

FINAL REPORT (6/24/09)
 USING ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIOS TO FACILITATE ASSESSMENT FOR
 LEARNING IN UMD FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS
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This report will present the impact of our work on the UMD community. Previous reports on our objectives, strategies, activities, and deliverables as well as disposition of fundings have already been submitted via the interim report. Our group wiki site—with team wikis that were generated—as well as my SPA 103 template wiki site were also shared with the President's Office in January, 2009. Our project team worked ahead of schedule and completed our objectives during Fall semester, 2008. This report therefore outlines the impact of our work on the UMD community and uses the following bases to assess that impact: (1) The Provost's Best Practice Award for Innovative Use of Technology to Dr. Biron for work conducted in her SPA 103 class (2) Comments by students on their SPA 103 experience (3) Comments by the project team on their wiki experience (4) Success of the Spring, 2009 mentoring project.

(1) The Provost's Best Practice Award to Dr. Biron for Innovative Use of Technology in her Spanish 103 class (a presentation on this work – “Facilitating Student Language Acquisition and Use with Web 2.0 Tools: Promises and Possibilities”- was given to the UMD community in March, 2009 and was videorecorded. The videorecording is being edited and will be available on the UMD Instructional Development website in the near future).

My innovative technology project was designed to facilitate the second language acquisition process of Spanish 103 students, students who wish to complete their first year Spanish language requirement in one semester. Building on a task-based approach to language learning and on the assessment concept of eportfolios or webfolios, the project used a wiki site designed to help students to express themselves in real-life contexts and in ways that were aligned with course goals and national standards of foreign language learning. The wiki site presented instructional technology resources already on the web such as the University of Texas at Austin's Spanish Proficiency Exercises site and BBC language tools such as Spanish Steps and Talk Spanish sites to model presentational and conversational tasks that students needed to demonstrate in the course. Students were required to use these technology resources to practice their pronunciation, to improve their comprehension of native speaker texts on a variety of topics, and to learn phrases and vocabulary that they could use in their own personalized conversation and presentation podcasts. Students also learned an easy EVOCA software to develop and record podcasts either at home (as is the case with the presentation podcasts) or in class (as is the case with the conversation podcasts). Since the conversational models provided on the web were relatively simple, podcasts recorded in class were recorded without notes and students were required to add additional vocabulary and phrases learned in class to develop these conversations. Aside from the

interpretive, presentational and interactional abilities developed with the above video and audio technology, the site also enabled students to easily access BBC Spanish news materials on the web on topics of interest to them. At the beginning of the course, students select an area of interest such as Culture and Society, Sports, International News, Politics, Technology, etc. and read four to five different extended articles on their topic. Students then used the wiki site to summarize their comprehension in English, to develop and apply reading strategies highlighted in the course, and to use vocabulary and phrases learned during the reading process to draft strings of sentences or a simple paragraph in Spanish about the text studied. Whereas the general wiki site helped students present varied oral and written tasks over the course of the term, the cumulative wiki tasks designed for use at the end of the term helped students to synthesize previous work through new tasks and projects. With these end-of-term tasks, students used the wiki site to work collaboratively in groups or to integrate other classmates' work into their own work, completing projects that ranged from classroom survey tasks to autobiography tasks to reading research tasks. The site also provided tutorials to help students post information on the web, to successfully record audio on the site, and to link information to appropriate pages.

The wiki site supported course student learning outcomes in a variety of ways. The instructional web resources modeled many of the learning outcomes that students were required to demonstrate in the course, thus facilitating their learning and acquisition. The conversation podcasts helped students engage in face-to-face conversation and to greet people, respond to greetings, make a variety of requests across different contexts, express likes and dislikes, and express needs and wants. For example, students learned to negotiate a taxi ride, check into or check someone into a hotel, order food in a restaurant, request the location of a supermarket, etc. In preparing for the conversation podcasts, students worked to demonstrate understanding of the main idea and some details of the video and audio web resources (an interpretive outcome) in order to do well on their original podcasts and, implicitly, observe similarities and differences between English and Spanish in the expression of actions and functions. The presentation podcasts helped students to present information to others in oral format. For example, students described what they liked to do, their daily routine, talked about themselves, compared themselves to three other people, and described family. The BBC tasks and cumulative wiki tasks helped students to present information in written format. The cumulative wiki survey task also helped students learn to obtain and provide information about people, places, and things. The cumulative wiki reading task helped students to compare content in Spanish and English and to demonstrate student awareness of Hispanic perspectives and practices on a variety of topics, as did the other BBC tasks.

