Technically Speaking: Transforming Language Learning through Virtual Learning Environments (MOOs)

Though MOOs (multiple user domains object-oriented) have found a limited use in some language courses, their potential for transforming the language learning classroom has not been fully recognized or valued. In Fall 1998 and 1999, the authors teamed up to teach the first language course conducted almost entirely using a MOO and involving a 7-week exchange between students learning German at an American college and advanced students of English at a German university. Drawing on their experiences, the authors systematically map out the tremendous pedagogical benefits to using a MOO for language learning: a student-centered learning environment structured by such objectives as peer teaching, autonomous learning principles, intellectually rich content-based instruction, individualized learning, and play. In addition to offering a model for the successful integration of technology into the classroom, this article suggests how MOOs can help achieve the long-sought goal of securely anchoring intermediate or even elementary language learning back into the liberal arts curriculum.

BEGINNING AS FAR BACK AS THE 1950s WITH the use of tape decks in the Audiolingual method, new technologies have been a perennial source of hope for making language learning a faster and more efficient process (Blake, 1998). The invention and widespread use of personal computers in the late 1980s and 1990s breathed new life into visions of a new future for foreign languages (FLs). Yet despite such promises, even longtime proponents of FL technology often express frustration with the current state of affairs. Garrett's 1991 conclusion that technology is still “light-years ahead of the profession’s ability” to harness it for FL learning (p. 74) still seems true today. More recently, Bush (1997), citing among other studies an informal survey of subscribers to the Language Learning Technology International (LLTI) listserv that "found few examples of language education programs where students spend at least 10% of their time using technology to help in their learning," laments that “there is little evidence that technology is having any significant impact on the way most students learn languages in today's classroom” (p. 288). While the expenses associated with most new technologies share much of the blame, teachers have been hampered just as often by the enormous commitment of time required to develop or adopt new technologies, especially because return on that investment of time is often not immediate. Moreover, many multimedia software programs do not yet achieve the promised goals for computer-assisted language learning (CALL). Even if most CALL activities are no longer built around “drill-and-kill” exercises, many commercially available programs are still structured quite rigidly and lack a truly communicative interface.

While educational multiple user domains object-oriented (MOOs) are not the only kind of technology suited to language learning, we think the MOO-based project we conducted with students learning German at Vassar College and stu-
native speakers stands out as the most obvious
just a few years ago. Even as extensive contact with
in a manner that we could only have dreamt of
achieve many long-held language learning goals
for the first time for teachers and learners to
that the MOO makes it technologically possible
learning methods. Indeed, we want to suggest
applying many theoretically sound language
room, it actually offers unique possibilities for
moves away from the traditional language class-
eral extraordinary pedagogical benefits from us-
ond look. Until now, however, research on MOOs
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it origins as Dungeons and Dragons game soft-
and other subjects, but they are only now starting to find use in FL class-
write notes for other users—and even post them
record entire discussions with a (virtual) recorder
virtual objects through simple commands or with
wide range of manipulable educational tools
"emote" (that is, express feelings or "physical"
room do not see what is being "said"), "shout" (so
verse with others in the same virtual room or
across different rooms, but one can also "whis-
author to refashion the FL classroom into a stu-
learning principles, intellectually rich content-
conceptualization of all student interaction as
authentic input through the use of the MOO is
equally exciting. The MOO has enabled the
authors to refashion the FL classroom into a stu-
dent-centered learning environment structured
by such objectives as peer teaching, autonomous
learning to transform language learning.

MOOS AS A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

MOOs are virtual learning environments with
powerful educational tools. As synchronous,
text-based Internet databases, they extend the
very concept of communication itself—both
within and beyond the four walls of the class-
room. Of course, like chat rooms, in which users
have keyboard conversations with each other,
MOOs enable people from all over the globe to
"speak" to each other in real time. Nevertheless,
to appreciate the MOO's potential impact on lan-
guage learning, it is important to understand how
it differs from chat rooms such as Internet relay
chats (IRCs), or even more complex Web-based
collaborative writing programs such as Daedalus.
Although they share with chat rooms the ability
to bring together language learners with native
speakers for conversational exchange or directed
writing, MOOs offer users many more communi-
cation features than are available on these other
chat systems. First, MOOs offer a variety of com-
municative modalities. Not only can users con-
verse with others in the same virtual room or
across different rooms, but one can also "whis-
per" to another person (so that others in the
room do not see what is being "said"), "shout" (so
that everyone in the MOO sees, regardless of
their room location) and, most importantly,
"emote" (that is, express feelings or "physical"
actions through words). Second, MOOs provide
a wide range of manipulable educational tools
and allow users to create and display their own
virtual objects through simple commands or with
a few clicks of the mouse. For instance, users can
record entire discussions with a (virtual) recorder
and play them back at a later date. They can also
write notes for other users—and even post them
on electronic notebooks. In fact, users can cre-
ate an almost unlimited variety of personal cyber
objects, since all objects in the MOO consist of
textual description. Third, instead of using pre-
defined and abstract spaces, MOOs allow users to create personal rooms and describe them in a personal way. As this article will show, the ability to personalize space and objects in the MOO allows a community of users to create and even analyze its own virtual culture. Finally, the newest generation of MOOs are fully integrated with the World Wide Web. This development means not only that users can access MOOs based on the enCore MOO database using a standard Web browser, but they can also import Web pages and other graphics into the MOO and send them to other people in the MOO. Because the hyperlinks in these Web pages are active, users can jump from the MOO to the Web and back again with just a few clicks of the mouse. In fact, all objects created in the enCore system have unique Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) and can be accessed directly through the Web, making it easy to publish electronically without any training in Hypertext Markup Language (HTML). As a result of these features, the MOO retains the text-based elements that its supporters have always admired while comparing favorably with any of today’s graphic-oriented multimedia programs.

