If you walk into my French class during virtual reality (VR) time, you may hear me saying [in the target language] to my students, “Okay, you should be able to see something pretty fantastique. If you don’t see it immediately, keep turning and then look at the sky!” I’ll watch excitedly as my students’ heads start turning around, holding their phones in $5 Google Cardboard viewers, their jaws slowly dropping. “I see it! I found the Eiffel Tower!” one of them shouts in French. Another enthusiastic voice joins in: “I found it, too! There’s tons of people!” “Bravo!” I exclaim. “Now, who wants to go to the top? Search around the area for the la queue and let me know when you’ve found it. Then, we will be able to see even more!”

These days, thanks to virtual reality, I have a new role: I am a teacher tour guide in my own classroom.

It was my experience as a student traveling to Paris for the first time just before high school that solidified my desire to become a French speaker. By the time I was selecting my major in college, I knew I wanted to help students have those same feelings for the French language and culture I’d had. However, as transformative as I know travel is, the cost can be prohibitive. I have taken students on trips to France but the financial constraints make it impossible for many. To be an effective educator, I had to find another way to bring French culture to my learners.

Ticket to Travel
Google Cardboard, and other similar virtual reality (VR) viewers, can provide students with a unique way to explore the world through the hundreds of thousands of 360 degree photos. These inexpensive products, which look somewhat similar to the ViewMasters of my childhood, are found easily online. Some sites offer bulk pricing for school purchases. Any of these VR viewers require the use of a smartphone, which may appear to be restrictive. However, it is important to note that, according to a 2015 Pearson study, Harris Poll, Student Mobile Device Survey National Report, 82% of high school students in the United States have a smartphone. If smartphone use is still holding anyone back, these 3D photos and videos are available on laptops, tablets, and personal computers. In my own classroom, I pair up students just in case someone doesn’t have a phone or their battery died. Also, I keep extra viewers in the drawer of my desk.

Becoming a Language Learning Tourist
The use of VR viewers in the language classroom is quite wide-ranging. Regardless of the assignment, I have found my students’ eyes light up when they see my stack of Google Cardboard viewers out on my desk when they walk into class. While certainly very engaging, the use of VR can also tie in perfectly with the goal areas of the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities.

Through reading signs on buildings, streets, and billboards, students are learning how others communicate, and they themselves are doing interpretive communication. Culture is present throughout, with students able to study architecture, clothing, hairstyles, modes of transportation, city and neighborhood layouts, restaurants, museums, monuments, and more. In exploring cities and towns, students can begin to make connections. My own students saw street names that connected to historical figures they learned. They would also look, with little luck, for the Bastille, and some would even look for a guillotine! In exploring the Parisian catacombs, my students found Latin inscriptions, and discussed similarities between the languages.

On a basic level, all of my students were able to study the cities, landscapes, and cultures with a new perspective that a textbook or two-dimensional photo could not provide. The level of engagement was quite apparent, which can also be difficult to gauge when all your students are staring at a book. All students were on their feet, moving their heads around, enthusiasm continued on next page
astically answering the questions I asked. They could easily make cultural comparisons through using VR, looking at the traffic circle around the Arc de Triomphe, the café chairs facing the sidewalk traffic, and the ornate exteriors and interiors of some of the schools and universities.

One of the greatest parts of this is the way communities were formed. My students could not wait to share what they found with their peers—both in and outside of French class. They became engaged and excited to learn about French and Francophone countries in a way I never experienced.

Tour Guide Tips for Teachers
VR viewers can be easily integrated into any level language classroom. Here are some tips to help you get started.

• Go beyond a photo of a market in a textbook. Allow your students to visit one virtually in France or Tunisia [or in a country where your target language is spoken]. YouTube has a growing number of Virtual Reality “Field Trips”. To find these 360 degree videos, simply include either “VR”, “virtual reality”, or “360” in your search on YouTube, along with the city or country in which you are interested. As virtual reality grows in popularity, there continues to be a growing number of videos available. These VR videos can be found in a wide variety of languages.

• The greatest wealth of material at present can be found on Google Streetview. This free app connects students with an ever-growing number of cities and rural areas around the globe. Virtually visiting countries allows students to experience culture in a way beyond watching something passively. They become active learners and in charge of exploring.

• Videos are great for crafting listening comprehension questions. You may choose to have students make comparisons with what they see or discuss the experience with classmates in the target language. Another quick assessment I use is the “Fast Five,” where I have my students quickly name five things in the target language that they see, find interesting, or understand. Virtual scavenger hunts are fun ways to allow students to explore cities as well. These can be linked with a unit’s thematic focus or essential question such as “Are cars necessary to get anywhere in this city?” or “What aspects of this city encourage a balanced lifestyle?”

Students as Tour Guides
As students become more comfortable with the viewers and applications, I plan on passing the baton of “tour guide” to them. This will allow them to help their peers see what life is like in other countries they may not be able to visit in real life, hopefully breaking stereotypes and misconceptions. While they will be guided by a key objective, they will have the opportunity to learn through the lens of Google Cardboard and then share their findings. These VR viewers provide a great opportunity for both teachers and students to become virtual tourists and tour guides.

Finding new ways to share the French language and culture with my students brings me great joy. My hope is that we as language educators can help bridge the world so that students can go from being tourists in the classroom to respectful, inquisitive, and empathetic world citizens.

Use Research Map to Connect Findings to the Classroom
researchmap.digitalpromise.org/about

The Research Map from Digital Promise helps education leaders, policymakers, and technology developers quickly access research findings on education and learning that can inform their work.

The map was built using data from over 100,000 articles published between 2007 and 2016, found in 184 academic journals from the Web of Science database. The developers of the research map analyzed the bibliographic record (title, keywords, author, cited references, and abstract) for each article and created a bibliographic coupling network to link articles sharing at least two common references.

Next, they used an algorithm to detect groups of articles with densely shared links. In the Network View, articles belonging to the same group are gathered into nodes, or circles, called “topics.” The circle size is proportional to the number of articles it contains. Similarly, the width of a border arc of color in the Chord View is proportional to the number of articles it contains. In both map views, the thickness of the lines (or chords) between topics indicates how strongly they are connected. Then, they applied the same algorithm to the articles in each topic to split them into subtopics.

Digital Promise supports the education community in using research to inform decision-making and to design high-quality learning programs and products. The research map empowers stakeholders with research information and tools to collect and analyze data, and commission and conduct research studies to drive change.
These and other web resources can be accessed through the Publications area on the ACTFL website at

www.actfl.org/publications/all/the-language-educator/tech-watch