that, for these early levels of language instruction, web-enhanced courses provide students with the benefits of technology as well as the face-to-face interactions that will produce the best outcomes. Thus, an online French course would not be the best option for students just starting the study of the language. It seems clear that completely online French language courses should be reserved for special needs, for special niches in the instructional cycle. As the dean of the college of liberal arts and sciences at the University of Colorado, Marvin D. Loflin, found with respect to the surprising number of undergraduates enrolled in the distance learning program there: “Obviously, we met a need …” (Guernsey, 1998, p. A29). Meeting the need for expanding the language learning skills of students and providing an environment for student-centered practice with the language can readily take place online. As Yang (2001, p. 156) observes,

For language learners to master a foreign language, it is best to be provided with opportunities to use and create, and further, to own the language. The tools and resources created on the World Wide Web (conferencing, whiteboard, streaming, and “plug-in” technologies, etc.) offer prime opportunities for cultivating language use through multimodal channels (listening, speaking, writing, reading, and communicating). The Web serves as an intrinsically motivating device and a natural platform for the development of the five Cs (communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities) advocated by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).
One area where online courses might prove especially useful consists of providing students with more intensive work in the very language skills that are often de-emphasized or forgotten in the typical introductory foreign language classroom. Given the enormous pressures of time constraints, many students spend the majority of their class time in elementary and intermediate foreign language courses working on speaking skills and grammar instruction along with cultural elements of the teacher’s or textbook’s selection. Focused attention and practice to build listening comprehension, reading, and writing skills are often collateral, tangential, periodic, or even missing. An online course can provide opportunities for students to focus on just these skills and thereby strengthen their overall French language proficiency. An effective online language skills course, then, might take place at some point during or immediately after the intermediate level of French language instruction. At Hollins University, for example, an optimal time for just such a course is during the January Short Term where students take only one course for a minimum of 36 hours over a four-week period prior to the start of the second semester of study. This timetable furnishes students who are enrolled in an intermediate or advanced intermediate French class the opportunity to bridge the time gap between semesters and maintain (or improve) their language skills for the second term. Students who have completed the intermediate level would also find this type of course an excellent way to refresh skills that have gone dormant before enrolling in a 200 level French class during the Spring semester. The “French in Cyberspace,” course is designed to meet these two needs and fits perfectly into the language instruction cycle at Hollins.

Would an Online Course Be Capable of Handling Foreign Language Skills Development? Would There Be Any Advantages in Offering a French Course Online?

In a great deal of the literature about distance learning, authors often cite the “no significant difference” research to suggest that online courses are equivalent to traditional face-to-face classes. “Since 1962, when systematic study of distance education started, research has indicated that there is no ‘statistically significant difference’ between learning from mediated instruction and classroom instruction” (Saba, 2000b, p. 1). However, the “no significant difference” conclusions are misleading. As McGinn (2000, p. 58) notes, “Researcher Thomas Russell has collected 355 studies, all showing no significant difference between what students learn in a classroom or far away. But most of those studies deal with television courses; Internet courses are new enough that research is still evolving.” In addition, the “no significant difference” research findings are based primarily on student grades; thus, their results do not look at many other important contributing factors that come into play in distance learning. Online classes offer many advantages over face-to-face courses creating not only significant differences but positive ones as well. As Saba notes (2000b, p. 3),

What is unique about the Internet is that it puts a plethora of prerecorded, live, and just-in-time resources at the fingertips of students, thus creating a
learning environment that is vastly different than the classroom. To be sure, teachers are a part of this learning environment, and in fact, they may even manage it, but what has changed is that they are no longer one of only two sources of information for the student, the other being the book. In fact, students on the ‘Net have access to a huge information bank, a source that is becoming interactive rapidly and responding to the individual interests of students.

