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Teaching languages online:
Professional vision in the making

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Abstract

The growing popularity of online language learning means that both experienced language professionals and novices are developing and delivering all or part of their language classes online. This study set out to query practicing online language educators as to how they view themselves; that is, their professional vision of themselves and their craft. One hundred seventy-four online language educators responded to a survey, nine of whom also participated in a synchronous online interview. Responses to questions regarding professional vision varied by stance (teacher-, student-, content-, and medium-centric) with the majority of respondents reporting viewing themselves chiefly as student-centered in their work. Pervasive descriptors of professional vision—comprised of individual stances and qualities, along with how these are enacted in practice—paint a vibrant picture of professionalism in online language education. Respondents report valuing authentic and multimodal affordances, opportunities for tailored instruction/feedback, and highly productive interactions with students, interactions otherwise not feasible in live classrooms. Variations in professional vision are discussed along with implications for online language educator support and development.

Keywords: *Online Language Teaching, Online Language Education, Online Language Learning, Professional Vision*

Language(s) Learned in This Study: *ESL, EFL, Russian, Spanish, German, Chinese, Italian, Arabic, and French*

Introduction

Attempts to determine what constitutes quality online instruction suggest that it is an online teacher's pedagogical role that plays the most crucial part in determining the quality of online courses and, ultimately, student success (Bawane & Spector, 2009; Paloff & Pratt, 2011). While the complexities inherent in the role of educator have been the focus of decades of research, the literature addressing online educators and their work is scant. Applying the construct of "professional vision" —the interaction of knowledge, practice and pedagogical actions of an educator (Goodwin, 1994; Sturmer et al., 2013)—we examine how online language educators see their work.

Background and Theoretical Framework

In the earliest days of online teaching, well-meaning educators duplicated textbooks, worksheets and their recorded lectures and posted these online as their "course." The oddity, close to impossibility of doing this, of directly transferring teaching practices from a live, bricks and mortar classroom to an online

environment, soon became evident. Online course designers were quick to learn that the time, space and communication forums they had to work with were radically different from traditional classroom modes. Change, both conceptual and practical, was necessary. Yet making the move to online teaching disrupts (Jenkins, 2009), forces rethinking roles and practices (Hall & Knox, 2009; Meskill & Sadykova, 2011; Richardson & Alsup, 2015), and most certainly requires adapting instructional routines to the peculiarities of digital environments (Compton, 2009; Dooly, 2013; Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Meskill &Anthony, 2014, 2015). Moreover, contemporary digital cultures, shaped largely by social media, also contribute to changing core concepts about teaching and learning (Lee & Tsai, 2010; Meskill, in press). As the popularity of online instruction grows, understanding practitioners' *professional vision* becomes increasingly important to thoughtful, informed professional development as well as to broader conversations about the profession. To this end we examine the professional vision of online language educators and detail how professional vision is enacted and articulated by them.

Professional Vision: Knowledge, Practice, Seeing

In cognitive anthropology professional vision is foundational knowledge and expertise that members of a profession share (Goodwin, 1994). It is a shared cognitive ability to *see* or single out what is important from complex contexts. This seeing and interpreting is socially oriented and operates with individuals' within-profession knowing as its organizing feature. When considering the teaching profession, Sherin and van Es (2005) employ the construct to teachers' ways of interpreting classroom situations and Hammerness (2003) sees teachers' professional vision as an idealized view of teaching comprised chiefly of the goals teachers hold throughout their work. The ability to *see*, argue Strurmer et al., emerges from knowledge about effective instruction, the ability to transfer this to special contexts, and to relate this knowledge base in a reasoned way to the moment at hand. Professional vision "describes a teacher's ability to notice and interpret relevant features of classroom events for student learning" (Sturmer et al., 2013, p. 1). The dynamic interplay between pedagogical knowledge and instructional application, between theory and practice leads to noticing, interpreting and responding in instructionally meaningful ways. In keeping with these perspectives and as applied to online language instruction, our view of professional vision comprises composite, interdependent foundations that determine noticing, reasoning about what is noticed, and responding in ways that lead to students' successful language acquisition. It is the professional vision of practicing online language educators that this study seeks to explore.

