Editor’s Note: The “In the Classroom” section of the January 2009 issue of The Language Educator featured two articles on social networking for language learning: “Communicating with Students Through Facebook” by Julie Damron (p. 41) and “Ning Offers Students Opportunities to Connect” by Drew Forlano (p. 43). As all social media—and Facebook in particular—have continued to grow in popularity over recent years and as they become a bigger part of our students’ lives, more information is presented here offering some specific activities for utilizing Facebook with language students.

Over the past several years, there has been an explosion in the availability and widespread use of social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Consider that Facebook currently reports more than 600 million active users worldwide and that it is also being adopted by more and more educators for teaching purposes. Social media sites provide a means of communication that is highly accessible to users across the globe. In addition, they allow users to participate in a collaborative form of knowledge construction, because they provide tools for creating and sharing information with others. In particular, Facebook is a social networking website that allows people to connect with other users through the exchange of profiles, conversation, photos, and videos. The average Facebook user reports connecting with 130 friends. A considerable portion of those in the United States use Facebook only to connect socially, but 70% of the total users reside in other countries around the world and they use more than 70 languages.

With the popularity and social nature of Facebook, there are numerous ways to integrate it into foreign language courses to encourage target language production. Using Facebook can take advantage of our students’ inherent social nature, as was demonstrated by two specific projects implemented at Kennesaw State University in 2010.

The Net Generation Curriculum
Today’s so-called “Net Generation” students are connected, digital, and highly social. Internet and social media sites like Facebook play a critical role in the lives of these students. Therefore it is essential that educators design the Net Generation curriculum with these characteristics in mind. This curriculum should be derived from social and student-centered views of learning such as Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory or Bruner’s social constructivism, which are best suited to tap into the collaborative nature of the students. Included in this idea of the Net Generation curriculum are the pervasive social media sites and Web 2.0 tools, which allow students to actively participate in the creation and widespread exchange of information. Facebook, in particular, provides students with a digital environment in which they can connect with other students. In addition, the Facebook platform offers the potential to access real-world resources that enable more diversified participation in the processes of knowledge construction and rehearsal. Finally, including social media in the Net Generation curriculum is essential considering the expanding global use of such tools.

Educational Uses of Facebook for Language Learning
As students become increasingly connected through social networking sites such as Facebook, it is important for us to explore how these can be utilized specifically in the foreign language classroom. Facebook provides a target-language-friendly interface created for and used by native speakers in a format familiar to students. As users connect, they are able to share Internet links and multimedia such as photos or videos with ease. This could allow the instructor to facilitate discussion among students of target language and culturally relevant material. As well, students can choose to follow a certain celebrity, athletic team, restaurant, event, city, or group from the target language country which en-
ables them to receive updates and interviews, read comments, and participate in discussions in the foreign language.

Utilized as a communicative tool in the language classroom, Facebook can also serve to promote collaboration through target language discussions, status updates, comments, and questions. Students can discuss a photograph or video or can facilitate an activity in which they describe in the foreign language a certain place, person, activity, etc., and other students try to guess what it is. Instructors can also create hypothetical events in the target language country and design a discussion around the students’ anticipation before, experiences during, and thoughts after attending the event. These types of collaborations can promote a sense of connection and community between the students allowing for a richer and more engaging learning experience. In this manner, Facebook allows for multi-dimensional conversation, both among students and between students and the instructor.

Sample Facebook Activities

In this section, we will describe our specific Facebook-based activities, which were implemented at Kennesaw State University in fall 2010. The two activities include a simple, autobiographical profile writing assignment for a Beginning Spanish course (SPN 1001) and a more sophisticated series of culture and photo-based writing assignments for an Intermediate Spanish course (SPN 2001). They could easily be adapted for other languages as well.

**Beginning Activity**

The Facebook activity used with the Beginning course was simple in nature and easy to complete. The students were asked to enter basic information in Spanish, including a written description of themselves, their university, and their family. For this purpose, Facebook was a good fit, because much of the basic information included in the Facebook profile is related to material that was previously covered in the course: la escuela, la universidad [school, university], el empleador [employer], and la información básica [basic information]. Once the students had completed their profiles, they were asked to “friend” the instructor and the other students in the class and to begin posting target language messages on one another’s pages.

The subsequent results of this initial written assignment were both fascinating and encouraging. First, the students were able to successfully complete their writings in Facebook as they would have done in a more traditional writing assignment. However, there was a significant difference in the apparent level of excitement among the students when they began working in Facebook. Second, beyond the formal, graded writing assignment completed in Facebook, the students were also asked at various times throughout the semester to post informal assignments.