Despite these expansive possibilities, MOOs are easy to learn to use. It takes less than 5 minutes for beginners to learn to move around and to communicate, and we found that as instructors we needed no more technical support to teach in the MOO than is required for any new computer software system used in the classroom. Especially with the new Web-based interface, even the advanced features of the MOO are intuitive. Furthermore, using an existing MOO is absolutely free: All that each user requires is a computer with access to the Internet. Most educational MOOs allow anyone to sign on as a guest, after which it is possible to apply for a free permanent “character” (sign-on name). Moreover, building a MOO at one’s home institution is relatively easy, though the process requires a small amount of technical support. For instance, with the help of two student assistants, two of us, von der Emde and Schneider, developed MOOssiggang, one of the world’s first bilingual German MOOs. The name is a pun on the German word Müßiggang, which means something akin to leisure, relaxation, and idleness and is intended to capture the MOO’s dimension of play. When a user enters MOOssiggang, he or she has the option of going to the “English side” or the “German side” of the MOO. In rooms on the German side, users are expected to type commands in German, and almost all feedback from the computer is also in German. Of course, even though such a bilingual MOO interface offers continuous opportunities for language practice at the level of computer commands, messages, and use, many of the communicative benefits from using a MOO can also be obtained from an English-language MOO interface.

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND ONLINE EXCHANGE

Beginning in Fall 1998, the three of us collaborated to reorganize Vassar’s third-semester intermediate German course to include a virtual exchange with students studying English at the University of Münster. Kötter, an English instructor at University of Münster, was actively searching for American partners for a collaborative exchange that would enable him to measure the impact of MOOs on tandem learning between language learners and native speakers. Meanwhile, von der Emde and Schneider were motivated to develop a course around the MOO to achieve two pedagogical goals: to find a solution to the often vexing range of student proficiencies in our intermediate German course (a common problem in small language programs that often leave some students underchallenged and others striving to keep up) and to introduce intellectually rich content at an earlier stage in the language learning process and thereby move beyond teaching a FL as a mere “skill.” Hence, we also used the MOO in the weeks prior to the exchange to introduce low to intermediate FL learners to texts and questions very much along the lines of our own scholarship in literary and cultural studies.

Because the German academic calendar starts in mid-October, we at Vassar College organized our intermediate German seminar in two distinct phases. During the first 7 weeks, students got acquainted with the MOO, began an intensive grammar review, and reflected upon general cultural topics. Though we drew on a grammar textbook, the primary focus of this phase was on exploring issues of identity and space through literary and cultural readings, through discussions in the MOO, and by having students create their own cultural spaces and identities in the MOO. In addition to activities that encouraged students to reflect upon the virtual culture they were constructing in the MOO, this first phase also included assignments that asked students to define their learning goals, assess their progress, build vocabulary, and understand the principles of collaborative learning. During the second phase of the course, which lasted from mid-October to early December, students...
FIVE PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS TO USING THE MOO

Of course, computer technologies such as the MOO do not represent a particular or inherent teaching strategy in and of themselves. As Garrett (1991) has observed, "the computer is rather a medium or an environment in which a wide variety of methods, approaches, or pedagogical philosophies may be implemented" (p. 75). Though it is still necessary to gather more information on the actual effects of the MOO on student progress before conclusive results can be made available, our experience with MOOs in the intermediate language classroom has nevertheless led us to identify at least five pedagogical dimensions that should constitute an informed and principled integration of MOOs for FL learning. Each of the following benefits from using MOOs derives in part from the radically student-centered learning environment made possible by the MOO.