The Professional Vision of Online Language Teachers

Of common professional interest to language educators is the kind of classroom interaction that furthers students' comprehension and acquisition of the target language. Of common professional interest to *online* language educators are the particular affordances by which comprehension and acquisition can be achieved through pedagogical means. Indeed, for language educators, clear, effective communicative talk in the live classroom and via synchronous and asynchronous online modes constitutes both the knowledge base *and* the instruction (Lightbown et al., 1993; Meskill & Anthony, 2015). The centrality of learners, language and active communication is thereby predominant. When the goal of language mastery is considered, processes whereby students actively produce and comprehend the target language, however incrementally, are central and language educators take advantage of opportunities to guide students to use the language productively and authentically as the surest route to acquiring the target language. In short, the interdependent components of professional vision—stances, qualities and enactment—for online language educators are clearly unique from those of other disciplines. Our survey of, and interviews with practicing online language educators set out to examine this uniqueness and give voice to what constitutes a skilled online language teaching professional.

Study Design

Rationale for the Study

The construct of professional vision as it is employed in this inquiry connotes the complex interplay

between stances, qualities, and enactments. It is thereby comprised of teachers' perspectives and professional ways of seeing and knowing. We asked educators how they see themselves applying their pedagogical knowledge and instructional stances in online environments. In all, 174 practicing language educators were surveyed as to their beliefs, experiences, and practices (Appendix A). Nine of those respondents participated in a synchronous online interview (Appendix B). The guiding question throughout the study design and data analysis was: What is the professional vision of online language educators?

Methodology

Our dataset for this mixed methods research is comprised of cross-sectional online survey responses and transcriptions of recorded synchronous online interviews. The exploratory nature of the research question required the collection of data from online language educators with a range of teaching experience, educational backgrounds, and geographical locations. To do so, the survey distribution was conducted via several online communication channels, both formal and informal:

- The link to the survey was distributed via online language educators' email addresses retrieved from U.S. university and college web sites and from publications related to online language teaching in journals focusing on teaching languages with technologies such as *Language Learning & Technology*, *CALICO*, *CALL*, *ReCALL,* and *System*. In total, 1,419 emails were sent.
- Announcements were made via professional listservs such as calico-l-bounces@groups.txstate.edu, worldlanguages@lists.merlot.org, and llti@listserv.dartmouth.edu.
- Announcements were made through the authors' profiles in social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

Responses to the first three survey questions provide participants' teaching experience (Figure 1). Most participants (79%) are language teachers with over 10 years of teaching experience, about 15% have taught a language for 6 to 10 years, 4.7% for 3 to 5 years, and only one respondent has taught a language for 1 to 2 years. Most respondents have significant experience teaching online: 34% of participants have taught online for 3 to 5 years and 26% for over 10 years, while 19% have been teaching online 6 to 10 years, and 14% 1 to 2 years and 7% (12 participants) - less than a year.
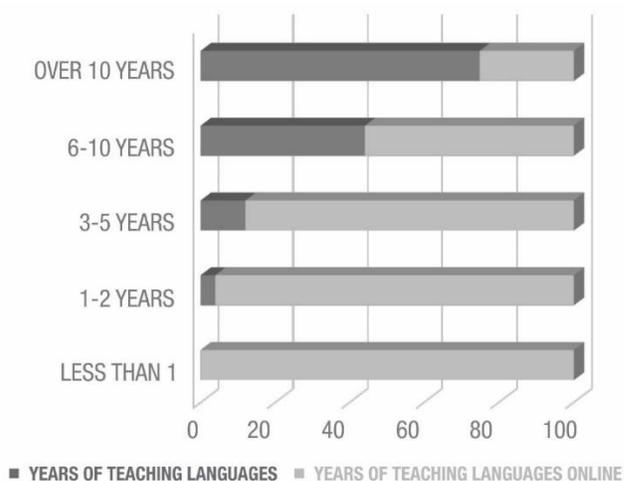

Figure 1. Years of teaching languages and teaching languages online

Survey responses also indicate that 35% of respondents teach only online, 10% teach in a blended format, while 55% of respondents teach courses that are offered only online and courses offered in a blended format. Two open-ended survey questions (Question 4 and Question 5) were completed by 164 and 156 respondents respectively. The final survey question asked participants to provide their email addresses if they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up online interview. Ninety-six survey respondents provided their

emails and 20 were randomly selected for the interview. Nine of those selected (two males and seven females) were able to schedule a synchronous online interview via web conferencing. Each interview, 10 to 28 minutes in length, was recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Short profiles of each interviewee are provided below.