This transition from subject-driven, teacher-controlled educational environment to one that is increasingly managed by learners is not a small change…What is missing in classroom instruction, despite the romantic misnomer of face-to-face instruction, is personalized learning that is tailored to the aptitude, interest, and motivation of the learner. No other medium can make such a claim. In the early days of computer-assisted instruction (CAI), there was hope for making learning individualized. But technology was limited and certainly not as interconnected as it is today. The ‘Net has made the media environment interactive, and this has shifted the paradigm in education from teaching to learning.

An online French language skills course that focuses on a limited number of language skill groups makes the best use of what online instruction can provide. By concentrating on listening, reading, writing, and culture, students would be able to make the most of their online experience to expand their facility with these skills beyond what is possible in the limited amount of time traditionally scheduled for these areas in face-to-face classes.

What are some of the advantages of an online French language course? The single most important advantage of an online course is its ability to engender a technoconstructivist learning environment for students. “Constructivists believe that knowledge is constructed by the individual, rather than transmitted to the individual. People make sense out of whatever they experience by constructing their own meaning based on what they already know, and how they perceive the new information” (McDonough, 2001, p. 77). McKenzie (2002, p. 101) refers to technoconstructivist teachers as those who “not only use technology as an instructional tool, but they also employ it to transform the classroom into a new and different learning environment for students.” Therefore, when students assume the responsibility of using technology to actively express themselves, personally, and intentionally interact with authentic materials and cooperatively construct meaning, a technoconstructivist learning environment is realized. Thus, a major benefit of an online French skills course is its ability to foster among students the five attributes of meaningful learning that are at the heart of technoconstructivist methodology. As Jonassen, Peck, and Wilson (1999, p. 16) posit, “If we accept that our goal, as technology-using educators, is to support meaningful learning, then we should use technologies to engage students in active, constructive, intentional, authentic, and cooperative learning.” With the right structure, an online course provides students the opportunity to experience all of these. Jonassen et al. clearly outline the process for making the most of an online course: “Meaningful learning
will result when technologies engage learners in: knowledge construction, not reproduction, conversation, not reception, articulation, not repetition, collaboration, not competition, reflection, not prescription.” An online French learning environment accomplishes these pedagogical goals in a number of ways.

First, students use Internet research skills to locate and read authentic French-language web materials of their own choosing and select cultural topics for presentation and discussion in which they have a particular curiosity. This student-centered approach that relies on the individual’s previous world experiences and personal interests increases motivation and gives students a sense of empowerment that extends beyond topic choice to language use as well. Second, the preparation of online presentations based on students’ Internet searches encourages them to investigate subjects that have personal relevance to them. They are also obliged to synthesize their findings, construct a concise, coherent presentation in the target language, and clearly articulate the results of their research in order to share and discuss it with their classmates. Third, an online class furnishes students the opportunity to actively practice listening skills at a more individualized pace with more culturally authentic materials. In the typical foreign language class, the targeted practice of listening skills is often relegated to repetitive, regimented language laboratory exercises or the use of cassettes and workbooks outside of class. An online course could include individually purchased CD-ROM materials where individual students intentionally work on improving their listening skills at their own pace while interacting with more culturally relevant materials. Fourth, the availability of instructor-suggested web sites for student use provides students with the opportunity to purposefully select material that most closely aligns itself with their preferred learning styles. Web sites of French newspapers and magazines, for example, would appeal to students who prefer textual representations, while web sites that have streaming audio such as Radio France would appeal to students who are audio learners. Web sites, such as TF1, FR3, and itelevision, that contain streaming video would attract students who are primarily visual learners. Fifth, online course discussions require students to express themselves in writing on topics of their own choosing while providing them with a less stressful forum in which to express their thoughts. By taking advantage of the asynchronous nature of online coursework to think through their use of the target language more thoroughly, students learn to reflect upon, organize and compose their ideas in French before posting them to the course web site. It encourages all students to develop successful writing habits with respect to grammar usage, appropriate vocabulary choice and textual editing for clarity and purpose. This also allows students whose voices are often drowned out in the face-to-face classroom the opportunity to have their ideas heard equally with others. As Sullivan (2002, p. 394) comments: “Because of time restraints in the traditional classroom setting, it is often just not possible to provide opportunities for all students to respond in the depth and detail that they might wish, especially if the discussion is lively and there is a great deal of interaction. Students who are more assertive or more comfortable in social situations also have a significant advantage in this kind of learning environment. Nonverbal, shy, or socially marginalized students—who might have thoughtful
and important things to contribute—are often put at a distinct disadvantage in the traditional classroom.” The online format for discussion provides all students with an equal forum for their ideas. Sixth, online discussions foster collaboration by encouraging students to cooperate in making sense out of unfamiliar cultural practices and/or a foreign worldview. Together, students are able to find and articulate relevant, authentic connections to French ideas and practices that have meaning to them and allow them to understand and empathize with the other culture. Finally, course management software packages, like Blackboard and WebCT, offer many features to facilitate interaction among students. Students can come together as a class or in small groups in the chat feature for more immediate conversations or on the discussion board forum to discuss ideas. Students can quickly email one another or the professor without having to memorize the email addresses of all the other students. Students can be grouped in small groups for online collaborative projects. Course management software used for online courses also offers opportunities to intentionally personalize language instruction for individual students. Instructor-created PowerPoint explanations of specific grammar points using visual clues and limited audio voice over can be uploaded to the course web site. Practice quizzes linked to these explanations can also be made available. In this manner, individual students whose online work demonstrates a recurring problem in a certain area can review only the material that they need and, when ready, take a practice quiz to see if they have indeed understood the material. Finally, course management software makes communication with the instructor more immediate via email or online office hours using the chat feature. With these many advantages as inspiration, “French in Cyberspace” is designed to provide students with a positive, constructive online learning experience.

