Technology, Your Partner In Language Learning

U.S. COMMUNITY COLLEGES USE TECHNOLOGY TO INDIVIDUALIZE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION AND IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOME

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Technology is winning over language instructors at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC)—not because Web-based courseware and streaming media happen to be trendy, but because educators say these resources increasingly deliver impressive student outcomes. How impressive? When the college compared the before and after performance of more than 500 students in a beginning Spanish course, it found that online courses helped boost comprehension and other key skills by more than 80 percent. Results like these have convinced CCBC's department heads to integrate technology into the entire language curriculum, which spans eight languages, including Spanish, French, Arabic, and Chinese. Some classes are fully online while others blend online learning with traditional classroom teaching.

"Students can access course materials outside of class, communicate with instructors, watch lectures, complete their homework assignments, create presentations, read about other cultures—all whenever they have the time and an Internet connection," says Soumaya Long, assistant professor and co-coordinator of world languages at the college. **>>**

The CCBC language department isn't alone in its support of technology. Across the country, an increasing number of community colleges are embracing digital tools in language programs. Educators say the resources complement traditional in-class instruction, expand the ways students can access learning, and help teachers and students focus on individual outcomes.

That's certainly been the case at Central Texas College (CTC), where administrators recently launched a 24-7 online learning center with access to interactive content for language instruction. Lisa Volle, a CTC anthropology and Spanish faculty member and a consultant who has helped other colleges implement language-learning technologies, says it didn't take long to see students' final grades rise at CTC. Volle says the online learning center has also helped increase retention rates for advanced students.

The Global Imperative

The results could not have come at a better time, especially as pressure mounts on colleges to prepare students for success in a global, and increasingly multilingual, economy.

A recent U.S. News & World Report survey found that knowing more than one language can significantly improve young peoples' career and earnings prospects. Job seekers who speak both English and Spanish typically make more money than monolingual peers in the same positions.

Despite such evidence, not everyone is convinced that technology is the best option for honing students' language skills. Some skeptics say the increasing role of technology inside and outside of the classroom is a distraction—one that could potentially undermine the work of teachers.

But supporters of technology have

5 Keys to Using Technology Effectively

There's a lot to like about technology as a tool for community college language instruction. But success isn't guaranteed. To get the most out of your blended language courses, consider these five best practices.

1. **Balance class time and online learning.** Soumaya Long, assistant professor and co-coordinator of world languages at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), records each class lecture and posts it online, often with additional resources like PowerPoint presentations. "Anything I do in my face-to-face class, I make available online," she says.

2. **Tap into available online tools.** CCBC uses an online community for the higher education industry for its course rubrics and peer-based reviews of new classes. All lectures, lesson plans, assignments, and materials for an online course are critiqued by community members before they go live at the college.

3. **Don't overlook technology instruction for students.** Not all students have sophisticated computer skills, and even those who have grown up with technology may not be adept at navigating online language courses. That means schools must provide training to help students effectively use online courses and communicate with instructors. Another way to help students is to keep the look and menus of courses consistent across all classes and program levels. This ensures students won't have to relearn how to use the online system every time they progress to a new course.

4. **Teach your teachers.** Training and professional development in online and blended learning is also essential for instructors. Faculty members need to become adept enough with the core technologies to understand and embrace using them in their courses. "If a faculty member is against technology, you will not have success," says Lisa Volle, anthropology and Spanish faculty member at Central Texas College.

5. **Steer students to the right delivery models** Online learning isn't effective for all students, so some advisers prescreen new enrollees to see if they're ready to handle the dual challenges of learning a new language and navigating online classes. "I'll ask if they are the type of person who does not need much direction and if they are self-motivated. Can they follow the instructions and create time for studying every day without anybody telling them to work?" Long says. "Some of the students say online works better for them because of their job." But others may decide to enroll in a traditional class, especially in an introductory course, to compensate for any gaps in self-discipline, she adds.

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—Soumaya Long, assistant professor and co-coordinator of world languages, Community College of Baltimore County

heard this argument before. Their take: Technology should not be viewed as a potential replacement for traditional classroom instruction, but as a tool to complement the good work educators are already doing.