Authentic Communication and Content

Almost automatically, the MOO restructures language learning dynamics away from drill-like exercises or an exclusive attention to grammatical accuracy to content-based activities and meaningful communication between students. Researchers in second language acquisition have long reminded language teachers that language acquisition is not a passive skill of recognition but a creative construction process. Cognitive scientists such as Hunt (1982) have found that by matching new language input with older bits of knowledge—what linguists call "schemata"—students constantly "negotiate" between what they already know and what they hear and see in new communicative situations (Rüschoff, 1993, p. 29). Indeed, in order to learn a new language, students must actively gather new information, and then process, reorganize, and internalize it. Already in 1985, Ellis pronounced that language learning results from communicative language use. Unlike many textbook exercises (and certainly most grammar exercises), however, the MOO establishes such authentic communicative situations in ideal ways.

First of all, like chat rooms, MOOs can be used to discuss authentic materials. For instance, in a unit on space during the first phase of the course (prior to contact with native speakers), students analyzed three exemplary short passages in German culled from different genres. The first was a paragraph from Franz Kafka's story "Der Bau" ("The Burrow"), which portrays a mole's nervously charged relation to his burrow. The second was taken from a contemporary detective story by Jakob Arjouni that describes the protagonist's very messy office in ironic, postmodern noir terms. The third was excerpted from a letter written by Rosa Luxemburg, in which she juxtaposes the dull confines of her World War I prison cell with the beautiful, emotionally liberating, phantasmic spaces of her memory and imagination. In the first step in this unit, we asked students to discuss the readings in small groups in the MOO. In our experience with discussions in the MOO confirms what Beauvois (1997) has found in her study of chat rooms: Students at the intermediate level were able to draw fairly sophisticated conclusions in the target language because the written conversational form of the MOO enables them to bridge the gap between written and oral skills—a gap that otherwise often prevents the "full expression of ideas" in discussions in a traditional language classroom (p. 167).

Using the MOO as a chat room–like discussion space, however, is not the only, or even the most unique, use of the MOO. The MOO also makes it possible for students to construct their own language learning environment and thereby re-
fashion themselves into a community of learners. Eck, Legenhausen, and Wolff (1995) suggest that truly authentic communicative situations only arise when the language classroom itself becomes the focus of student work and activities, that is, when the classroom environment is recognized and thematized as an integral part of students’ living reality (Lebenswirklichkeit) rather than as an unreflected routine outside of it. Thus, after initiating another MOO-based discussion about the relationship between the MOO’s unique spatial dimensions and the three texts illustrating different notions of space, we asked students to put theory into practice and to construct their own room in MOOssiggang. In the virtual, text-based world of the MOO, building a room essentially means describing a space—any imaginative space—with language, and thus the goal of the assignment was to have students produce texts on par with the discursive examples they had read for this unit. Students then analyzed with a partner the spaces they had produced. These partner work exercises not only helped students with their descriptions but also emphasized that their writing had an authentic communicative purpose. For instance, after they built and described their rooms, partners gave each other feedback about their descriptions, such as what kind of impression they made and what kind of person they thought lived there. Thus, rather than an arbitrary exercise undertaken only to practice the language, these spaces became themselves objects for the same kind of analysis done on Kafka’s story or Luxemburg’s letter. As public documents of a sort, these virtual rooms were qualitatively different from a description of a dorm room, a standard assignment in a traditional FL classroom.

An example of a room description by one of the students from the Fall 1998 semester can serve as an example:

Zimmer von Carla


(Carla’s Room

My room is super. I have a refrigerator, where I keep my vodka (though I like rum the best!) My bed is in the corner. A candle lies on my sideboard. The candle is magical (but I don’t know why!) My friends believe that they can see a woman in the flame. Yes, I find it very mystical. My room is also very calm. People do not speak in my room. They only want to hear music. My walls are blue—blue like the sky. My carpet is green—green like the grass. My room has only one window. I love to lean out of the window. I can see a forest. The view is very beautiful. I think a lot about the woods. The woods don’t have any walls. Sometimes my room is a little disorderly. My clothing is not in the closet—but that’s not important. Dirty or not dirty, I think my room is great. Oh, I have a cat. Herby, the SuperCat, lives with me. I am not so lonely. My room is cozy but a little uncanny. I love my room.)