The Interviewees

While completing her doctoral studies in applied linguistics, Jane (all names are pseudonyms) taught French and Arabic online. She was particularly enthusiastic about the communicative affordances of the online venue and how her developing understanding of sociocultural theory could be readily enacted synchronously and via video recordings. "For me, video is the deal breaker. That's where we can make learning happen."

Ellen had been teaching Spanish online for three years. She described herself as enthusiastic, teacher-centric, with her main role being a manager of learners. "I make them work hard." In describing her work she says that she teaches "the way I was taught. I hated to be bored. Nothing boring."

Chris had been teaching languages with technology since the mid 1990s and gradually moved parts of her instruction online. She now teaches French and Spanish online and was very enthusiastic about what she saw as great pedagogical progress: "The affordances of the online medium? Awesome! So much you can do that you couldn't do before."

Randi had taught Spanish online for four years. Her move to online teaching was facilitated by her institution's faculty support offerings, which she continues to rely on exclusively in her course design and teaching. Prior to availing herself of these services, she said her first online course was "awful" and that she knew something had to change. The support she receives takes a student-centric and authentic experiences approach, which she finds conducive to her students' needs.

Kate was in her fourth year teaching Spanish fully online. The focus of her online teaching was on interpersonal communication, something she saw the medium readily affording.

Dana was a nine-year online language teaching veteran. Her stance towards teaching was very much content-centric in that her courses are comprised of textbooks plus publisher-provided online activities. This provided the structure that she saw as essential to a positive learning experience. She saw her main task as that of managing learners within the given structures and integrating multimodal materials so as to "captivate my students."

Jim is a decades-long veteran of both language teaching and instructional technology. He was thrilled to be called up from his retirement to transform a failing language program at his local community college by turning it into an online program. He found a perfect match between his views on second language acquisition and how online teaching forums can serve language learning. Enrollments have surged and he delighted in sharing teaching ideas among his department's faculty. As he put it "I resurrected dead language programs by moving them online."

Fran was a veteran language educator who taught fully online and blended courses, but remained skeptical. She believed the live classroom was a superior venue for language education but persevered because "that's what students want."

Frank described himself as "communicatively oriented, crazy to a point." He enjoyed interacting with his online students and set up multiple times and opportunities for students to interact with him and with other students strictly using Spanish in their online conversations. As he stated, "I participate a lot, I have virtual classes where I have a form where students plug in information, a calendar—when are you available? That way I can offer virtual classes."

Data Analysis

To explore the professional vision of study participants, data were also analyzed qualitatively. Responses

to the open-ended survey questions and the nine synchronous online interviews were transcribed and coded using emerging themes as they iteratively developed in conjunction with emergent themes and patterns in the survey data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The coding was conducted by two researchers independently. After comparing and refining codes, the researchers reviewed the data for the second time, paying specific attention to how survey data corresponded to data from the interviews. To determine the magnitude of phenomena, open-ended survey responses were compiled in a single corpus and the top emerging themes were analyzed for frequency and context. For example, concordancing was conducted for the lemmas *facilitat** (facilitator, facilitate), *creat** (create, creative, creativity), *authentic, engag** (engage, engaging, engagement, engaged), *feedback, confiden** (confidence, confident), terminology that thematically developed through coding and analysis. Resulting contexts and frequencies, in conjunction with our theoretical frame, thereafter comprised major lenses through which specific data were integrated and selected for reporting.

Limitations

The study design, particularly the selection of participants and the data collection instruments, include some limitations. First, considering the range of participants' backgrounds, the survey questions could have been subject to misinterpretation (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996). Our method of participant recruitment, while enabling us to achieve a relatively large sample size, limited the collection of data to those who are actively involved in an online community and/or conduct research in online language learning. With the goal to explore the construct of professional vision in online language teaching, however, we determined that the populations recruited could serve as effective spokespersons, and this proved to be the case. To mitigate the limitations and increase the validity and reliability of findings several steps were taken: 1) survey questions included two open-ended questions meant to encourage participants to freely express their professional vision; 2) the selection of interview participants was done randomly out of the pool of 96 participants who expressed their agreement to be contacted for an interview in their survey response; 3) interviewees represented different levels of online language teaching experience, as well as educators who teach only online or in both formats—online and face-to-face); 4) interview questions were designed to clarify and extend survey responses and decrease the level of participants' bias; and 5) responses to the open-ended survey questions and the interviews were coded for recurrent themes by two researchers independently, then compared, agreed upon, and grouped to form the subthemes in the findings section below.

