

Using

SOCIAL

MEDIA

to Create

Community
Within the Classroom
and Beyond

BY NICOLE SHERF AND TIESA GRAF

With the plethora of technical applications available online, the trick for teachers seeking to incorporate them into lessons is finding the most appropriate one for their needs. These social media tools offer a range of possible interactive activities to engage students in community language learning. Whether you're a technological novice or proficient with technology, we all recognize that our "digital native" students experience life and create community through online tools. It is our responsibility to consider how we can meet our students at their technological level to best support them as we create online community connections in the target language to enhance their class experience. However, special care must be taken to ensure authentic interaction, communicative purpose, and student safety.

Here we will explore a variety of tools with some learning scenarios both inside and outside the walls of the classroom as well as within a larger digital community. Purposeful communication and interaction, especially when it extends in some way beyond the classroom walls, engenders a stronger sense of community among students who might otherwise not connect as fully.

Online Tools to Create and Experience Community

New technological applications are appearing all the time to entice users seeking a diverse online experience with a wider community. There are a variety of considerations when selecting a technological application to use in a class setting or as an extension activity at home, not the least of which is the level of interactivity that is possible through the use of the tool. Our goal should be to find a tool that allows students to interact in an open-ended and creative way about topics of interest and relevance to them.

S Schoology

There are a variety of interesting tools that class communities can use either to respond to specific teacher-assigned discussion or to hold more open-ended discussions. In an attempt to create a meaningful class forum for discussion and language practice in the more relaxed after-school environment, Laura Fox, an eighth grade Spanish teacher in Reading, MA, created a 6-week action research project in which her students interacted in a variety of ways for homework assignments through a discussion forum called Schoology. She wanted to discover how the use of the forum would affect student confidence in conversations in class and inspire them to connect with peers.

At www.schoology.com, students are logged in by class by the teacher, and interact with one another through the posting of comments or responses. The discussion topic can be presented by the teacher at the start of what will then become a student-directed thread of conversation and can be enhanced with the uploading of documents or links. Like many social media sites, participants in the forum can like a comment, respond directly to a comment, or make an independent comment. In Fox's project, the task was changed weekly, and the students were required to participate in the posting a minimum of two times a week, and to interact with one another as much as possible. Some of the topics of discussion included the investigation of and conversation about a popular Argentine singer, responses to a question about their favorite places, and reasons for the importance of language learning. Some of the topics required interaction with authentic resources, such as the songs and websites of the singer, and others were more open-ended and based on student interests and ideas.

Student surveys given before and after the Schoology project clearly demonstrated that as a result of participation in the forum, participants felt less anxious and more confident using Spanish in class. Surveys also showed that students had more interest in class and an improved attitude towards Spanish study after the project.

“Interestingly, the more active participants in class were not those who participated most actively in the forum, which seemed to offer a setting in which to converse more openly,” reports Fox, who will incorporate the forum in her classes from the start of the new school year, and develop class activities that extend to forum activities for homework. Fox states that the forum worked as an “equalizer,” offering opportunities to shine for those students who, for a variety of reasons were more hesitant to speak up in class.

Twitter

Leanne Cirigliano, a high school Spanish teacher in Medford, MA, also developed an action research project, but she used Twitter with her Spanish II Honors class with the goals of promoting student interaction at home and developing a deeper sense of community in class. Students needed to create an account on www.twitter.com and were given the opportunity to tweet about any topic they desired provided that they were communicating solely in the target language.

“Although my class was small, there were three very distinct groups that did not interact much with each other in class,” says Cirigliano. “The lines between the groups were erased by the use of social media, and this extended to the classroom.” Students developed relationships in the class that would not have necessarily occurred had they not been participating online with each other outside of class.

For the project, Cirigliano created a hashtag (#) for the class that had to be included with each tweet that was sent. This meant that though they were tweeting within the general Twitter community, the students had the ability to read and comment on each other’s

tweets just by including and clicking on the hashtag. They did not receive tweets from people outside their class under the hashtag, even though their conversations were not private. Different than Fox’s study, Cirigliano did not impose discussion topics, hoping to elicit true interaction within the group. As a result, students shared what they were doing and what had happened to them. Students would often reference each other’s tweets during class. When one student dyed his hair purple and posted a picture of it with an explanation of what he had done, the entire class was excited to see it in person and the class discussion was animated. Upon completion of the project, student surveys reflected that students felt that Twitter helped the class to focus on community building. One student wrote, “We responded to each other and carried on conversations with people that we might not have talked to in class.” Another student commented: “It was a new way to connect with people that you didn’t know that well.”

