ASSETT FELLOW PROJECT - 2022-2023

Online French Textbook
Improving Engagement and Achievement of 21-st Century Students
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We should not aim to replace the physical classroom. Instead we have an opportunity to blend the virtual with the physical and reimagine education entirely.

Salman Khan on August 1, 2013[1]

Almost 10 years after this article was published, it seems that not enough has been done to "reimagine education", either in the physical or the virtual classroom. When trying to adopt a new textbook for my first-year French classes, I was disappointed at my online options. Even though sometimes the description of the teaching philosophy or approach behind a given textbook seemed good on paper, it was seldom reflected in the various units of the book. Textbooks have added online components and improved their wording, including buzz words such as "communicative approach", "IPA", "can do statements", etc. but in reality, it is still the same textbook I used 30 years ago with a few extra "bells and whistles"...

I know I am not going to revolutionize foreign language teaching with my online textbook, but I want at least to try to make it more relevant to our students. By creating my own textbook, I will be able to cater specifically to our students' interests as well as be able to easily adapt content to be relevant and up-to-date. Being able to include recent authentic material will help create a more culturally relevant classroom environment.

And, of course, having a no-cost access will be beneficial for our students and help with inclusiveness by improving access for everyone.

- **Describe the challenge you addressed in your department with this project.**

For the past four years, as first-year French language coordinator, I have focused my efforts on a significant revision of the curriculum. My own teaching philosophy focuses on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and the Colorado Department of Education, and I believe following their guidelines is the best way to improve students' proficiency in all three modes of communication (Interpretive, Interpersonal, and Presentational). I reduced the prominence of fill-in-the-blank grammar exercises and developed communicative-based activities that provide meaningful, purposeful, and motivational opportunities for students to learn by using the language. The new curriculum is based on a communicative and contextualized approach, using the target language, and providing students with the opportunity to engage in real-life communication.

One of the many challenges of teaching first-year students is that one encounters quite a few students who do not wish to learn a foreign language. One way to better include those students is to implement individualized and project-based assessments that are relevant to them. By using an online textbook relying on a task-based communicative curriculum, I can create opportunities to attract and retain 21st-century students - as they are looking for meaningful, purposeful, and motivational opportunities to use the language.

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[1] This article was originally published with the title "No More Lockstep Learning" in Scientific American 309, 2, 57 (August 2013)

Another hurdle is that most of the students who take French 1010 have never learned a foreign language and simply don't know how to do so. Therefore, in the textbook, I included a chapter on "Strategies for learning a foreign language" as I noticed that our students are struggling more and more with tasks such as learning vocabulary, etc. Implementing an online textbook focusing on the specific, evolving needs of our students would be beneficial for the French program, allowing teachers to differentiate and refer to various resources according to the individual students or the whole classroom's needs.

- **Describe desired result.**

While revamping the program these past few years, one of the main obstacles I encountered was that it is quite challenging to add extra readings, videos, and projects to an existing textbook program given the amount of material we have to cover. Designing my own online textbook allows me to focus primarily on authentic material and add more as I come across them. As noted in the article *How do online textbooks improve learning?* "An online textbook is not the same as an ebook, i.e. it is not a digital version of a book that can be read on different devices. On the contrary, a digital textbook is actually much more than just an electronic version of a printed textbook. It is a learning package with extensive visual and interactive potential, options to create links to other internal and external content, options to underline, highlight and take notes, as well as other advanced options brought about by modern technologies."[2] While the technological aspect of an online textbook (such as the ease of including authentic material) is definitely what I am interested in, one of the challenges of creating this textbook is to not lose sight of the most important parts, such as the pedagogical aspect, the importance of the learning outcomes, etc. I have to be careful not to fall for the "technology-as-savior story".

Ideally, I would like my online textbook to help students be more engaged by using relevant authentic material and also to be able to spend more time helping them with metacognition, focusing on making them reflect on the process of learning a foreign language. By implementing this for all first-year French classes, I wish to create a learning experience that better aligns our program with the needs and expectations of our students.

- **Describe the project. What did you do?**

At first, I chose to work on implementing a portfolio for first-year classes, since I started doing this with my Business French class a few years ago and it worked well. I thought that since I wanted to implement a new program, I needed new forms of assessments (which I do!). But then I decided that it would be better for me to actually try a new technology for my ASSETT project and that is why I decided to create my own online textbook using Scalar, an online publishing platform.