Findings

Foundational Stances and Qualities

In this section we discuss the foundational stances and qualities (Figure 2) expressed by survey respondents and interviewees along with how these are instantiated in their online instruction.

When describing their foundational stance regarding online language teaching, the majority of survey respondents foreground *students* as primary. This stance squares precisely with extant research on teaching generally: Understanding one's students is central to the enterprise (Borko, 2004). Respondents stress the importance of knowing students especially given the challenges and opportunities of doing so at a distance and then conceptualizing appropriate instructional design and teaching strategies to meet their needs. Those focusing on students' needs also emphasize the importance of being friendly, helpful, efficient, available, compassionate—"considerate of life events"—and ready to assist with stress. As one respondent put it "We must meet students where they are and listen to them to help them learn to learn."

FOUNDATIONAL STANCE
- Student-centric
- Teacher- centric
- Content-centric
- Activity-centric

QUALITIES
- Relational
- Responsibilities of learners
- Facilitation
- Engagement
- Creativity
- Confidence
- Organization/managerial

ONLINE ENACTMENT
- Access to authenticity & native speakers
- Communicative opportunities
- Multimodality affordances
- Feedback
- Developing language skills
- A labor of love

Figure 2. Professional Vision: Foundational stances, qualities and online enactment

Similarly, seven of the nine interviewees point to student-centeredness as their main stance. Jim, a 30-year veteran language educator, stated unequivocally that "contact and connection with students is the most important affordance." Similarly, Kate, a younger, less experienced teacher, also emphasizes student contact: "I see myself primarily as a supporter of students and a facilitator of communication."

Chris explained that she reviews learners' progress and their prepared work in advance of synchronous meetings and in this way knows "where they need scaffolding and support," and can "come up with tailored tests using communicative forums." And, while Dana depends on publisher material for all of her teaching, when she makes decisions about what activities the class will do and how she will assist, she says she thinks about that student who lacks confidence, who needs the most help and plans accordingly. Like many others, Dana sees connecting with students as the most attractive feature of the medium. One survey respondent even lauded the medium for making possible what she would have appreciated when a student: "I reflect on what hindered my ability to learn and how I can modify things to make them more accessible for my students, especially learning to differentiate for students who have specific needs." This sense of responsibility resonated in the following survey response:

> As a language teacher, my foundational beliefs about teaching and learning are to provide students with quality instruction that is innovative, flexible, and student-centered. My responsibility as a teacher is to know my students, their backgrounds, their interests, and their unique perspectives. It is my duty to help that student reach his/her potential.

When foregrounding *teaching*, respondents indicate the importance of the instructor's role in shaping the kinds of interactions that most benefit language acquisition processes. One survey respondent described herself as "dependable, exciting, excited, energetic, enthusiastic," emphasizing the motivational role in online teaching.

While general teaching methods were mentioned, most responses cite *communicative language teaching*

that incorporate task-based, culturally rich activities:

> My philosophy as a teacher is to provide the opportunity for students to learn the Spanish language by facilitating the development of their communication skills effectively and to provide them with an appropriate cultural experience.

Content-centric stances place primary importance on materials and assessments with students' success more attributable to course design than any other aspect.

> I am an online language instructor that always makes sure that each lesson has a clear takeaway. It is crucial that the student can understand what he or she is going to be able to do by the end of the lesson. Also, materials need to be attractive and brain-friendly.

One interviewee, Dana, a 9-year online language teaching veteran, exemplifies a content-centric language educator. Her online students' work and class activities are generated by the course textbook and its adjunct tools. Dependence on the online component of the course textbook and the textbook itself was mentioned by a number of content-centric survey respondents along with the need for continuous input and facilitation.

Activity-centric respondents value what students do online with the materials teachers designed, informed by their understanding of second language acquisition processes. Thus, the long-term veteran language educator, Chris, stated that "the most critical part of the whole online teaching enterprise is the second language acquisition knowledge base. This needs to be taught, integrated, not left behind. It's what *makes* language teaching language teaching." The other veteran interviewee, Jim, reiterated this: "Activity-centric, communication centric, my role is one of facilitator." To Jim the online environment "primarily affords access to authenticity and communication opportunities."