What Would an Online French Language Skills Course Look Like? How Would It Function?

Given a unique niche in the language skills instructional cycle and its nontraditional delivery format, an online French course needs to be constructed from scratch—not just a traditional course retrofitted for distance delivery. As Palloff and Pratt (2001, p. 20) caution: “Teaching in the cyberspace classroom, requires that we move beyond traditional models of pedagogy into new practices that are more facilitative. Teaching in cyberspace involves much more than simply taking old, ‘tried and true’ models of pedagogy and transferring them to a different medium.” They further advise that: “… instead of looking for ways to convert a course that has been successful in the face-to-face classroom, instructors are better served by approaching a course to be taught online as if it were a course to be taught for the first time— which in essence it is— while drawing on content knowledge and best practices. This allows a sense of freedom in the development of the course, without a tendency to adhere to tried-and-true methods that may not work online” (p. 67). Naturally, course components and techniques may come from courses previously taught but they must be reconsidered in light of the distance learning mode of delivery and take into account how well they promote techno-
constructivist principles for meaningful learning. All online activities should be
designed with the five attributes of meaningful learning in mind. Learning should
be active, constructive, intentional, authentic, and cooperative while students are
provided with opportunities for more intensive work in the “forgotten” classroom
skills. Here is a unique opportunity to emphasize reading and writing in French
as well an occasion to hone listening skills and focus on cultural topics of specific
interest to students.

**FRENCH IN CYBERSPACE**

The French language course “French in Cyberspace” designed for the one-month,
January Short Term at Hollins University, is intended to facilitate these goals.
Before the class itself begins, consideration must be given as to who the students
in the course are likely to be. In this case, the class would be comprised of primar-
ily freshmen who are required to be on campus for the Short Term as well as a
small number of upper classmen, perhaps two or three, who may or may not be on
campus during January. In order to accommodate this range of students, a letter is
sent to each student enrolled in the course prior to the start of the class to advise
them of not only the technological requirements of the class but also of the types
of assignments they can expect. The letter includes such information as

