

Evaluating a Web-based Generic Second Language/ Culture Methodology Course

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The advent of global education for the Pacific Century has necessitated the teaching and learning of second languages by the majority of students world-wide (Carey 1997). The pressing need for second language learning has necessitated the exploration of more efficient approaches to the teaching and learning of second languages (Carey 1996). In this paper we explore attempts to use Web-based technology and more autonomous approaches to second language teaching and learning. We will show how to exploit technological developments to deal with the need for more efficient second language acquisition.

There is much uncertainty as to how to fully utilize online courses and how effective these courses are. Universities are reluctant to implement unknown instructional procedures with unknown results and some students remain reluctant to try innovative technological approaches to learning. This study reports on a within-subject comparison of two Modern Languages Education generic second language methodology courses that were taught during a common three-week period at UBC in July, 1997. One course used a traditional lecture and assignment orientation while the other used a web-based approach. The instructor who has taught both types of courses was in a good position to draw comparisons between the two course formats. Since, by definition, the course formats are different between the two common content courses while the students are the same, the confounding factor of between groups or between subject differences in course ratings with course differences is eliminated.

Furthermore, because the instructor had recently taught the course in the traditional lecture and assignment format, he was sensitive to students' different reactions to the Web-

based and the conventional course. Additionally, because the Web-based course was also divided between conventional lectures and the online activities, it was also possible to make within-subject, between-course, and within-course comparisons in terms of traditional and online approaches to common content.

The online course utilizing *WebCT (World Wide Web Course Tools)* developed at UBC) included instruction on how to use the Internet as well as how to access the online course and to do online assignments. Students were encouraged to use the bulletin board, chat rooms, and private email tools as well as to explore the 1,000 links on the Modern Languages Education web site for resources and other activities. Other optional activities included the creation of a home page, how to use search engines and advanced search techniques and the creating and maintaining of online journals.

Class time for each day of the 15-day Web-based course was equally divided between a conventional lecture held in a classroom and the activities and instruction in the computer lab. Classroom lectures and discussions were split between classroom application of the course text (Ramirez 1995) and applications of the Internet to the second language classroom. This division of content provides a contrast between students' interests in traditional content presentation and computer applications to the classroom. Because half of the course time was spent in the computer lab on the Web-based activities, it was therefore also possible to contrast the conventional lecture with the Web-based activities. Half of the students (12) were concurrently enrolled in complementary conventional second language methodology courses. This permitted an additional within-subject comparison between a traditional and a Web-based course for which the content was common. Following the courses a questionnaire was administered to the students to ascertain the success of the Web-based and traditional components and to determine which aspects of the Web-based course were most appreciated. In addition, direct comparisons were also made between this Web-based course and the conventional complementary second language methodology course.

The Students

The students taking the courses were pre-service B.Ed. students who were taking their final two courses prior to graduation and the commencement of their professional careers. There were thirteen women and twelve men in the courses, which met every Monday to Friday for three hours

each day for three weeks. Because these courses were in the summer session and therefore isolated from the other courses during the year, it was possible to study students' interaction with these differing course formats unencumbered by the influence of other courses. Similarly, because these courses met every weekday for three weeks, the concentrated nature of the two courses was more easily set apart from their courses during the academic year. Students were informed upon registration that the Web-based course-time would be divided equally between time spent in a conventional classroom with a lecture and discussion format and the time spent in the computer lab engaged in online activities.

Interviews

Throughout the course both formative and summative evaluations were done in the form of interviews and generally the instructors acted as participant observers to gather descriptive data on the performance of the students in all stages of the lectures and online activities.

Results of the Questionnaire

The data from the questionnaire which was administered on the last day of the class are shown as follows.

Class topic (course title)	14
Experience Technology	10
Receive Technical Instruction	15
Improve my SL	11
Make contacts via WWW	2
Access	1
Convenience	2
Flexibility	4
Less work	1
Other (enjoyment)	1

Table 1. What incentives led you to choose this course?

Question 1 results show that the students were motivated to learn both more of the second language and the methodology of teaching the second language in the Web-based course.

TECHNOLOGY	
To acquire computer skills	6
Develop Internet knowledge	7
To create a Home Page	2
How to integrate technology and teaching	6
How to do effective searches	5
LANGUAGE	
To locate language resources	3
To find lesson plans	1
To learn specific teaching strategies	1
To locate other resources	4
OTHER	
To develop marketable skills	1
Achieve professional growth	1
To help students	1
To overcome apprehension about technology	4
To find Key Pals	1

"[S]tudents particularly liked the acquisition of knowledge of the technology used in the course and tended to respond more positively to the time spent in the lab than in the conventional classroom."