Qualities of Online Language Teachers

Relational

Eight of the nine interviewees stressed the centrality of connecting with students, something temporally constrained in face-to-face contexts. That both teacher and students could communicate at length at any time in the target language, with the instructor providing scaffolding and guidance along the way, is widely considered a chief affordance of online language instruction. As Jim stated, "There's more richness, more depth, I can talk more about culture, my experience, it's a level of deeply getting into the subject that can't happen in the traditional classroom." And, as one survey respondent put it, "I am always seeking to increase social interaction and student engagement which can be tricky online. I have learned that the number one factor is instructor presence." Another survey participant also supported this view: "I am proactive and I find ways to connect with each student individually and build a solid rapport."

Responsibilities of Learners

When stating their foundational beliefs about teaching and learning, many survey participants emphasize the important role of the student, and students' responsibilities as learners:

> Students have the responsibility to make every effort to learn what works best for them. You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. To paraphrase D. Smith-Shank, the student as receiver of information needs to change into the student as author of understanding. Language learning is about student self-empowerment and individual agency enhancement. My job is not to teach Spanish, but to teach my students how to be better Spanish learners.

Interviewee Kate feels positively about students helping one another to learn. This is echoed by Randi who uses pair work as a means of having his students practice communication in the target language. Kate also points out that online "all learning gets documented, so assessment is easier. Online everyone is responsible for learning."

Facilitation

According to a 2009 study, the term *facilitator* was the descriptor most frequently cited by online educators (Bawane & Spector, 2009). This is strongly echoed in our survey and interview data. The term is directly used 26 times throughout survey responses and is also suggested via analogous terms, such as: *coach, mediator, guide, updater,* and *awakener.* Online environments imply that learners must exercise control and volition in their learning. Thus, online instructors see themselves as aiding and assisting in what is widely viewed as partially autonomous activity (Reinders & White, 2016). One interviewee, Frank, especially portrays his primary role in online teaching as supporting and aiding student oral production and aural comprehension: "My favorite part of the online [class] is when I assign students to work on the textbook exercises orally (synchronously) in pairs and I come into the conversation and guide and help them."

In more self-paced courses, in which students' main responsibility is to complete work independently, an instructor may perceive their role as primarily a *grader* as one of the survey participants describes. In contrast, one survey respondent compares her role to a *fitness coach* that trains students via a web conferencing program. Another survey respondent eloquently shares: "Teaching is the privilege of serving as a guide, role model, coach and cheerleader in that process. My students and I are partners as we co-construct meaning together."

Engagement

A majority of study participants point out that the key to learning a language is interaction. It is widely agreed and widely taught in language teacher professional development that the more students engage in authentic communication in the target language, the more facile mastery of the language overall becomes (Lightbown et al., 1993; Long, 2017; Savignon, 2018). This emphasis on student interaction and engagement is echoed in several survey responses; for example: "Empower students—get them using the language as much as possible."

As Randi emphasizes in her interview, students need to be kept engaged, "you need to give them personalized tasks, make them DO a lot so they'll learn." Ellen's comment regarding online course design is in the same vein: "Design from the students' perspective; the way young people learn is very different from the way we see things, learn things." And, as Frank takes great pleasure in recounting,

> When I am involved in a conversation with the students, they have an assignment, I show up and it is very satisfying that they are doing it and enjoying what they are doing, smiling laughing, saying something funny, they work hard but they are enjoying.

Survey respondents concur. As one states, "Engagement is the cement that holds together all of the other facets of the classroom."

Kate emphasizes the importance of building community and having "as much interaction with me as possible." This is echoed by Ellen: "Nothing boring! I am enthusiastic so I make them enthusiastic." In her interview, Randi emphasizes the importance of active students and reports integrating student action at every opportunity: "Work this into assignments, students make choices, watch things in the target language, choose meaningful things, make it more personal, giving tasks so students DO something with the language." A similar sentiment is expressed by a survey respondent: "It is imperative that students are engaged in tasks in the online course and not just passively processing material presented to them."

Creativity

In the field of second language teaching, creativity has long been viewed as a central component (Jones & Richards, 2016). Given the tools and content of the internet, it is a given that the language teaching craft would thrive in digital contexts. The descriptors that survey respondents use for themselves as online teachers certainly connote the creative dimension of the craft. Terms such as *visionary, explorer, awakener* versus *correcting machine* suggest opportunities to experiment with the infinite possibilities they could

avail themselves of online:

> A visionary. Free from the bounds of time and space, I have the opportunity to creatively approach language instruction invoking cutting edge technology to curate a unique personalized learning experience.