WeSpeke

Establishing community within our class walls through the interaction and open exchange of ideas out of class and online has been demonstrated in the above examples to reduce student anxiety and create a sense of community within the class. If you are looking to create community with a larger native-speaking community, other activities like student exchanges, pen pals, and guest speakers are all valid options. There are, however, online sites that allow for a free global network to practice languages and to learn about cultures. WeSpeke, for example, offers a unique opportunity for language students to connect to the community using the target language in an authentic way. Students can communicate both inside and outside of the classroom setting with other students from across the globe using text, audio and/or video.

Tiesa Graf, high school Spanish teacher in South Hadley, MA, explored the program on her own before involving her students. She set up a free teacher account at www.wespeke.com and was quickly flooded



Some Tools and Guidelines from WeSpeke

- Free, easy-to-use format with live text, audio, and/or video chats available
- Consent form templates for parents and information to distribute to administrators
- Matches provided between your class and other classes (national and international) to meet your needs
- Scheduling tool available to facilitate organizing chat time
- Chat partners limited to someone four years older or younger for those 17 and younger (i.e., a 13-year-old will not get matched with anyone older than 17)
- Instant disconnect option available and WeSpeke will investigate all flagged conversations and/or members. WeSpeke will remove any inappropriate members from the community
- Upon request, general reports provided about student activity that includes number of logins, invitations sent, appointments (with time) requested, number and length of conversations, usage of conversation tools, and the number of times they used the text chat within a conversation
- Teacher resource guide available with sample activities and projects based on the National Standards

with requests to chat. After identifying a few initial interests (e.g., music, politics), the program matched her with potential chat friends who were trying to learn English and were very proficient Spanish speakers. Whether she decided to meet them by text, audio, or video, she set the parameters of her interaction. For example, one might offer to practice English for the first 20 minutes and then Spanish for the next 20 minutes.

Graf has been using WeSpeke with her Spanish IV and V classes, using in-class, text-only chats. Students quickly found matches and were thrilled to be communicating with native students from Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and Argentina within 5 minutes of signing up.

"We spend time brainstorming questions to guide conversations based on our current theme of study, and students also have the freedom to learn about topics of interest to them," says Graf. Students have been motivated to use WeSpeke outside of the classroom and once a week they share with classmates what they have learned from their interactions. The sharing time has led to great follow up in the target language (e.g., "I didn't know that Brazilians were experiencing such hardship regarding the World Cup happening in their country." "I had no idea about the level of unrest occurring today in Venezuela."). These opportunities have led to further research and discussion directed by theme and student interest. As a result, students are using the target language both inside and outside of the classroom by connecting to the global community.

Facebook

Facebook is widely used by students and adults alike to maintain contact with acquaintances to update them on your events and activities. Elizabeth Blood, French Professor at Salem State University, recently revamped her French conversation course to include posts and comments on the French Club Facebook group page which had been created previously. The page is for students in the program, alumni, professors, and community members who speak French. As such, students were not just posting to one another, but to a wider community of French speakers of different levels (including native speakers) who all had an interest in the college community.

Students could post on a variety of topics, but most posted on French-related themes, such as films they'd recently seen, articles they came across in the news, and music or videos they found on YouTube. Sometimes they simply posted a question or a comment about something they had talked about in class. This allowed students to get to know each other better, to practice using informal conversational phrases, to improve question formulation, and to make connections with other students. The goal of the course was for students to gain confidence in interacting with others, particularly with native speakers, but the Facebook group offered the added benefit of giving students a space to support and encourage each other, creating a stronger community within the classroom when they met face-to-face.

Student surveys given at the start and end of the course showed that the vast majority of students felt that their French proficiency had improved and, further, most indicated that they felt more confi-

dent in their abilities to interact with native speakers of French as a result of the conversations through Facebook and other social media, as well as face-to-face interactions and interviews. The survey also showed that students' knowledge of and interest in Francophone cultures increased substantially, two indicators of improved intercultural awareness important for effective communication in French. Blood states, "It is clear that the online forum facilitated conversation among students and other French speakers outside of class and that it had a positive impact on the interactions among students in class as well."

Ensuring Authentic Interaction

The careful selection of which program or application to use is important so that the activities that follow meet intended pedagogical purposes. Many applications offer only a simulated interactive experience and should be avoided unless the communicative objective for students is purely presentational. For example, there are a variety of tools that allow for the creation of animated characters to interact in a dialogue on screen, or a display of text and pictures allowing for some explanation. These applications offer the opportunity for a role play, or the presentation of a dialogue or content rather than a true conversation or exchange of ideas. Though these applications may have their pedagogical use, they do not create an interactive experience for the students nor do they allow for the creation of community unless they are shared and elicit reactions and commentaries.

The parameters of the interaction need to be established ahead of time by the teacher as well as the expected level of participation and interaction of the students. As engaged as your students might be in the activity, there is no escaping that this is a course assignment or requirement which may hinder open communication and could dampen some enthusiasm. For this reason, before the class begins to engage with the application, it is important to develop a rubric to describe in detail the number, type, and quality of interactions that you are expecting of each student. It is also a good idea to create a list of class rules of etiquette and safety for the interactions with consequences if the rules are not followed.

