Language Courseware Design

Christopher M. Jones
Carnegie Mellon University

The early period of computer-based language courseware development was characterized by projects which often failed to progress beyond the proof of concept or prototype stage. Early developers might find that an ephemeral hardware platform had evaporated, a programming language faded from use, or some minimal material support had been withdrawn. The programs which did come to fruition often required an institutional investment in infrastructure to use them which was hard to come by. In the 1960s and 1970s virtually all courseware was text-only as well, leaving important components of human language and culture beyond the scope of effective computer delivery.

Much has changed. With the advent of multimedia and the radically decreasing relative cost of computing power applied to graphical user interfaces, the scope and attractiveness of language courseware has expanded dramatically. In the last decade we have seen language courseware take its place in the marketplace alongside the textbook, the audiocassette, and the videotape as necessary components of mass-marketed language methods. Simultaneously, the number of language instructors who are creating their own materials has grown exponentially. Knowledge of what constitutes good courseware, if not the capacity to produce it, has become a requirement of many new hires in postsecondary language instruction, with increasing interest in the secondary arena as well. Many language educators now define themselves, in whole or in part, as authors of language courseware.

If language courseware is no longer a minority concern among language educators, knowledge about the process of actually creating such courseware is unevenly distributed. It is still relatively common to receive requests for information about a cross-platform, networkable, multimedia CD-ROM series for Portuguese, for example, or for an even less widely studied language. Such requests ignore the factors of technological complexity and cost, to say nothing of market size, both of which dictate the feasibility of large-scale multimedia projects.

The import of this special issue is intended to be in exactly this domain, that of the practice of courseware design and production. Authors were not asked to elucidate the research implications related to use of their courseware. The primary emphasis is rather on the process through which these materials are created with a view to offering insight to others who might be attempting to
plan similar endeavors. There is no typical process, but each contributor has been asked to initially consider a common set of courseware design considerations including: the developer’s underlying CALL philosophy, the context of the project, content and technical constraints, a narrative description of the production process, and lessons learned by project’s end.

Three authors address directly the creation of authoring systems intended to facilitate the construction of courseware by instructors without extensive training requirements. Frommer and Foelsche document the creation of the SuperMacLang authoring system, an updating of Frommer’s popular MacLang authoring system. Fischer and Farris detail the development of the Libra authoring system and subsequent work on courseware for French. Godwin-Jones discusses the simultaneous development of courseware for German and a Web-based authoring system, Web Course in a Box. These authors share the preoccupation of creating a useful authoring system feature set in a changing technological environment with limited resources.

Pusack, while himself (with Otto) the creator of the Dasher authoring system, here describes the creation of multi-faceted multimedia support for the Kontakte textbook, using a new version of Dasher and other templates developed at the University of Iowa. Particular issues brought forward include the strengths and weaknesses of an authoring system for commercial development and the constraints inherent in production of courseware for a small-market language (German).

The remaining three articles describe the creation of courseware without the use of an authoring system. Blake discusses the design of the Nuevos Destinos CD-ROM and the advantages of working with multimedia designers at WGBH in Boston. Jones and Frommer detail the process of creating the Portes ouvertes CD-ROM in the context of authoring a first-year French text for Holt, Rinehart. Nelson and Oliver describe the creation of Web-based courseware with a strong component of computer-mediated communication and the possibility of alteration by end users.

It is to be hoped that the ensemble of these articles, all by experienced practitioners, will give some notion of the nature of the work involved. If in the process our readers can glean some helpful hints for their own designs or avoid even one pitfall, our time will have been well spent. Courseware design is ultimately a collective accomplishment over time in which a small measure of personal creativity is applied to models established by our colleagues both past and present. And of course there’s the work … .
NOTES

1 For a CALL history overview, see various articles in the CALICO Journal (1995) 12(5).

2 No slight is intended in any way to Portuguese, which is a beautiful language close to my heart after four years of residence in Portugal. Portuguese is not commonly taught in the U.S., however; the number of students (i.e., potential purchasers) would not be encouraging to for-profit publishers.

AUTHOR’S BIODATA

Christopher M. Jones is Director of the Language Learning Resource Center and Senior Lecturer in French at Carnegie Mellon University. His professional activity is divided between the study of French culture and involvement in a variety of multimedia development projects. He is currently co-director (with G. Richard Tucker) of a multi-year project funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to deliver basic French and Spanish instruction on-line.

AUTHOR’S ADDRESS

Christopher M. Jones  
Department of Modern Languages  
Baker Hall #160  
Carnegie Mellon University  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213  
Phone: 412/268-8087  
Fax: 412/268-1328  
E-mail: cjones@andrew.cmu.edu