Confidence

Because language education is such an interpersonal affair and entails intensive social competencies, the theme of confidence arose throughout the data. Engaging learners in using the language productively can involve risk taking, or "putting oneself out there," as one survey respondent put it. Interviewee Frank expresses strong confidence in his ability to render the language comprehensible and the learning fun, his intention being that his students in turn be confident users of the language: "I need to speak in a way they can understand—comprehensible input; I use cognates, at a slow pace, not complicated, I want them to be confident."

In contrast, three survey respondents express a *lack* of confidence in their online teaching along with optimistic outlooks: "OK but not great. Still have room for improvement." says one. Another reports: "Ineffective. However, I improve with each course taught." Yet another expresses, "I feel like I am engaging and fun in the classroom and I would probably describe myself as being worried about how to translate these qualities into the online classroom."

Organizational and Managerial

Strong managerial skills and carefully organized activities are viewed as important ingredients in online language instruction. Interviewee Dana describes her responsibility to manage student performance with published materials: "I make it as clear and as easy for students as possible." Another interviewee, Ellen, sees herself as highly organized whose role is chiefly the manager of learning activity. Frank, too, saw the importance of providing a well-structured environment:

> I needed to be well organized from day one where I knew like say the semester begins in August, I knew the learning outcomes need to be laid out—I work out the progression of student knowledge…

Several survey participants also describe themselves as organized, precise, structured: "Structure is important; students appreciate and respond well to structure because it keeps them on track in the course."

Online Enactment

How do online language teachers perceive the medium? How does the online environment come to influence and shape professional vision? First, when discussing the ways they came to online teaching, a handful of the interviewees mention how difficult and often impossible it is for their institutions' instructional support staff to accommodate the kinds of design functionality they require for language teaching. "It's a whole different animal and they just couldn't get that," reported Jim. While Ellen stated, "I figure out a lot of work-arounds, you have to, everything is so new, lots of the tech experts can't answer my questions, meet my teaching needs." For this group of educators, online teaching, then, requires a great deal of flexibility on their part in terms of what they wish to accomplish. It also requires what a few study participants term "work-arounds" to achieve a course design that makes sense for language teaching.

As regards sentiments about the online medium itself, responses vary widely. Some are ecstatic about the range and frequency of communication opportunities. Some cite time affordances as allowing them to notice and reason much more and better about student output than in live classes. Others note their ability to attend to individual students, individual learning issues, interests, etc. Additional themes regarding the medium's affordances follow.

Access to Authenticity and Access to Native Speakers

Authentic language and culture are immediate in the age of social media, connectivity and international

commerce. Language professionals no longer rely on fabricated textbook dialogs and stories as models and anchors. Rather, they employ authentic digital materials that are readily available. Many respondents were quick to point this out and describe their efforts to make the language and culture learning as authentic as possible. As one survey respondent put it, "I do my best to engage my students in authentic communication practice in the target language."

As regards having access to native speakers and authentic online resources, a survey participant confesses: "I'm trying to make my online class as efficient as possible by using outside resources that enable students to interact with native speakers to compensate for the lack of interaction that usually takes place in class."

In his interview, Jim enthusiastically emphasizes the rich literacy inherent in closed captioning and subtitling under new Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) laws. "Literacy opportunities are huge and authentic!" and Randi speaks with passion about her "students visit[ing] Spanish institutions and popular venues online for target language exposure" while Kate sings the praises of heritage speakers who volunteer as online conversation partners for her students.

Communicative Opportunities

Respondents speak specifically of the medium affording multiple, varied and rich opportunities to communicate with learners. Asynchronously and synchronously, via text, voice and video, teaching online means more tools, more time, and, therefore, more chances for meaningful, authentic interaction between and among teachers and students as a means of to practice and thereby master the language.

> Online means meaningful input, more opportunities for output and feedback because students can get together in Adobe Connect room any time they want… I design activities that allow for self-regulation and achieving all of the communicative modes so we use YouTube, Voicethread, whatever, and that translates into the teaching. The most effective thing we've discovered—students have a one on one synchronous evaluation that is recorded—when they're half way through the course, we play the students' first attempt, seeing students process changes their language learning identity from "I'm learning Russian" to .. "I am a speaker of Russian." (Jane, online interview).