In addition to the use of the wiki, varied web resources, and podcast requirements to support student learning outcomes, the site design itself provided numerous opportunities to apply and develop these outcomes. The site design supported a continual application of Spanish to varied contexts of language use and rejected a one-time snapshot approach to demonstrated learning. The site therefore enabled a formative, process-oriented,

cyclical approach to the attainment of these outcomes and increased the potential for student success and growth as a result.

Finally, the site used clear instructions that delineated the process-approach through which students could successfully accomplish a task. Each direction line for a given task asked students to perform a sub-task en route to the larger task, thus providing students with strategies and more manageable micro-tasks that can assist them in building toward the demonstration of one or more learning outcomes.

The development of this wiki site enabled me to more fully apply my teaching philosophy in a more student-centered, organized, and reflective manner. From a conceptual perspective and in connection with Vygotskian sociocultural approaches to teaching, I believe that language is jointly constructed between teachers and learners in situated contexts, that teachers and learners are both important participants in developing a class culture and a class learning community, and that meaningful language learning engages both parties in problem solving and knowledge building. Through practices such as guided participation, teachers can assist students to perform tasks at more sophisticated levels than they would be able to perform on their own. Students are therefore active agents in their own learning and the wiki site functioned as a situated context that furthered this agency, strengthened our class learning community, and allowed me varied opportunities to facilitate guided participation through site design.

From a practical perspective, the construction of the wiki site facilitated the organization, efficiency and ease with which I implemented my teaching approach. I found that the construction of this wiki site allowed me to present large sections of content in manageable, user-friendly formats that could be repeatedly viewed and reflected upon at students' convenience. Because the site was visible to all, I was more sensitive to the clarity and logic of my explanations and found myself to be constantly tweaking phrases, ideas, or wordings over the course of the term. I could also avoid lengthy classroom explanations of my expectations. Also, since peer review and group work and reflection was built into the wiki site, I could free class up for other important activities. I also found the wiki site to be very helpful in assigning grades and in providing formative feedback on student work. The member board of the site allowed me to directly reply to students on the page of work I was examining and therefore speeded up the process.

Finally, development of this wiki site helped me to become a more reflective teacher. It enabled a tighter integration between assessment and instruction in this class and helped me to develop tasks that enabled the generation of student eportolios, comprised of both oral and written student work. I could more easily reflect on students' work and their formative development over the course of a term. Use of the site also prompted me to develop parallel sites and to explore the possibility of this technology for other courses

This technology improved student learning because it helped students focus on the use and application of learned language skills and showed them how language works in context. With the inclusion of authentic materials that the site enabled, students were linked directly to texts that native speakers either produced themselves or to those that they themselves read. This brought students into the wider Hispanic community outside of the classroom and connected them to the real world. The models provided on the site also built student confidence and gave students the tools they needed to take risks in communicating an idea or message in Spanish. As previously mentioned, the numerous opportunities to converse, interpret, and present in varied situational contexts facilitate student progress and development over time. Wiki tasks were closely linked with expected learning outcomes, thus showing students how their wiki work helped them succeed in the course and, at the same time, develop life-long skills. The BBC reading component of the course helped students connect course work to other classes or to topics of interest to them. Students therefore developed critical thinking skills through these readings as they applied background knowledge to the new content, guessed words from context, learned new information presented through the Spanish content and linked reading content to their own personal or academic experience.

From an assessment perspective, the wiki site allowed students to review their own work and/or to reflect on it and make changes to it. Although this review and reflection was built into course tasks, especially the cumulative tasks, some students voluntarily made changes or improvements on their work assignments. Hence, the wiki site provided students with the opportunity to take more responsibility for their learning process and move toward greater autonomy in improving their own work.