On one occasion the students were asked to write about their favorite athletes without referring to the person by name. Then, other students read these posts and attempted to identify the individual based on the descriptions given. Last, and perhaps the most significant occurrence, there was a plethora of extracurricular writing that took place in the target language. Much like in normal, daily Facebook activity, the students frequently visited other students’ pages, reviewed their updates, and posted target language messages about a variety of topics. All of this extracurricular target language writing was done voluntarily, not at the request of the instructor.

**Intermediate Activity**

The Facebook activity utilized in the Intermediate Spanish course was presented to the students as an opportunity to write about and discuss a hypothetical semester study abroad program in Mexico City. The purpose of connecting on a social media site such as Facebook was to meet and engage in conversation with other students who would be studying in the same program and living in the same dorms. The instructor became the hypothetical study abroad coordinator in Mexico which allowed for facilitation of cultural events and excursions and discussion on Facebook of students’ experiences studying in another country and acquiring a foreign language. Students completed a basic profile in Spanish describing where they were from and their education, family, and interests. After connecting with the other students in the class as well as the instructor, students began to engage in target language conversation, asking questions, giving opinions, debating topics, and sharing experiences as if they were really studying in a foreign country. For the main writing assignment, students created virtual photo albums in which they were asked to provide a series of pictures and describe, in Spanish, their first week in Mexico City. In addition to writing about their own experiences, students were also asked to comment on their classmates’ experiences and photographs that were posted. Finally, students were required to update their status at least twice a week and engage in target language discussion with their fellow classmates.

The initial intent of the instructor in using Facebook was to promote interpersonal communication among students in the target language through discussion questions, status updates, and description of photos, videos, and events. However, an unexpected result of this activity was the cultural competence gained by the students as demonstrated in their ability to seek out culturally appropriate descriptions and engage in meaningful discussions about certain habits and practices of the target language culture.

Because students were “situated” in a certain target language city and assigned a specific role, to carry out the specific tasks of

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“Friend” or Foe: Facebook in a High School Language Class

By Nicole Naditz

Editor’s Note: We asked French teacher Nicole Naditz from Bella Vista High School in Fair Oaks, California, to share her perspective on using Facebook with language students at the secondary level.

When I first created my page on Facebook, I wasn’t planning on sharing my latest coffee infatuation or the newest, best price I found on my favorite jeans. Instead, I saw Facebook as an incredible opportunity for people with similar interests to share resources. So I signed up and initially, all of my friends were language colleagues from around the country—who, not surprisingly—saw the social networking site in the same way. We shared music, videos, articles, and activities with all of our Facebook friends with just one “post.” And, being “friends” we did (and do) occasionally share a family picture or new favorite restaurant. Initially, I hadn’t really considered using Facebook with my high school students.

Last spring, that changed. After having initially accepted some friend requests from students, I realized that it may not be professionally appropriate to be friends with students on Facebook (although this is still a matter of debate in many educational circles). Although I subsequently made a personal decision not to accept friend requests from current students, I couldn’t deny the power of Facebook to share information with many people quickly. How could I maximize the benefits of providing my students with instantaneous (read: viral) access to francophone world news, music, my video tutorials, announcements, and other links if I don’t use Facebook? E-mail has proven to be less and less effective each year; many high school students simply don’t check it. Even my extensive website only seems to reach some of my students. But get the word out on Facebook, and watch the news spread!

I found the answer last spring: Facebook Groups. Group pages on Facebook allow users to set up a space where others can request membership, but they don’t have to be your friends. I created a group page for each of my levels of French, and this year, I added pages for my French Club and French Honor Society. Students request membership and I approve them. Once approved, they can view the content of each page, and they can add comments and share resources as well. Pages can be designed to require the owner’s approval before posting anything.

Although students are members of my group pages, they are not officially my friends. I do not receive status updates from their personal pages and they do not receive status updates from my personal page. I made a decision to also allow parents to request membership because I know that some parents want to be able to monitor their students’ online presence.

Of course, the ultimate question is, “Why?” Currently, the pages allow me to quickly share information, club events, French-language resources and news (regarding the class or the world). Students are also invited to use the pages to ask questions about their homework or any other questions they have about our content. They are encouraged to share resources with the other members of their group page. Interestingly, while one would expect my posts to be in French (which they are), the students who have chosen to join the pages also typically post in French. Although the students were never explicitly told to post in French, the fact that they do so indicates that that they are fully invested in our brick-and-mortar French-speaking environment and as a result, they ensure that it extends to our virtual presence as well.