Though this assignment generated an impressive amount of language use from a third-semester student just weeks after the start of our course, we advocate reading the room description for the cultural and personal notions of space it conveys. As Kramsch and Nolden (1994) stress, intermediate language students (and their teachers) need to value student writing—and take it seriously—by subjecting it to the kinds of cultural analyses that are practiced in the classroom on the published writing by native-speaking authors. Such an approach means that grammatical accuracy should not be the only or even a primary focus of any response to student writing—either by a teacher or by a fellow student. Indeed, like the short texts by Kafka, Luxemburg, or Arjouni, Carla’s room description offers an imaginary space worthy of more careful consideration. Perhaps the most striking feature of her room is its fusion of practicality with mysticism. Though one of the first things she tells us
is that she has a refrigerator with alcohol (not an uncommon feature of a dorm room), she also informs her fellow students that she has a burning candle near her bed in whose flame several visitors claimed to see a spirit. This second point makes the room seem very different from a typical dorm room. Nevertheless, it is possible to read Carla’s room as a reaction to the challenges and uncertainties of life as a first-semester freshman. Her own virtual room—with its blue walls resembling the limitless sky—attempts to strike a curious equilibrium between unlimited possibility and natural borders. This search for an equilibrium seems to be required of all freshmen as they leave the confining comfort of home for the big adventure of college. That new life is both exciting and scary—perhaps sometimes lonely or even uncanny. Carla’s virtual room captures that heady combination of feelings—and, with affirmative statements at the beginning and end of her description, embraces it.

When students build their own rooms, create noteboards or other educational tools, and represent their own (virtual) personality in the FL, their motivation to use the target language is genuine and has authentic communicative goals. While research into computer-mediated communication (CMC) has verified its significant impact on learner motivation (Warschauer, 1996; Beauvois, 1994), the MOO necessarily expands the definition of “communication” beyond synchronous discussions or other direct and intentional exchanges (such as email) with native speakers, classmates, and teachers. Instead, building rooms in the MOO is not just a pretend exercise, which students hand in and then forget. Instead, their rooms become part of the environment that the students themselves construct and use for their language learning. Because these virtual rooms become the meeting places for groups of students working on projects or just looking for fun, the students’ writing becomes part of their identity as language learners and can potentially trigger countless discussions and exchanges with other learners in the MOO. Like one’s own apartment, home, or dorm room, the virtual rooms convey important information about who students are or want to be in the target language, and in this sense they represent their owners to the native and nonnative speakers they might soon encounter and even work with. Hence, it would be a mistake to discount the virtual nature of spaces and interactions in the MOO as “unreal” or “inauthentic.” As Haynes and Holmevik, the developers of the MOO core used in this study and two of the MOO’s most thoughtful theorists, eloquently put it: “Our work debunks the myth that online relationships are somehow UNREAL and ONLY full of inane chat; rather, it is a testimony to community-building, not dehumanizing urbanization” (Haynes & Holmevik, 1995). The writing that students do in the MOO becomes part of this community’s discourse and plays an integral and lasting role in constructing that public culture. What kind of communication could be more authentic?

Autonomous Learning and Peer Teaching in a Student-Centered Classroom

Much research on the use of synchronous online systems in classes has observed that working with these programs inevitably transfers more responsibility for the direction of the course from the teacher to the students (Beauvois, 1992; Lafford & Lafford, 1997). In our use of the MOO, this happened at two distinct but intimately related levels. First, the decentered space of the MOO necessarily gives students more autonomy as learners, which Little (1991) provisionally defines as “a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action” vis-à-vis the very process of learning (p. 2). In the small group work that takes place in the MOO, students largely control the flow of discussion; in completing authentic documents for the MOO, such as their room or character description, students decide how many drafts and revisions they must complete in order to meet their own standards for self-presentation; in reviewing their logs, students identify their contributions to class discussions and their own learning. Second, the community-based structure of MOOs also naturally leads to peer teaching, since students begin to learn from and teach each other. Though tandem learning is an age-old method that relies on autonomous learning principles, new technologies such as email have made it more feasible to bring native speakers together with language learners across great physical distances (Brammertz, 1996). In the case of the exchange organized between students from Vassar College and students at the University of Münster during Phase 2, all participants were responsible not only for their own but also for their partners’ language learning progress. While having native speakers function as experts increased the number of teachers available to students (from 1 to about 20) and allowed each student to receive much more feedback, taking on the role of teacher for
their own native language also automatically made students' own language learning process more self-reflective.

In line with the principles of autonomous learning and peer teaching, students negotiated with their native-speaker partners about how much time should be spent working in each language and how they wanted to handle corrections. All students understood that their partners should have a fair chance to learn from them, too, and thus each language should get equal time. Each group, however, could decide how to achieve this goal. In the first exchange (Fall 1998), many groups decided to switch half-way through each session, while others decided to alternate entire periods—to comply with the class meeting twice weekly. In addition to determining the time allotted to each language in the discussions, students also negotiated how to help each other learn the target language. The logs from the students' group work demonstrated time and again how thoughtful and responsibly students teach their partners: They correct each other politely and in encouraging ways, they gently remind one another to get back to work, and they praise each other's efforts and accomplishments. Often a series of complex interactions occurs in a short period of time, such as in the following interaction about language learning that took place in a group consisting of two Americans and one German:

Michael lacht auch
Frank says, “Mmh, ich denke, Hemmungen beim Sprachen einer Fremdsprache [sic] liegen oft daran, dass wir beim lernen gesagt bekommen haben, dass alles korrekt sein muss. Dabei ist doch der Inhalt viel wichtiger als die absolute fehlerfreie Sprache.”
Holger_Guest says, “ich bemerke gerade, dass das hier suechtig macht, nicht wahr?”
Linda says, “Was heissen Hemmungen und suechtig?”
Frank says, “Hemmungen sind, wenn man sich nicht traut, etwas zu tun, wenn man zögert, weil man Angst hat, etwas Falsches zu tun. Suechtig: wenn man die Finger nicht davon lassen kann und immer mehr will; abhängig, wie von Drogen. Okay?”
Linda says, “Ja, danke.”
Michael says, “die Satze mit viele Infinitivs, und mit dem Konjunktiv sind sehr schwer fuer mich”
Frank says, “Mmm, ich versuche, kuerzer zu schreiben. Und einfacher.”
(Michael smiles too

As this example illustrates, students working in the MOO often felt much more comfortable asking their partners for definitions and other help than tends to be the case in the traditional classroom, where their questions might have interrupted the discussion for the whole class. While both German and American students often resorted to English words and translations, especially when they excitedly sought to convey information or make a point quickly, many also put extraordinary care and effort into giving definitions of words and even whole concepts in the target language. Frank’s thoughtful definitions of “Hemmungen” (inhibitions) and “suechtig” (addictive) helped his American partner Linda, but the complex syntax he used in his initial point about speaking inhibitions confused Michael. Fortunately, the MOO’s mediated conversational format lowered speaking inhibitions, and Michael was able to admit that he did not understand something and to ask his partners to slow down or to use simpler German. Thus, though Frank focused on helping Linda and Michael learn German, he also received feedback on his use of his native language, making him more cognizant of the complex social and psychological processes required to facilitate positive and effective language learning. This, of course, was the point Frank originally set out to make about speaking inhibitions!
Students similarly showed great responsibility in either correcting their partners' mistakes or helping them with vocabulary. Without the teachers' help, most groups in the Fall 1998 semester actually discussed on their own initiative when they would intervene to correct their partners and when they would overlook less important slips in order to refrain from interrupting the conversation. For instance, in this same discussion Frank employs a very effective method of handling mistakes:

Michael says, "Ich will eine 'Webpage' machen."
Linda says, "Also, Schwierigkeiten mit Immigration, und . . ."
Frank says, "Auf einer Internet-Seite? Okay, klingt gut."
Michael says, "Ahhh . . . Vielen Dank, Frank."
Michael says, "Sollen wir eine Internet-Seite über Immigration machen? Oder über ein anderes Thema?"

(Michael says, "Ich will eine 'Webpage' machen."
Linda says, "Okay, difficulties with Immigration, and . . ."
Frank says, "On an 'Internet-Seite' [Web page]? Okay, sounds good."
Michael says, "Ah, . . . Thanks a lot, Frank"
Michael says, "Should we make an Internet-Seite [a Web page, gender = feminine] about Immigration? Or about a different topic?")

Instead of correcting Michael, Frank simply modeled the correct use of the German word for Web page ("Internet-Seite"). Michael immediately picked up on this input and used the word correctly—with the correct gender!—from this point on. Even though Michael, Frank, and Linda understood each other in this discussion, Michael still signaled his interest in improving his German skills and thus improving his chances of being understood better in the future. It was obvious how much the students in this group liked one another and how they trusted their partners to treat them with respect and empathy. In this way, peer teaching actually increased the students' self-confidence in using the language. Because all American students were learners of the FL as well as teachers of their native language, they not only felt safe to make mistakes but they also gained self-confidence in the knowledge that they had something to teach their partners in Germany. Although the English of the students from the University of Münster was more advanced than the German of the students from Vassar College, the American students did correct their German partners and they did feel that they had something to offer to the students in Germany.

If students using a MOO assume these two roles previously held by the teacher—on the one hand setting learning goals and structuring class discussions, while on the other correcting mistakes and representing the target language and culture—then clearly the role of the instructor must change radically. Thus, the introduction of technology challenges teachers to develop new pedagogical approaches as much as it promises deeper student language learning. Blake (1998) suggests that empowering students "to communicate with other students and teachers from other institutions in the United States and abroad" necessitates that teachers "surrender their sovereignty over the direction of the classroom" and "embrace a new social infrastructure" (p. 232). Rather than serving as the final arbiter of what has to be learned, the teacher becomes "facilitator" and "guide" (Beauvois, 1992) in the common project of exploring the FL.