1. technical requirements for the class (i.e., PC with color monitor and CD-
ROM drive, Internet connection [56K or higher], email that handles at-
tachments, MS Word, FrontPage, and PowerPoint, and Username and
Password for Hollins Blackboard site);
2. instructions for how to add a French keyboard toggle to the toolbar;
3. a tentative syllabus and course procedures description;
4. a suggested schedule for study to facilitate student assignment comple-
tion;
5. consequences for late assignments (e.g., work turned in late will lose 5
points out of 20 for each day that it is late);
6. suggestions on how to locate French language cultural material on the
Web (e.g., French-language search engines, French archive/reference
sites and selected French web sites with streaming audio and video);
7. a short guide to using the class Blackboard web site (e.g., where to find
assignments, grammar explanations, and listening comprehension and
practice quizzes);
8. instructions and specifications on how and when to access the Black-
board chat feature for online office hours and as well as for collaboration
with other students;
9. a grading rubric;
10. contact information for the instructor and the computer help desk; and
11. reminders of appropriate levels of civility and language usage for discus-
sions and debates.

For students who live on campus and take this online course, all of the technical
requirements are provided for them in the University’s computer labs. Further in-
struction and demonstration of the other information provided takes place during the orientation session on the first day of class on the university campus. For these students, this letter serves as advance information to prepare them for their online educational experience. For students who are not on campus for the January term, this information is invaluable and allows them to make a more informed decision about whether or not they feel they have the appropriate computer skills and can handle the online course while being off site. In this way, each constituency is able to assess in advance whether this online course is right for them.

Although the course takes place entirely online, the best practices of distance learning specialists and online educators recommend that students enrolled in an online course should have an introduction to the software and the types of online activities they will engage in prior to the start of the online class. As Grenier-Winter (1999, p. 259) discovered, it is “… crucial for the instructor to provide technical orientation and facilitation.” Salmon (2001, pp. 84-85) also suggests “that a face-to-face meeting is appropriate for induction, especially for small groups, because of the bonding that occurs and because early problems can be ironed out on the spot…” In order to facilitate this orientation process, the first meeting of “French in Cyberspace” is scheduled on Monday morning of the first week of class in the Hollins multimedia classroom. This session lasts a minimum of three hours. With this one initial face-to-face meeting conducted completely in French, students become familiar with Blackboard. They learn how to use Blackboard to access the course syllabus, announcements, assignments, web site collections, grammar reviews, and practice quizzes, as well as how to post presentations and responses on the course discussion board and contact the instructor and other students via the class email and chat features. Instruction is also given on how to maximize the whiteboard feature for visually enhanced communication and on how to use the digital drop box for turning in written work to the instructor. The students are also introduced to researching topics on the web in French using some of the instructor-selected web site collections posted on the class web site as well as using various French-language search engines. Finally, students also learn how to make presentation slides using PowerPoint and how to upload them to the class web site.

After the introduction to Blackboard, web searches, and PowerPoint, the rest of the first class is spent teaching students to construct simple web pages using FrontPage and creating a personal introductory bio web page in French. Students are shown how to add the French keyboard as a toolbar option using MS Word so that they can easily work with accented French characters. Students learn how to copy and paste illustrations from the World Wide Web into their bio page. Using a digital camera, the teacher provides all students with a digital picture to include on their pages. Students are also invited to take other digital pictures for use on their pages and to use the multimedia classroom scanner to add images from other sources. At the end of the class session, students are directed to complete their bio web page by the end of the day, that is by no later than 6 p.m., and email it to the professor as an attachment. The instructor then posts all of the bio pages to the class web site and alerts students by email when all the pages are available.
Students are then asked to “get to know” their classmates by reading all the bio web pages and asking questions in French via email of at least two students from whom they would like further information or by discussing any topics that they find that they have in common. Students are also required to reply to any email sent to them during the getting acquainted phase. All emails must be 10-15 sentences in length and be sent by no later than 10 a.m. Tuesday, the second day of class. Students are directed to send a copy of all their messages to the professor so that she may monitor their progress on the assignment as well as participate in the exchange of greetings and information. For this activity, the teacher also emails all students with encouragement, positive personal reactions to their web page, and helpful feedback. In this way, the instructor creates a positive climate for the entire course as well as establishes personal links among and to each student. As Palloff and Pratt (2001, p. 85) also observe,

Posting introductions is [an] important step to take when a course begins. Most courseware allows both students and the instructor to create simple homepages, often including a picture, that remain on the course site….These pages serve as an initial way to get to know one another, and because they remain on the site, students and instructors find themselves visiting the homepages frequently as a reminder about what students look like or what they said about themselves. In addition to being a good community building tool, this helps everyone involved with the course understand why someone else might be coming from a particular place or take a particular position in his or her postings.