We have a fairly significant number of students not on the Internet, so I have not yet graduated to having my students chat with one another in French using Facebook, or creating any other required assignments. At this time, it is merely one option that helps students remain connected to the classes or clubs, find out about events, acquire and share resources, or get just-in-time support.

Since Facebook began the group pages feature, they have made one important change: in order to create a group, you must invite at least one of the people on your friends list. So, I have an arrangement with another French teacher who is also a friend of mine on Facebook: when I create a group for students, she is the first member. Likewise, I am the first member of any of her groups. This allows us to set up our group pages even if no students are our Facebook friends.

Like all Internet resources, Facebook is merely a tool. In and of itself, it will not improve instruction, nor will it ensure that all students more actively engage in the curriculum or automatically become more proficient. It is the way in which teachers employ all of the tools available to their disposal that will determine whether or not we achieve those goals.
the assignment they needed to understand the culturally appropriate practices of a university student living in Mexico City. For example, students posted photos or discussed certain cultural practices such as greeting fellow classmates with a kiss on the cheek, they mapped a specific bus route to arrive at the university, and they participated in a protest against raises in student tuition. Students were also invited by the instructor to attend hypothetical cultural excursions in the specific city and were asked to write about their experiences, facilitating the need to understand the cultural importance of the sites visited and the events attended. This awareness of the target language culture as well as the sense of community and collaboration promoted through discussions, messages, and comments in the foreign language, provided students with a multi-dimensional language and cultural experience based in the Facebook environment.

Benefits of Using Facebook

Based on our experiences with integrating Facebook in foreign language courses, there are several perceived benefits to doing so. First, using Facebook seems to have a significant impact on language learning. It allows students to engage with peers in a familiar format and for an academic purpose. More importantly for foreign language courses, it provides opportunities for informal conversations in the target language. In addition, the Facebook platform allows for access to authentic materials and the sharing of culturally relevant photos, videos, and music. These features appear to promote social and active language learning.

Second, the nature of the student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions is more multi-dimensional than in traditional writing assignments. For example, in many cases the traditional writing assignment is accompanied by one-time feedback and assessment from the instructor. In the Facebook environment, feedback can be delivered more dynamically. It can be more easily given and can be done so immediately. In addition, this type of more informal feedback often comes from both the instructor and other students, which further promotes the sense of collaboration that accompanies the social media environment.

Third, on a more personal note, collectively in our teaching experience (at various levels of education) we have never encountered such genuine excitement on behalf of the students when participating in an activity using the target language. We could not have predicted the sheer amount of linguistic production from the students, especially that which emerged outside of the formal writing assignments. The students seemed to enjoy lurking, checking, reading, and writing completely in Spanish. Even students who were typically reserved and non-participatory in class quickly emerged as highly productive students in this environment.

Considerations for the Future

There are several things to consider for future endeavors in using Facebook in the language classroom. First, it is important to protect the rights to privacy of the students and instructors. For this purpose, it is recommended to only allow the students and the instructor access to the Facebook pages. Furthermore, with regards to privacy, both students and instructors are encouraged to not reveal information that could be too personal or deemed inappropriate in the educational setting. As a rule of thumb, we suggest that instructors filter this information in the same manner as you would in a face-to-face class.

Second, it is important to establish clear expectations for the Facebook assignments including step-by-step procedures for creating a new account and completing the required components of the assignment, and outlining what is appropriate student behavior in the Facebook environment. For example, one should define appropriate student behaviors in the online environment including guidelines for posting text, pictures, and videos to be shared with the instructor and other classmates. This type of approach is meant as a reminder to the students that participating in an online environment for educational purposes comes with expectations similar to traditional class meetings.

Third, one should consider how to treat error correction with Facebook. For the purposes of our Facebook-based activities, we made a conscious decision not to correct errors as they occurred. We feared that constant error correction might negatively influence the amount of target language produced by the students. We felt it was more important to encourage natural and free-flowing interpersonal communication. However, perhaps private messages could be sent for extreme cases or repeated mistakes. Also, it may be appropriate to offer target language vocabulary where students have reverted to their first language in their posts.

On the other hand, for the formal writing assignments completed in Facebook, we did provide written feedback and assigned grades using a rubric designed for foreign language writing. This feedback was intended to target the strengths and shortcomings of the students’ writing while encouraging further learning and development.

In closing, it is our hope that by sharing our experiences with utilizing Facebook we may further the discussion of integrating social media in foreign language education. We feel that the successes we experienced may be easily replicated with other languages and educational settings.

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