Of course, the responsibility that teachers turn over to students does not diminish their role in the classroom, let alone make them superfluous. Rather than personally directing all activities in the classroom, teachers using the MOO need to facilitate student learning in three primary ways. First, teachers need to design meaningful student-centered activities with explicit content-based goals. Because we no longer relied on a textbook to organize classroom activities, prearrangements for the course involved identifying topics, locating pertinent readings, developing discussion questions (which we posted in the MOO), guiding students through the features of the MOO, and supplementing work in the MOO with class sessions devoted to oral practice. Second, teachers need to help students become autonomous learners by letting them define their individual learning goals and analyze their own progress, since, as Little (1991) emphasizes, "autonomy is likely to be hard-won and its permanence cannot be guaranteed" (p. 4). We met with students once each week outside the MOO to show them, for instance, how to go back through their logs to identify errors and use the correct modeling done by their native-speaker partners, how to identify grammar exercises for their own practice, and how to learn the vocabulary they needed for their projects. The results of these activities formed the basis of their learning portfolios, which also included printouts of all
their work in the MOO. Third, instructors need to respond regularly to the students' ongoing portfolios as well as to their efforts in the MOO, because students require counseling and feedback from instructors in order to be effective peer teachers (Brammerts, 1996). In the end, the effective integration of MOOs into the language learning curriculum does not mean turning students loose simply to "chat." On the contrary, the unstructured exercises in early experiments using the MOO to teach ESL (Pinto, 1996) can leave students feeling bored or conflicted about its benefits for their language learning— even when conversing with native speakers.

Individualized Learning

An important facet of the MOO is its potential for individualized learning. By having students work together in the MOO, all students write and speak at the level they are capable of while still participating fully in the collaborative learning projects taking shape there. As the two examples above illustrate, the MOO enables multiple and flexible communication levels that can be tailored to each student's needs through negotiation with his or her partner. Moreover, the practice of having students maintain logs of their work in the MOO allowed slower learners to "repeat" the conversation at a later date to study the vocabulary and syntax that had given them problems the first time around. This mediated structure to communication in the MOO is especially important for small language programs like the German section at Vassar College, where an instructor is more likely to have a larger range of students at different— sometimes perplexingly different— skill levels in the same classroom. In a recent article, for instance, Tschirner (1997) calls such heterogeneity in language classrooms "the biggest problem" after the persistent "lack of time" required to achieve our goals as teachers and learners (p. 123).

In addition to facilitating partner and group work between students at different proficiency levels, the MOO and other online, synchronous systems lead all students to produce more language than is possible in a traditional classroom (Beauvois, 1992; Pinto, 1996). Even in an era of language teaching that values (or even overvalues) oral proficiency, such language production is significant, given that research by Beauvois (1996, 1997) and Smith (1990) suggests that written skills practiced in synchronous environments may lead to improved oral performance. Moreover, although the logs from the classroom sessions document increased language production for all students, this increase was even more prevalent and noteworthy for students who were either shy, afraid of making mistakes, or otherwise unable to perform equally well in all different skill areas. While a traditional classroom setting might easily discourage these kinds of students from participating fully in a class discussion, the more mediated form of oral communication creates a less pressurized atmosphere by allowing students to consider their words before pressing enter. One of the American students, for example, a shy but talented perfectionist who would not participate in a discussion unless she was absolutely certain that what she wanted to say was free of all grammatical mistakes, gave at the end of the semester the following evaluation of her learning in the MOO: "I think I pick up on mistakes when I'm speaking and try to correct them, but this is, of course, easier in the MOO because the text is right in front of us... I think I've also been a little more experimental with the language, using a word that I'm not completely sure of or making a German word out of an English one and then asking my MOO-mates if I did use the word correctly." Though working in the MOO did not necessarily lead her to change her approach dramatically, it did help her to participate more fully in class by giving her more control, and teaching her to rely on her partners for assistance. Of course, the MOO does not only facilitate more direct participation—in the form of discussion—with other class members or native speakers. As a space for producing culture and non-synchronous documents (i.e., room descriptions) that are then integrated back into the synchronous environment, the MOO also offers FL learners a variety of participatory and expressive options not available in IRCs and other chat rooms. Not only is the MOO, as a general space, hospitable to a wide variety of interactions between students, but through personal rooms and other tools, it allows each student to tailor his or her learning environment to make individualized learning possible.

Importance of Experimentation and Play

Aside from structuring all communication as meaningful interaction, the MOO also encourages an element of play and experimentation with the language which triggers students' creativity, a vital dimension of the language learning process. Rüschoff (1993), for example, reminds us that "language learners not only need ample opportunity to engage in communicative activi-
ties but must also . . . be given enough freedom to creatively interact with [language] in order to build on their mental knowledge base" (p. 9).