Finally, providing models of effective and expected posts, communication, and/or interaction is the only way to ensure high-quality student responses to the task. Midway through her project, Cirigliano was finding that the posts were not as full and complete as they could be so she again presented the rubric and the class discussed some sample anonymous posts based on the criterion of the rubric and the quality of the posts improved as a result.

Fox's Schoology project demonstrated that the weeks in which she, as teacher, interacted more in the forum, the students were also more active. This was a disappointment to her since the goal of the project was to foster student interaction, but they seemed to rely on her encouragement. It is sometimes difficult through an assignment to expect authentic and enthusiastic interaction, especially if your students are reticent language learners, but in many cases, it is the use of the social media tool that can be the impetus to motivate those students.

As a final consideration, since the focus of the activity is interaction and building community through this interaction, the criterion of assessment of student progress toward this goal should focus on this rather than their grammatical accuracy, spelling, and vocabulary choices. This is not to say that precision is not important, but it should be considered in the context of how well the message was delivered.

Protecting the Identities of Students and Ensuring Their Safety

In a K–12 setting, it is a good idea to get your principal’s permission before using social media with your classes in any capacity. For minors, it also makes sense to get permission from your students’ parents. They want to know what you are doing in class and, for the most part, will be as excited as the students. These kinds of class projects are great ad-

vocacy and lots of fun. However, some parents may have concerns about how you are protecting their children’s identities online and/or about the types of interactions that will take place, especially with more open social media sites such as Twitter, WeSpeke, and Facebook.

In Cirigliano’s Twitter project, one of the parents did not want her daughter to participate because she was concerned about her online presence in terms of upcoming college applications. She was hesitant about her daughter’s overuse of social media. Cirigliano offered a variety of options for participation and the parent selected the most innocuous offering. She had her daughter email the tweet to Cirigliano, who posted it for her. It is important to respect the concerns of the parents in these types of projects.

In Graf’s case, the bulk of the WeSpeke interaction happened at the laboratory at school under teacher supervision. Parents are expected to approve and supervise the at-home conversations. WeSpeke offers a variety of resources including parent consent-form templates and guidelines for class usage, which were adapted and signed by parents before the project began.

Blood was more concerned about student privacy on Facebook than about safety issues, given the age of her students (college-level, 18+). She made Facebook participation one of several options for the weekly conversational assignment. It made sense to use the French Club’s departmentally administered group, so that conversation was limited to those who were motivated to communicate in French with others. In addition, the moderator could delete any inappropriate posts or reject any group members if necessary. These kinds of controls facilitate the process.

In any case, thoughtful planning and well-articulated expectations are essential to setting the tone and encouraging safe and authentic interactions in the class and beyond. In the K–12 arena, permissions are especially important both from the administration as well as parents, and the code of conduct needs to be clear among the students. These well-laid-out plans enable opportunities that can ultimately be an invaluable component of the learning experience.

Time to Get Started

Getting up to speed with the variety of technologies that make sense for you and your classes may take some time and patience. If you are not as technologically adept as you would like to be, remember your students’ experiences learning language in your class. It is only through practice, and trial and error, that you gain technological proficiency. Just like you tell your students when they get frustrated in their language learning: If you are not making mistakes, you are not trying hard enough! Sometimes, an application that works well with one group may not be the right fit for another. Keep in mind your goals for the use of the application and play with it a bit yourself so that you feel comfortable describing the process and avoiding the pitfalls with your classes.

Nicole Sherf is a Professor and Secondary Education Coordinator in the Department of World Languages and Cultures, Salem State University, Salem, Massachusetts.

Tiesa Graf is Department Chair and Spanish teacher at South Hadley High School, South Hadley, Massachusetts.

Resources

Sites suggested in this article

- **Schoology:** <https://www.schoology.com>
Free academic-based social network that focuses on collaboration
- **Twitter:** <https://twitter.com>
Free public online social network where posts are limited to 140 characters
- **WeSpeke:** en-us.wespeke.com
Free global community to practice languages, share interests, and make connections
- **Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com>
Free public online social network program

Other possible sites to encourage interaction

- **Edmodo:** <https://www.edmodo.com>
Free social learning platform for students, teachers and parents
- **Blogger:** <https://www.blogger.com/home>
Free blog platform where students can interact with content posted by teachers/classmates
- **Google Drive/Docs:** www.google.com/docs/about
Free tool to share, peer edit, and collaborate
- **TodayMeet:** <https://todaymeet.com>
Free tool to share back-channel conversations, reflections, and questions in real time



Share your answer to these questions in TLE Online at www.thelanguageeducator.org.

How are you using these resources to create authentic audiences for your language learners?

What additional resources would you recommend?