Table 2. What did you hope to gain from taking an Internet course?

Question 2 responses corroborate the results of Question 1 and show that the students hoped to acquire second language teaching methodology resources and the technical skills necessary to access these resources.

What did you like about this course?	
course format	
the learner-centred/student-centred approach	
the integration of theory and applications with computer skills	
the text - the exams were useful	
I enjoyed learning about the Internet	
I appreciated the class discussions with experienced teachers	
I gained experience and expertise in WWW	
the freedom and responsibility of exploring the Internet	
being able to share/exchange ideas and opinions with fellow students	
the ability to gather resources from WWW	
Dr. Carey's lectures and anecdotes	
the flexibility/ability to adapt work to own needs	
being able to overcome my fear of technology	
the lab time camaraderie	
the WebCT - established a mini-community, model for own classroom	
the linking of theory and technology	
the classroom debriefing on resources found in lab time	
the concept of culture in language	
the booking of lab time	

Table 3. Question 3: What did you like about this course?

Question 3 responses show that students particularly liked the acquisition of knowledge of the technology used in the course and tended to respond more positively to the time spent in the lab than in the conventional classroom. There is also a theme of liking the social interaction which cuts across both the conventional classroom (liking Dr. Carey's anecdotes) and in the computer lab (lab time camaraderie). This is a critical point which highlights the necessity of social interaction for learning in any course but demonstrates that this social interaction and collaboration can be achieved through the chat rooms and bulletin board which provide sufficient opportunities for cooperative learning and collaboration from which students develop a sense of camaraderie. The essential social interaction and the resulting strong sense of camaraderie which developed during online activities in the lab benefited from the initial and on-going personal interaction in real class time.

What did you dislike about this course?	What would you change about this course?
the time constraints	the text
the problems with DOS lab	to have more lab time/all classes in the lab
my frustration using the Internet	I wanted more structure to lab
the course was too short	I would have liked school visits
I was already familiar with the text/theory	more activities and demonstrations
I had too much work	less reading
the scheduling of lab hours	more technical instruction
not enough lab time	have it advertised properly in calendar
I would prefer computer component only	more structured assignments
seemed like 2 courses - theory and practice	one assignment should have been a Home Page
there was not enough discussion on text	separate elementary and secondary sections
	assign to and schedule the Discussion Groups

Table 4. Questions 4: What did you dislike about this course and Question 5: What would you change about this course?

Questions 4 and 5 results show that this intense three-credit course was very intense for a three-week course and the computer lab was not always available when students wanted it due to crowded computer labs in summer session at UBC. This, however, seems to be primarily a question of computer availability, which is a common issue in education courses and not peculiar to this course. Question 5 results demonstrate the popularity of the Web-based component of the course and specifically mention the Discussion Groups and the opportunities for social interaction.

What did you learn during this course?
computer, WWW and WebCT skills
the depth and scope of resources on the WWW
how to locate resources
the relevance of technology to SL teaching
how to incorporate resources on the WWW into classroom
how to make a Home Page
how to use a search engine and use advanced searches
the integration of culture and language
the role of multimedia in teaching/learning
practical applications of resources
how to reflect on my own teaching/learning
current theories/methods/technology
realizing the different approaches to SL teaching/learning

Table 5. Question 6: What did you learn during this course?

What was the added benefit of having the course online?
being forced to become familiar with technology and its application/new tools
showed the way of the future
the ability to download
the ability to schedule own time
being able to share online sources, opinions and applications
the flexibility and convenience
being able to see others' work
ability to keep info on a diskette - save paper and confusion
the group learning through BB and mail
ability to access from home
sending assignment electronically
I spent less time in class - could work at home
not much (DT)
the autonomy
my increased motivation

Table 6. Question 7. What was the added benefit of having the course online?

Question 6 and 7 replies demonstrate that students particularly like the extensive amount of their learning due to the Web-based nature of the course. Answers to the open-ended questions stressed the greater motivation, individuality, flexibility (could work at home), and autonomy concerning scheduling and range of interests that the Web activities provided. In addition, the course supported more organization

for students because all material was kept on diskettes which minimized the loss of material when brought to class.