Like no other medium, the MOO allows learners to experiment with and explore the language to which they are being exposed. For instance, through the use of pseudonyms, the MOO provides a wealth of opportunity for role-play activities that can even extend to constructing the necessary setting and props as well as “filming” for playback at a later date. But even without the anonymity of assigned or freely chosen names in an organized activity, the MOO’s more mediated form of interaction—its reliance on “written speech”—makes it also a safe environment for students to experiment and play with new language structures. Such a playful and non-pressure environment can lower or even eliminate affective filters, thus encouraging learning as well as experimentation with communication strategies (Beauvois, 1992).

It is possible to find countless examples of instances in the logs where students began to play and experiment with the target language: They tried to be funny in the target language, they displayed an amazing creativity with the emote commands, and they explored ways to sympathize, encourage, and convince their partners. At the end of one group’s otherwise productive session, one of the American students tempted her German partner into leaving the more sophisticated discussion of multicultural identities in Germany and the United States for some MOO play in English:

Sarah says, “ok—I’ve got a quote we could discuss. . . . ”
Carla says, “let us have it”
Carla eats Luigi
Luigi doesn’t taste that good, really ;)
Luigi nibbles on Carla’s ear.
Luigi says, “I’d like to hear the quote too”
Luigi pokes you in the ribs.
Sarah says, “As long as the U.S. continues to emphasize the [sic] rights of individuals over those of groups, we need not fear that the [sic] diversity brought by immigration will lead to ethnic division or disunity”
Carla runs away
Sarah feels left out of the action
Luigi comforts Sarah, telling her that everything will be all right [sic].
Sarah wonders “what about my ears?”
Luigi nibbles on Sarah’s ear too.
Sarah expresses gratitude

Even in situations where students only seemed to be silly and not very focused on the task at hand, they displayed a tremendous range of communication strategies. In terms of soliciting spontaneous and unselfconscious use of language, playing and experimenting with language is probably the most obvious and one of the most productive learning strategies that the MOO encourages. Yet playing is also a means for students to develop and to affirm their meaning within the community they have established in the MOO. Though Sarah initially felt left out of the play between Carla and Luigi, Luigi brought her into the game and afforded her the same kind of affection he had shown Carla. Thus, play also encourages students to build the kind of bonds with each other that make the MOO such a safe place for experimenting with language.

Students as Researchers: The Intellectual Dimension

As several of the student examples illustrate, not only did the target language serve as the medium of authentic conversational exchanges in the MOO course, but it also formed the intellectual focus of the class and project work. In addition to the usual expectation of an intermediate class that students become better “users” of a language, a content-based approach to our work in the MOO also asks students to become researchers of their target language and its culture. With this pronounced focus on culture in the language classroom we join language learning theorists such as Kramsch (1993), who insist that language—as one of the very structures of culture—cannot be learned in isolation from its cultural uses. Kramsch explains that:

“Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.”

(p. 1)

In the first half of the course, students from Vassar College used their own language production in the MOO—for example, the room descriptions and their self-descriptions—as a site for combined cultural and linguistic analysis. While these activities during Phase 1 were designed to lead to such analyses, the project work that students completed with their native-speaker partners during Phase 2 facilitated potentially even
broader and deeper cultural and linguistic insights. This happened at two different, but equally important, and related levels. First, at the most general level students developed projects of a crosscultural nature. Though one of the primary goals for all the students was to learn more about the culture of their target language, inevitably and happily their group work also could open up new understandings of their own culture. Often, this insight came about in their partners’ estranged reactions to cultural realities in their own culture that they had assumed were natural. Just as often as not, it also came from disagreements between native speakers who each spoke with authority about their own culture. For example, in Fall 1998 a group compared the German and American educational systems. The conversation initially led one of the Americans to the expected conclusion that the German education system’s practice of categorizing students at around the fifth grade and sending them to schools with different (and socially hierarchized) missions was inherently unfair. Nevertheless, in articulating to their German partners the American system, in which most students attend the same public schools but take classes requiring different aptitudes that are themselves socially hierarchized (such as advanced placement or vocational training), the students from Vassar College recognized that the American system might be similarly unfair—but that it hides that unfairness behind a veil of supposed equality. Rather than being exposed to such observations in a lecture, students experienced for themselves the effort required to reach such conclusions. The pleasure of their insight was all theirs.

