Cultura
A Method and Tool for Cross-Cultural Learning

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The suburbs—quiet, peaceful, well-to-do. But the French word “banlieue,” given in the dictionary as the equivalent word doesn’t convey that at all—the suburbs are where poverty and unemployment have recently fueled violence and riots. Lexically, the words are equivalent, but the connotations of the words are completely different.

Under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Gilberte Furstenberg, a professor of French at MIT, and some colleagues now at other schools developed a constructivist method of illustrating and discovering these differences in attitude and meaning. The project was called Cultura.

The method

A class studying French at MIT is paired with a class studying English at a French university. Three questionnaires are created and posted on the Web: word associations, sentence completions, and reactions to situations. Students respond in their own language, and the responses are collected and published on a new set of Web pages. Then the students have the opportunity to discuss their answers in an on-line discussion board—again, each student using his or her own language. (The reason for having students use their own instead of the target language is so that they can be exposed to authentic speech, including slang.)

The tool

Originally, the technology behind this project was somewhat primitive. Every semester, each questionnaire had to be constructed and posted by hand. The student responses, entered on a Web form, were collected in an MIT-specific e-mail archive; then the answers to each question had to be separated and collected again in new Web pages. Initially, this was done by hand, too, but the later development of a few Perl scripts automated some of the processes. The Web forms didn’t interact with the discussion board in any way; setting up the discussion topics was another exercise in manual labor. Finally, the archiving of each semester’s data had to be performed by hand.

To make this process more efficient, we undertook to build a database-driven application. With it, the instructor can enter new terms, edit existing ones, and publish the questionnaire in a few very simple and intuitive steps. The students’ responses are automatically gathered in the database, where they can be edited for spelling, etc., and then published when the instructor is ready to open discussion. A simple discussion board is integrated into the application. And archiving just requires changing a setting in the database.
Interested?

Over the years, a couple of other language classes at MIT have adopted elements of the Cultura method, and there have been many requests from other schools to make this program accessible to them. Until now, this really hasn’t been possible, given the intense amount of manual labor involved and the reliance on MIT-specific technologies. The new Cultura tool, however, is being released to the academic community as an open-source project.

A goal was to make the Cultura tool self-contained and simple, in the expectation that it will be used in a wide range of settings, from middle schools to research universities.

Technical data

The Cultura tool requires a Web server, PHP (version 4.1 or greater), and MySQL. Our installation uses Apache running under Linux; we haven’t tested it on other platforms.

For more information

A complete description of the Cultura method can be found at:
http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH

For information about obtaining the tool, contact:
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