On the first day of class, the teacher also holds the first round of her twice-daily online office hours via the chat feature of Blackboard in order to acquaint students with the process of online office hours and to help any students who need further instruction or assistance with their web pages. The instructor also notifies via email individual students who have not turned in their web page on time or not sent their response emails by the designated time and reminds them of the assignment parameters. These steps demonstrate to the students the active involvement that the instructor expects from them over the course of the term and help the entire class recognize from the start the importance of completing assignments and adhering to deadlines in the online learning environment. Grenier-Winther (1999, p. 257) makes the importance of this very clear: “I … had left the scheduling up to them, believing that the beauty of the asynchronous format is the flexibility it offers students to manage personal, professional, and academic commitments. This did not ‘translate’ well into practice.” Thus, the necessity for deadlines and completion of assignments on time are stressed repeatedly throughout the course.

Beyond the first class meeting, there are no further face-to-face sessions for the rest of the course; the remainder of the class evolves completely online. Students devote the second day of class to working on their listening comprehension skills via CD-ROM, practicing the presentation process, and researching cultural topics of their own choosing for presentation to the class. As Palloff and Pratt (1999, p.
suggest: “The discussion begins with the instructor modeling the process.” Therefore, to acquaint students with the process for presenting a cultural topic, the class participates in a teacher-led trial run. The instructor begins by posting a sample topic of interest to her to the discussion board. For example, the instructor explains to students that there are many American terms that have no direct equivalent in French, such as the word “leadership” or the idea of a “challenge” as an obstacle that, with individual perseverance and effort, can be successfully overcome. She then explains that there are, of course, concepts in French that have no direct American translation. As an example of this, the instructor summarizes the French concept of “la belle laide” as described in Claire Whitcomb’s (2000) article “The Secret of French Style” in Victoria magazine to fuel a discussion of this cultural/linguistic phenomenon. She adds examples of this uniquely French idea and contrasts it with her understanding of American standards and values. At the end of her one-screen length post, the instructor poses three to four questions regarding her presentation. Students are asked to read the teacher’s presentation and react to it by posting a response. Students may respond to one or more of the questions asked by the professor or they may respond with their own commentary supported by examples and observations. Initial student responses to the professor’s presentation must be posted by no later than noon and be at least 15-20 sentences in length. Students are then required to react to at least two other students’ comments on the original topic. The person making the presentation, in this case the teacher, must react to at least two other students’ comments as well. All reaction responses must be posted by no later than 8 p.m.. Reaction responses must be 10-15 sentences in length. For the third day of class, Wednesday, students must email or use the digital drop box to deliver an MS Word document in French of no more than one page to the instructor summarizing and detailing their evaluation of the initial presentation and summarizing/analyzing their response to it as well as those of their classmates. The presentation response deliverable is due by no later than 10 a.m. Wednesday.

With this practice run for the presentation, posting, and response sequences of the course completed, the students are now ready to take responsibility for the cultural input of the class. Students have until noon Thursday to post their first presentation accompanied by 3-4 discussion questions and a reference list of no fewer than 5 sources that they used to develop their ideas. Each student must post responses to the main presentations of every other student by 5 p.m. of this day and two subsequent reactions due by 10 p.m.. Students are asked to select one cultural topic that they find the most interesting or compelling and prepare a one-page evaluation of the main presentation and a summary/analysis of their responses as well as the responses of other students. The one-page, MS Word document is due to the professor via email or digital drop box by 2 p.m. Friday.