Using Scalar had a learning curve as it is not the most intuitive program and figuring out the right "look" for the textbook required some trial and error, which was quite time consuming at first. That was the case, for example, when I tried to set up my two main classes (Français 1010 and Français 1020) as "visual paths".

I decided to have 13 parts (Welcome / French 1010 / French 1020 / French 1050 / Vocabulary / Grammar / Phonetics / Readings / Songs / Culture / French speaking world / External resources / Strategies for learning a foreign language).

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[2] https://www.allisonacademy.com/students/learning/lmearning-strategies/online-textbooks/

The main pages are French 1010, and French 1020 which are each divided into 4 main sections. The various other sections in the *Table of contents* are designed to make it easier for students to find what they are looking for outside of the "path" they are set on when they click on "French 1010" for example.

I decided to use Scalar in conjunction with Google Slides for three main reasons:

- I already have a lot of material available on Google Slides, which I can use making minor modifications.
- With Google Slides, it is easier for me to be able to assign a few projects to our TAs and GTPIs to work on independently and then add to the textbook.
- Scalar is not practical when it comes to tags, especially when trying to reference a specific part of a page (I need to go back and add the tag manually in each page via HTML coding). I hope that using Google Slides is going to make tagging various parts of the textbook easier.

Designing the rough draft for the textbook (deciding what I wanted to include and what I wanted the textbook to look like), is something I did with inputs from our teaching graduate students and our students. One semester, I sent all undergraduate students a Google Form Survey about the curriculum asking them to express their preferences (both on form and content). This is how I decided on having 4 units in each class and which themes to use in each.

Now that is all set up, I am going to involve our teaching Graduate students to help make this project available to our students within the next two years. This is an extensive project that is going to take many months to be ready for students to use, and it will be an ongoing process to keep it up to date.

- **Describe the outcome. What worked, what didn't work, lessons learned.**

Short-term goal: Positive feedback in the courses mid-semester and end of the semester evaluations.

Long-term goal: Improvement in students' enrollment and retention in the program.

Right now I haven't implemented the full website in my classroom so I don't have data to base my results on. Still, I have already used in my classes some of the activities based on authentic materials that I will incorporate into the website, and the students feedback was positive. Also, the Graduate students I supervised are excited about the changes I am trying to implement in our program.

Open textbooks directly enable one of the three principles of UDL: provide multiple means of representation. This principle holds that "learners differ in the way that they perceive and comprehend information… [and] may require different ways of approaching content"[3], so I hope this is going to be a positive outcome.

The cost savings associated with OER help address the financial barriers to education that many experience. However, content within these resources needs to be accessible. As digital resources, open textbooks have the potential to be a lot more accessible for students with different types of print disabilities. Eventhough I keep in mind the Quality Matters Higher Education Rubric[4] while designing the textbook, this is something I haven't actively worked on yet. As the textbook becomes more refined and closer to its publishable version, I will meet with Quality Matters to ensure that it is up to their standards.

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[3] CAST, 2018
https://bccampus.ca/2019/09/24/open-resources-improving-access-for-everyone/
[4] https://www.qualitymatters.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/StandardsfromtheQMHigherEducationRubric.pdf

- **Reflect on your experience in the Faculty Fellows program and working on your project.**

I always enjoy meeting colleagues from across campus and found it very valuable to exchange ideas even when we had quite different projects. The hands-on activities allowed all teachers involved in the program to come together and experiment with different strategies, methods, and class activities. While I try to keep up with research on Second Language Acquisition, as a coordinator in charge of forming new teachers in the department, it is easy to fall back to the basics of first-year teaching, and not take the time to experiment. I had been wanting to implement an overhaul of our first-year classes to better accommodate our students, and being part of the Faculty Fellows program allowed me to make it a priority and get started on this project.

- **Include other artifacts and visuals (data, weblinks, pictures, student work/examples, write-ups, sharable templates). Student artifacts are particularly impactful.**

Here is the link to my online textbook:

http://vanderma.buffscreate.net/education/alors-quoi-dneuf-/index

It is far from being finished but I hope it gives an idea of what I wish to accomplish.