Jim repeatedly lauds online opportunities to connect with his students in meaningful ways. This was echoed by Kate who points out how online teaching affords the tailoring of individual learning through instructor-student interaction. Indeed, the affordances of the online medium in this regard are frequently cited as a plus, a supportive aspect for enacting communicative practices as part of the language teaching craft.

Multimodal Affordances

Many respondents are adamant about the value of multimodalities in their teaching. Language is, after all, rendered readily comprehensible when accompanying visual depictions are available (Meskill, 1999, 2009, in press; Walker & White, 2013). Ellen, a true proponent of multimodal instruction, expresses the urgency of multimodal aspects of language teaching: "I want visually captivating, they are social media junkies, this is what hooks them." This is seconded by Kate who is "as multimodal as possible, use many modalities at the same time." Dana, a former communications major, takes multimodal integration a step further by applying communication heuristics in her teaching: "Visuals and text short and to the point is optimal. My videos are simple and short." Frank, too, is enthusiastic: "Multimedia. Yeah, adding voice to PowerPoints, use more images, insert songs—big transformation for me to make my instruction more exciting." Randi uses "as much multimodality as I can. This is the only way to grab them, to get them, this generation. It's what they expect" and Dana further exclaims in her interview: "I live to use videos to captivate them!"

Feedback

A key aspect of language education is feedback; literally giving learners correction, encouragement, models, and direction (Mackey, 2006). Online feedback can be accomplished asynchronously or synchronously with text and/or voice. Visual feedback in the form of images, drawings and animations is a

common strategy, according to both interview and survey responses. Indeed, many study participants' foundational beliefs about teaching and learning language rest on the importance of providing learners with feedback on their attempts at communicating (comprehension and production) in the target language. Said one, "Specific, timely, targeted feedback about what the student is doing well, and where s/he has 'room for growth' is essential to good learning and teaching."

While also expressing her focus on students and their learning, on "making connections, having a presence," Randi, a 4-year online teaching veteran, values the feedback she provides: "clear, valuable feedback; students do video logs incorporating grammar and themes. I watch and take careful notes then make a video back to them with areas of improvement: pronunciation, grammar, I add visuals, etc., all the ways I can help them improve."

Survey participants point to the text-heavy nature of online courses as positively developing literacy skills as well as the variety of media (multimodality affordances) they employ in their teaching. As a survey respondent puts it: "Language and technology are a natural match because of the interactive nature of video, podcasts, pdf forms for worksheets, the echogram for many texts, and so on."

Developing Language Skills: Face-to-face vs. Online

Those who make comparisons between online teaching and live classroom instruction tend to be either entirely in favor of the online form or not. "The dynamic of language is, by nature, geared to include verbal, oral, tactile and visual experiences. I find the online option very conducive to language learning," states one of the survey respondents. By contrast, another survey participant confesses disliking being an online instructor: "I don't like it. I do it because it is what students think they want. They are wrong. It is not a good way to learn for many people." As would be expected, our other self-selected interviewees are uniformly positive about online language teaching.

Problematic areas associated with the online learning environment mentioned by survey participants are:

- The lack of face-to-face communication
- The disruptive, volatile nature of synchronous online meetings.

One of the survey participants describes the online environment as being in a state of "permanent disruption," which the writer reasons translates into being willing "to change and make adjustments." Many point out that online teaching requires additional time and effort: "I spend a lot of time teaching the class because it requires individual attention to help students succeed in the course. I work nonstop."

A very small number of survey participants expresses little enthusiasm for, and a lack of knowledge about online language learning, for example, one participant states, "I try to make the online course students experience as close to a face-to-face class as possible, although I realize it will never be the same."

Goodyear et al. (2001) observe that, after content facilitator, "technologist" was the second most important of ten online teaching competencies in their early inquiry. Interestingly, neither the interviewees nor the survey respondents come across as technologically enthralled. The one exception is a single survey respondent who self-describes as a "teachnologist." Otherwise there is no hint of the 'geek' or the medium-centric. Rather, the study respondents uniformly emphasized the craft of teaching and how technology tools served that enterprise rather than the "techie" side of online instruction. Finally, one additional respondent points out that online learning is "beneficial for *some* students" but that learning online is "not for everyone."