While researching their topics and responding to the findings of their classmates, students also work on honing their listening skills. In order to concentrate on listening skills, students buy 4 months worth of Champs-Elysées CD-ROMs that substitute as the textbook purchase for the course. This portion of the class can be done at the student’s individual pace. Students write out the answers to a
set of questions prepared by the instructor to accompany the CD-ROM for each week she posts to the course web site. Students email their answers in an MS Word document as an attachment or use the digital drop box to submit their written work to the instructor by no later than 5 p.m. on the Thursday of each week. Students also take a weekly online quiz on the course Blackboard site based on the material covered in Champs-Elysées for that week. Students must take the quiz, a 20 question, multiple choice format, by no later than 5 p.m. on the Friday of each week, but it is up to individual students as to exactly when they choose to take the quiz. Students who do not do well on the quiz may choose, in consultation with the instructor, to submit an alternate form of assessment.

For reading and writing skills, along with encouraging students to discover and share aspects of French culture that are of particular interest to them, students, on a weekly basis, must research a cultural topic of personal interest on the Internet or in the newspaper, magazines, and journals at the library, and present it to the group. To facilitate the research process, the instructor posts the URLs

1. For French language search engines: Francité (fr.francite.com), Voilà (www.voila.fr), Nomade (www.nomade.tiscali.fr), Lycos.fr (www.lycos.fr), Yahoo France (fr.yahoo.com);
3. Selected illustrated French-language newspaper and magazine web sites:
   LeMonde (www.lemonde.fr), Libération (www.liberation.fr), l’Express (www.lexpress.fr/Express); and

Students are not required to use the web sites provided by their instructor, but they can serve as a good starting point. The URLs above can also guide students to web sites that speak to their particular learning styles. As Palloff and Pratt (2001, p. 7) note,

Many of the technological developments may be helpful in accommodating various student learning styles. An auditory learner, for example, may feel more comfortable listening to a brief audio clip explaining a concept than reading about it. A visual learner tends to do well in an environment that presents mainly text or uses video clips. A learner who is more kinesthetic may appreciate assignments requiring visits to other websites on the Internet and the incorporation of online research. All of these techniques also help to keep things interesting for students who feel the need for more activity in a learning situation.

Thus, the search engines and web site collections encourage haptic students to move around the web to discover information about their topics. The illustrated
newspaper and magazine sites provide visual learners with textual information in French that is supported by authentic photographs and illustrations. The radio and television sites give audio and visual learners the opportunity to learn in ways that are best suited to them. Based on their own unique experiences and interests, students intentionally select authentic French-language materials to develop their presentations for subsequent collaborative discussion by the class.

Once students have completed their research on their chosen topic and prepared a presentation for the class, they post it to the course discussion board. Although students deliver their presentations to the group via the discussion board, the presentation may be done in any digital form that students wish to use in order to deliver their research findings and express their point of view. If the presentation takes the form of a written text, it must be at least one screen in length, approximately 25-30 lines. If the presentation is a PowerPoint presentation with visuals and/or recorded voice, there must be at least 10 slides with a minimum of 2-3 sentences per slide. If the presentation is done as an illustrated web page, there must be a minimum of 20-30 sentences included on the page. Requirements for any other types of digital presentations (e.g., scanned presentations or HyperStudio presentations) may be negotiated between the student and the instructor. All presentations, no matter which form students choose, must replicate the format presented by the teacher on the second day of class and end with 3-4 questions for discussion by the group. Each presentation, with the exception of presentations during the first week of class, must be posted by no later than noon on the third class day of each week. All students are required to post one culture presentation per week for a total of four in all.

Students must view and respond to all the main presentations done by their classmates. They must answer one of the questions posed at the end of the presentation and/or make any other comments or contributions that they believe are appropriate. This use of "elaboration strategies by adding their own ideas … makes the information more meaningful" for each student (Morrison & Guenther, 2000, p. 20). Responses to the main presentations must be posted by noon Thursday, and each one must be 15-20 sentences in length. Students must also read and react to at least two other students’ comments made on any of the main presentations. Students making presentations must respond to all other main presentations as well as react to at least two other students’ comments. All response and reaction posts must be substantive in nature (no “Je suis d’accord.” or “Je pense que Marie a raison.”) and must be at least 10-15 sentences long and include material or observations as supporting evidence. All reaction posts must be made to the discussion board site by no later than 5 p.m. on the fourth class day each week.