(2) Comments by students on their SPA 103 experience

A review of seventeen responses to the question “How have the course wiki and wiki activities helped your learning of Spanish” indicated that students appreciated the ability to look back at their work a bit, the clear directions, the web resources, the ability to look at peers’ work to “reference how to do what”, the use of resources to help with comprehension and the understanding of main ideas, the advantage of having work on the computer so that it is not lost or misplaced, the ease with which to do homework, the ability to learn new vocabulary, phrases and grammatical tips through the resources, the fact that the site brings all knowledge together, the idea that the wiki has forced students to immerse themselves in Spanish, that it is nice to be able to speak outside of class, that it allows students the option to complete the work on their own time schedule, that it facilitates communication, that it helps students speak more fluently, that it helps in learning Spanish culture, that it has made homework more interactive, that the assignments are more fun, enjoyable and memorable than other ways of learning and that it helps to hear what one sounds like. Other student voices commented that the wiki site helped them learn more, helped them become better speakers and that it facilitated more meaningful learning.

In preparation for the presentation of my work to the university community I also collected the following additional comments from students regarding the BBC reading tasks. Students commented that the BBC reading tasks were “very helpful” and that “it was very interesting to take an entire article in Spanish and process it into something I can actually understand. Other comments included:

“all in all I enjoyed learning more about my own culture and about other ones...I never watch news or read the paper but there is a lot going on in the world that we should pay attention to...thanks very much!”

“All together the topic of science and technology proved to be very interesting and many times the vocabulary used in the articles overlapped with that of the classroom”

“I enjoyed the BBC tasks and learning more about a topic I found interesting to me”

“I learned a lot about Spanish and about global culture through the BBC tasks. I learned a lot of facts about religion, art, and general culture that I wouldn't have ever known if I had not done the project”

“All in all I would say that I learned something new everytime I did a BBC task, as well as from reading the tasks of classmates”

“From my own work and after reading my classmates' work, I have realized that Americans and Latin Americans share very similar interests, whether it is sports, politics or pop culture. We are not as distant and separate from one another as society portrays.”

(3) Comments by the project team on their wiki experience

I provided access to our group's projects and comments via our group wiki site as attachments to the January, 2009 interim report and can be reviewed at the following web address (<http://umdfllwebfoliopproject.wetpaint.com/>). A review of these comments indicate that the wiki experience was very positive for participants. They believed the course wiki to be “a good learning tool and a great source of useful information for students.” Another team member stated that she was “very pleased with the wiki in general” and that it was “a great way to get the students to use the target language, read authentic materials and listen to native speakers from different parts of the Spanish speaking world.” Our one French member said she had “some Ludite reservations” when she began the project but found that “the students unanimously preferred the Wetpaint site to MyCourses for its ease of use and availability. They liked the online work and some would have liked more online work...their enthusiasm has inspired me to think more creatively about how to use Wetpaint in the future.”

As an added measure of the positive impact of project work on team participants, three of the participants (in addition to the project leader) elected to use wikis in different courses during Spring, 2009 and did so successfully. All team participants have also indicated their intention to use Wetpaint wiki technology in future academic work.

(4) Mentoring Work During Spring, 2009

On February 25, 2009 I organized a department meeting for other FLL faculty interested in this technology and followed this up with another presentation in March for two of our members who could not attend on the first date. The presentation, "What You Can Do with Wetpaint Wiki Technology", featured the team in presentation of their sites and what they had learned in the process. The presentation discussed inclusion of syllabi, student pages, importation of visuals, ways to facilitate student oral and written presentations, the development of interactive homework assignments, the development of student conversational skills as well as comprehension and interpretive abilities, links to other instructional technology resources, listening to and posting audio in sites, integrating language and culture through the site, facilitation of group project work, and encouraging student reflection through the site. All attendees were enthusiastic about the possibilities of the technology for their classes. Although four people were reportedly mentored in developing their own sites for Fall, 2009, no one to date has come forward to answer a survey questionnaire on what has been accomplished via the mentoring process. It is perhaps reasonable to assume that the mentoring process has been informal and that more follow-up is needed. Given colleagues busy time schedules, it is difficult to assure that this takes place without financial incentives and within such a limited time frame. I was loathe to approach the team to put pressure on colleagues since they had already dedicated large quantities of time to the project. It is likely that participants will work on this process over the summer and that follow up in the Fall will further this process into a more productive stage.