Traditional	web-based	Online (no classes to attend)
1	18	2

Table 7. Question 8. Would you now prefer a traditional classroom course, a web-based course or a completely online course?

Question 8 results show that a majority of the enrolled students who took both the traditional and the Web-based course preferred the Web-based course over both the traditional course and a course that might have been exclusively online or had no conventional lectures. These results corroborate the results above that show the necessity of social interaction in providing an enjoyable course. The conventional classes that included discussions of classroom applications of the Website however, were equally as popular as the text-based lectures. These results are also consistent with the high value placed on the web activities, such as the bulletin board and the chat-rooms that permitted social interaction.

Question 9 was addressed to those students who concurrently took a regular classroom generic second language methodology course during the same three-week time period. Results show that over 50 percent selected the web-based course as contributing most to their higher-order thinking skills while 87percent stated that it contributed more to their greater mental growth.

Results from further questions also addressed to students who were in a concurrent regular course revealed that while students found the Web-based course did not allow as much interactive dialogue as some conventional courses, the Web-based course did increase the students' ability to learn and provided more opportunities for learning than a traditional course.

All students agreed that the web-based course took more time than a conventional course. Estimates of this additional time ranged from twice as much to four times as much.

Discussion

One of the major findings is that the Web-based course is certainly not less work for the instructor than a conventional course. It takes considerably more planning and involves much more individualized work, such as

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Implications for Graduate Courses

responding to students on a one-to-one basis by means of the chat rooms, the bulletin boards and the general email, than did the conventional equivalent course. However, the increased work load has a major pay-off in the increased quality, depth and breadth that the course provides for the students. Students consistently reported that they spent more productive time in learning in this course than they did in the conventional course and that it contributed to greater mental growth and higher order thinking skills. The authors also reported that they spent considerable time instructing individual students in computer skills and lesson plan construction.

Moreover, because the students' work was highly individualized, the students could follow their own interests in the diverse topics that the course provided and their motivation was thereby increased. Such diversity of interest, which could not be accommodated in a conventional course, was easily harmonized in this course. Students interested in teaching a variety of different languages could pursue their individual resources easily. Consequently, students reported spending much more time eagerly learning about the various resources that were available for their particular language(s) on the Web.

The success of this course will result in the development of a graduate course which will also be Web-based. In the first author's experience of 25 years of supervising theses and dissertations, the concern has consistently been that students at their defenses frequently lack the depth and breadth necessary in their discipline. This is due in large measure to the limited number of seminars that graduate students take and also due to the fact that there is little time before the seminar and following the seminar for students to discuss ideas while they are hot in their consciousness and their motivation is high. While it is possible to have some limited discussion following a seminar, it is always difficult for graduate students to find a compatible time to meet and discuss their ideas with professors.

A Web-based course solves this problem in several ways. First, it allows the students to immediately compose questions and put them on the chat-line and bulletin board. Writing these questions down serves to refine the question somewhat more than hurriedly blurting the question out at the end of a class. Second, by placing the question for discussion on the chat-line and bulletin board it provides the professor the opportunity to consider each question and to come back to

a question on more than one occasion after pondering for a while. Moreover, each of the responses becomes part of the discourse. Equally importantly, all other participants in the seminar can weigh the question, ask for clarifications, engage the original participant in dialogue, and continue the discussion until the next active seminar. These virtual seminars add greatly to the depth and breadth of the conventional seminar and provide the possibility for participants to engage fully in the seminar and to ask all the questions they desire. It is particularly important to have the time to conceptualize the questions when the technical language is difficult and the majority of the students are themselves studying in a second language.

In summary, the analyses of the results from the questionnaires, interviews, and on-going participant observation throughout the course lead us to believe that offering this course as a Web-based alternative increased the quality of learning by the students and did not sacrifice the opportunities for collaborative and co-operative learning that is essential to the course. The social networking from this course was exceptional and several students have continued to work within this course after it ended, thereby attesting to the sincerity of the positive appraisals of the web-based approach. ♦

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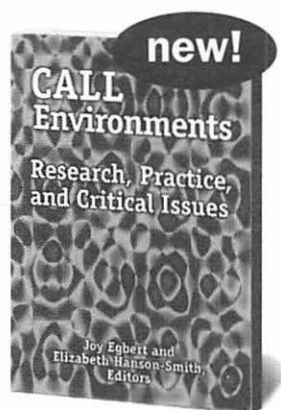
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