Students must then choose one of the cultural presentations and prepare a one-page summary and evaluation of the main presentation and include a summary/analysis of all of the responses and reactions to that presentation. In this activity, students “use integration strategies to transform the new information into a more meaningful form …” by “paraphrasing the new ideas and generating new examples” (Morrison & Guenther, 2000, p. 20). The presentation response deliverables are due to the professor by digital drop box or email attachment by 2 p.m. on the
last class day each week.

As Knowlton (2000, p. 13) describes, “The online classroom is dynamic; it develops a life of its own based on the course content, student personalities, and the professor’s ability to monitor and guide the course and make adjustments based on students’ needs, interests, and goals. Although students determine the direction of a course through their active engagement with course materials, professors must react to the direction that students provide.” With the dynamic, student-directed nature of the online course in mind, the instructor constructs a final, capstone discussion question for the week based on all of the presentations that have been posted to the discussion board for that week and posts it early Friday morning. “An added benefit of educational activities that are technologically mediated is that a record of proceedings can be stored and accessed by students asynchronously …” (Berge, 2000, p. 23). Thus, students are directed to review all the posts made during the week and ultimately to respond to this summary question in a digital format of their choice. They may select to write an essay of at least one page in length using MS Word, create an annotated web page or a 10-15 slide PowerPoint presentation with at least 25-30 sentences included, or prepare an illustrated text in which the written portion of the work is the equivalent of 25-30 sentences. Students then email their work to the instructor as an attachment or deliver it by digital drop box by no later than 9 a.m. the following Monday.

With the tremendous amount of written work students do for this course coupled with Warschauer’s (1995-1996, p. 7) observation that students use “language which is lexically and syntactically more formal and complex in electronic discussion than they [do] in face-to-face discussion …,” the occurrence of noticeable and repeated grammar problems in student writing is inevitable. A singular advantage of the online course is that it allows for a personalized approach to grammar review that is tailored to each individual student’s needs. The class Blackboard web site has instructor-generated grammar review presentations on specific points using PowerPoint (e.g., relative pronouns, interrogative pronouns, and passé composé-imparfait). Topics for the review material were selected based on errors found in student email responses and other written work. Each grammar presentation is associated with a machine-graded practice quiz. Since the instructor reviews the written work of the students, those students who need remedial work or further instruction in a specific grammar area receive an email from the instructor asking them to review the material on the Blackboard web site. Once they have reviewed the material, they are invited to contact the professor via discussion board, chat room, or email to seek help for any further questions they may have. Students are then directed to take the practice quiz to see whether they have indeed assimilated the grammar point in question. The Blackboard software immediately informs students and the instructor of the grade on the practice quiz, and, if needed, further tutoring of the students takes place via chat room and whiteboard. The PowerPoint presentations and practice quizzes are of course also available to the entire class should other students choose to review any of the grammar principles. Students are also encouraged to request grammar presentations from the instructor on any items not already posted at the web site that they
would like to review. “One of the hallmarks of the online classroom, and one that differentiates it from face-to-face learning, is the need for students to take responsibility for their learning process” (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 113). This approach not only individualizes grammar instruction and review but also makes the students actively responsible for the improvement of their online written work.