When used judiciously, advocates say, online workbooks, Web-based writing and speaking programs, videos of class lectures, and other technology-based resources enhance lesson plans and help teachers better connect with students.

Of course, like any teaching tool, the resources only work when instructors take the time to plan and implement them as intended.

The Student Benefit

With campuses shifting focus from access to success, any technology investment should have a demonstrated ability to improve student outcomes.

Greta Clark, director of multicultural education and ESL professor at Dodge City Community College (DCCC) in Kansas, says instructors at DCCC turned to language learning provider Rosetta Stone to provide tools that could reach students on their own time.

Many DCCC students work at a nearby meat-processing plant, which has shifts 24 hours a day, she says. It's not unusual for students to end a shift after midnight and work through Web-based language lessons before going to bed. "The online programs let students practice listening to the language and pronouncing the words," explains Clark. "Students can also do self-assessments to know where they stand before taking a formal test. This helps boost their confidence or show them where they need to devote extra attention."

Though the technology is helpful, Clark says it's the teachers who blend technology with traditional classroom instruction who should be credited for students' success.

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The tools have encouraged several instructors to rethink how they teach. Many of the college's language instructors have, in a sense, flipped their classrooms, posting lectures and presentations online and using class time for more workshop-oriented exercises and one-on-one instruction.

"Language instructors will spend most of their valuable class time guiding students' oral performances, as this is best done face to face," explains CTC's Volle.

Instructors acknowledge that speaking up in class is sometimes difficult for students, especially those who don't yet have a firm grasp of their newfound language skills.

In the past, this often meant that questions went unanswered or that students didn't get individual help in certain problem areas. But proponents of technology-based language instruction say the communication that online tools facilitate between students and teachers helps overcome these barriers.

Doris Meng, adjunct instructor at DCCC, posts her e-mail address at the beginning of each semester so that she can connect with students outside of class. "There is always a group of students who are just more comfortable e-mailing their questions," she says. "We often have e-mail conversations throughout the course where they are getting clarifications in a way that's nonthreatening."

Beyond standard communication, teachers says technology-based language tools also offer access to important digital audio functions that isolate sounds so students can pick up on nuances of the language and improve pronunciation.

Students can also view video recordings of class lectures to help them comprehend key concepts. In addition, community colleges use online videos

80%

PERCENTAGE OF CCBC BEGINNING SPANISH STUDENTS OUT OF 500 WHO IMPROVED THEIR COMPREHENSION AND OTHER SKILLS BY TAKING A BLENDED COURSE.

Source: Community College of Baltimore County

to help students better understand cultures and current events in countries where the language is spoken. "These resources help make our students better global citizens and teach them a little more about what's happening outside of our country," Long explains.

There's one additional advantage for cost-conscious students: Fees for online learning may be lower than for traditional courses. At CTC's online center, for example, students can pay $113 per semester for access to digital materials. In the past, the cost was nearly twice that for a traditional textbook, workbook, and CDs, Volle says.

Tools for Teachers

The potential benefits of technology-enabled language classes extend beyond community college students.

Instructors use customized reporting and analytics tools to chart student progress and build tailor-made lesson plans. Teachers can drill down further to see each student's performance and quickly identify those learners who may be falling behind. "I can look at a report and by the next class period intervene where necessary," Meng says. "That's important because the diagnosis of a problem is critical. I can also keep all of my students' coursework online so they can access their grades anytime to get immediate feedback on their progress. That's especially helpful for students who are less organized than others—they see what assignments they haven't completed or what projects they did poorly on."

The flexibility of online courses also pays off through improved course enrollments. Prior to DCCC's large-scale commitment to online courses, area students had fewer options for balancing their personal, professional, and student lives. DCCC saw an enrollment decline in its French classes—at one point, the college had only a handful of students. But when the college introduced a selection of traditional, online, and blended classes, registrations peaked. "Students have more classes to choose from that are all at different times and in different settings," Long explains. "Now, students have better choices."

Long and other community college instructors point to these and other examples as a growing body of evidence that technology, when used effectively, can enliven and enrich college language courses.

"When we use technology, the resources are richer than what we have in just a face-to-face class," Long says. "And that improves outcomes. It improves studying, and it heightens a student's awareness about the world that surrounds us."