A Labor of Love

Although we can assume that reporting educators are held accountable for their students' mastery of the language as reflected in retention, grades, and test scores, only one online teacher mentions this as important: "We need to meet expectations at state and local levels" while two other survey participants explicitly state that language teaching is about loving one's work:

> Teaching languages must come from the heart. You need to love your material and you need to love what you do.

> The teacher has to love the subject and the art of teaching to be effective. Also, the teacher needs to present the material in a way that is appealing and understandable.

Finally, one respondent states that online learning "is not a good way to learn for many people." Another describes online language learning as not the best format for language acquisition, but as offering a "viable alternative." A novice online Chinese language teacher also describes the instructional format as far from ideal. She is "disappointed in the outcomes" and "reluctant."

Discussion

As educators move online, they of necessity develop new roles for themselves (Baran & Davis, 2011). The emerging professional vision this group of online language educators articulate has much to inform us about in this regard. Reported insights about the accommodations they make, as well as how their approaches to exploiting technological features that align with their professional vision, have much to contribute in understanding these new roles. For example, it is widely held that effective online education is the "integration of content, technological, and pedagogical knowledges and the contexts in which they function" (Koehler et al., 2007, p. 740). Online language education, as portrayed via these study participants, clearly complexifies content and pedagogical knowledges as they relate to both the linguistic and the technological.

What we see in these data, then, is professional vision that is particular to the language education discipline. With language being the pervasive, integral content and tool of instruction, deep understanding of how new languages are learned is shaping the design and instructional decisions these online language educators make about student learning. This is clearly evident via the most predominantly reported aspect of professional vision: students and the medium's socio-communicative opportunities for students. Indeed, the majority of respondents described their work as "student centered" and keenly relational with online affordances best considered in the service of those relationships. Understanding and having facility with online communication venues and attaining a level of fluency with their concomitant digital resources appear to be central to pedagogical possibilities and can be viewed, then, as comprising the core of professional vision for the majority of these online language teaching professionals.

Conclusion

Teacher accounts have long been an integral tool in teacher research and teacher professional development (Bruner, 2006; Johnson, 2009). Teachers telling stories of their pasts, presents, and futures is clearly a powerful means of developing connections between theory, pedagogical knowledge and practice, thereby furthering the field. In their discussions of teaching languages online, these educators are articulating their professional vision of themselves and their work. Their stories constitute a vital source and force in our understanding of the intricacies of practice, the professionals who practice, and the vision that guides them. Their professional vision is perspectival and serves as a lens through which the profession is enacted and understood.

These online language educators' responses reveal the range and variation in stances, qualities, and enactments involved with this mode of teaching. The majority see themselves as empowered by the medium, especially its communication and multimedia affordances which align neatly with second language acquisition. Others see themselves as coaches and facilitators of student learning, others see themselves as managers of learning with publisher content being the mainstay. No respondent reported being enthralled by the technology of online teaching per se. Rather, there was widespread consensus regarding the socio-communicative power of online tools and venues. Finally, this richness and variation of professional vision tells us that there are committed educators in the world who invest time and dedicate

themselves to the mission of student success by optimizing opportunities for students learning languages online.

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Appendix A. Survey Questions

1.   How long have you been teaching language(s)?
     • Less than 1 year
     • 1-2 years
     • 3-5 years
     • 6-10 years
     • over 10 years

2.   How long have you been teaching language(s) online?
     • Less than 1 year
     • 1-2 years
     • 3-5 years
     • 6-10 years
     • over 10 years

3.   Do you teach languages
     • fully online
     • blended
     • both

4.   If you were asked by a colleague to describe yourself as an online educator, what would you say?

5.   State your foundational beliefs about teaching and learning.

6.   We would like to conduct a follow-up interview to clarify your answers and to deepen our understanding about how you are developing as online language teacher. If you don't mind if we contact you via Skype for a 15-20 minute interview, please provide your email address to set up a meeting time. Please provide email contacts of colleagues who might want to participate in this study.

Appendix B. Interview Questions

1. Please describe what it means for you to be a good online language teacher.

2. When designing an online language course, how and why do you choose what activities to develop and implement? Please describe goals and processes of the activities that you employ to make optimal use of the online medium to teach language.

3. Can you provide an example of how what we know about second language acquisition gets played out in your online courses?

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