With respect to grading, students are evaluated in five categories per week. “The online course actually has yet another advantage in evaluating students that the face-to-face classroom does not. In an online course, students must participate in some fashion in order to complete it successfully. This means that the instructor can see on a regular basis how students are analyzing and applying course material, especially if they are being asked to respond to questions that encourage them to think critically. Consequently, a good means of evaluating student performance in an online course is to require a particular number of substantive posts each week” (Palloff & Pratt, 2000, p. 113). In addition to specifying the number and length of posts per week, the evaluation rubric for “French in Cyberspace” reinforces the observation that “one of the most effective ways to promote student participation in an online class is to make it required and graded” (Ko & Rossen, 2001, p. 222). Thus, students are provided with the following grading rubric in their initial information packets sent to them before the course begins. In this way, they know well in advance how much work will be required of them in order to complete the course successfully. The weekly grading rubric for “French in Cyberspace” has the following form:

- **/20 written questions and online quiz (Champs-Elysées)**
- **/20 culture presentation**
- **/20 response/reaction posts (one response post [15-20 sentences] for each main presentation and two reaction posts [10-15 sentences] to other students’ comments)**
- **/20 presentation response deliverable (selected presentation evaluation, response summary/analysis: one page)**
- **/20 weekly summary question response**
- **/100 weekly grade**

Students receive their grade report by noon on the first class day of each week. As noted in the letter sent to students before the start of the class, they will lose 5 points per day for each late assignment. In this way, students are apprised of how they are doing on a continual basis and, thus, are able to focus on specific areas for improvement in a timely fashion. The final grade is then calculated on the number of points received out of 400 possible for the full month-long course.

However, even when alerted by the grading rubric to the types and amounts of work that the online French course requires, some students take an online course because they think it will be easier than going to a face-to-face classroom at a specific time. “Lori Wallace, a senior instructional designer at the University of Manitoba … has tracked the demographics of distance-education students in Canada for more than a decade … . Many of the students Ms. Wallace surveyed said they thought they would get better grades taking distance courses. She speculates
that some believed on-line courses were easier, while others figured they’d excel on-line because they’d never have to miss a class” (Guernsey, 1998, p. A29). As clearly demonstrated from the description of “French in Cyberspace” presented here, the online French language skills course was not designed to be easy. It is a rigorous, time-consuming course with demanding assignments and deadlines. The initial face-to-face class alone lasts three hours and presents students with activities that engage practical, authentic use of listening and oral communication skills. That lengthy session is then followed by extended work on the bio web page assignment that can last anywhere from 1 to 4 additional hours. Students spend this time completing the web page itself (which would perhaps necessitate email or chat room contact with the professor), reading the bio pages of all of the other nine students in class, and sending two 10-15 sentence email responses to them. An analysis of the remainder of the course assignments reveals a similarly intense focus on using the target language. Examining the assigned coursework predicated on a class size of 10 students, each student would spend the following amount of time engaged in actively and intentionally practicing French language skills per week:

1. 2-4 hours for listening comprehension practice using *Champs-Élysées* (including time to complete the written questions and quiz),
2. 2-3 hours for reading and researching a cultural topic for presentation (students referencing at least 5 sources),
3. 1-3 hours for preparing the presentation for posting (a written text of one screen of text, a *PowerPoint* presentation of a minimum of 10 slides with 2-3 sentences per slide, or a web page with 20-30 sentences on the page),
4. 1-2 hours for reading all the other students’ presentations,
5. 2-4 hours for responding to all the other students’ presentations (each response consisting of 15-20 sentences for a total of 135-180 sentences),
6. 1-2 hours for reading all the other students’ reactions to presentations,
7. 1-2 hours for responding to two other student reactions (each response with 1-15 sentences for a total of 20-30 sentences),
8. 2-3 hours for writing a one-page summary (evaluation and analysis of a selected cultural presentation),
9. 1-2 hours for reviewing weekly posts, and
10. 2-3 hours for preparing a response to the weekly summary question (a written text of one page, a *PowerPoint* presentation of 1-15 slides with 25-30 sentences, or an annotated web page of 25-30 sentences)

As Glisan et al. (1998, p. 59) remind us “… as in any type of language program, the more opportunities to engage students in time-on-task with the foreign language, the greater the yields in terms of language acquisition.” “French in Cyberspace” engages students in a minimum of 15 hours per week of active and cooperative construction of knowledge and building of language skills. This focused attention to productive uses of French ensures that the course achieves the course objective and fosters increased language skills competence.
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