Second, at the linguistic level, student projects also forced learners to go beyond merely gaining a knowledge of correct word usage and to focus also on ideological and contextual uses of the words. Thus, one of the Fall 1998 groups that had chosen to focus on multicultural identities in Germany and the United States had an interesting discussion about the semantic valences of the word assimilate versus integrate:

Sarah sagt, “so is assimilation seen as a good thing?”
Luigi [zu Barbara]: Hmm . . . He should be online
Sarah sagt, “in teh [sic] U.S. assimilation is not a very politically correct term”
Luigi cackles.
Sarah sagt, “everyone is supposed to be able to keep their own identity in the US”
Barbara [zu Sarah]: Maybe the term is not the correct one, in Germany we talk a lot about integration
Luigi sagt, “Hehe, kinda strange, this instant switching to another language”
Barbara [zu Sarah]: Ein guter bergang [Übergang]
Luigi [zu Barbara]: So, hab Markus unser Thema und unsere Gruppe mitgeteilt.
Barbara sagt: “Integration wird als wichtig und . . . Moment mal eben.”
Luigi [zu Barbara]: Und wir haben keine Umlaute, nicht Vergessen
Sarah sagt, “Ich denke, dass Integrieren ist gleich als ‘assimilieren’”
Barbara [zu Luigi]: wie?
Sarah sagt, “was? Ich been [sic] verworren!”
Barbara [zu Sarah]: Es ist, glaube ich, nicht ganz das gleiche
Barbara [zu Sarah]: warum?
Sarah sagt, “Vielleicht sind nicht ganz gleich”
Luigi sagt, “ ‘Assimilieren’ hört sich wie ein Angriff an, integrieren hört sich jedenfalls freundlicher an”
Barbara [zu Sarah]: Ich schaue mal im dictionary nach. bis [bin] sofort zurück
Sarah sagt, “Integrieren bedeutet, dass die Leute leben zusammen können”
Sarah sagt, “angriff?”
Luigi sagt, “Oh, ich habe assimilate immer nur von Star Trek im Kopf (You will be assimilated)”
Sarah [zu Luigi]: oohhh
Luigi sagt, “ist ‘assimilate’ und ‘integrate’ denn das gleiche in Amerika?”
Barbara sagt, “Im Lexikon stehen sie als Übersetzungen [Übersetzungen] voneinander, aber ich verstehe sie nicht gleich”
Sarah sagt, “denke du, dass wenn die Leute integrieren werden, müssen sie ihre Identität ‘lose’”

(Sarah says, “so is assimilation seen as a good thing?”
Luigi [to Barbara]: Hmm . . . He should be online
Sarah says, “in the U.S. assimilation is not a very politically correct term”
Luigi cackles.
Sarah says, “everyone is supposed to be able to keep their own identity in the US”
Barbara [to Sarah]: Maybe the term is not the correct one, in Germany we talk a lot about integration
Luigi says, “Hehe, kinda strange, this instant switching to another language”
Barbara [to Sarah]: A good transition [to
Luigi [to Barbara]: So, I just informed Markus about our topic and group.
Barbara says: “Integration is [seen] as important and . . . wait just a second.”
Luigi [to Barbara]: And we don’t have any umlauts, don’t forget.
Sarah says, “I think that integration is the same as ‘assimilate’.”
Barbara [to Luigi]: How?
Sarah says, “What? I am confused!”
Barbara [to Sarah]: They aren’t, I think, the same thing.
Barbara [to Sarah]: Why?
Sarah says, “Perhaps they are not quite the same.”
Luigi says, “‘Assimilate’ sounds like an attack [Angriff], integrate sounds friendlier in any case.”
Barbara [to Sarah]: I’m going to just check in the dictionary. I’ll be right back.
Sarah says, “Integrate means that the people can live together.”
Sarah says, “Angriff?”
Luigi says, “Oh, I am thinking of assimilate from Star Trek (You will be assimilated)”
Sarah [to Luigi]: oohh
Luigi says, “Are ‘assimilate’ and ‘integrate’ the same thing in America?”
Barbara says, “The dictionary says that they are translations of each other, but I don’t understand them as the same.”
Sarah says, “Do you think that when people are integrated they have to ‘lose’ their identity?”

Though it requires practice to get accustomed to the multiple threads of conversation happening simultaneously in any given MOO conversation, it should be easy to notice the problem the group faced in trying to identify the proper term—that is, not only the linguistically correct, but also politically desirable, expression—to characterize the ideal relationship between minority groups and the dominant culture. Instead of being able to rely on their native-speaker partners for the “correct” words, both American and German students were driven to explore the cultural context for interpreting and using these words. In this situation, real differences between American and German students emerged in the understanding of assimilate. In Germany, the contemporary debate about whether to offer citizenship to children born in Germany to immigrant parents has been characterized by a problematic emphasis on assimilating immigrant populations into German culture. It was clearly interesting for Barbara and Luigi, himself a native German-speaker of Italian descent, that Sarah initially sounded the alarm at the word assimilation. Nevertheless, she, too, was unclear about the slight semantic differences between assimilation and integration, and signaled her confusion. While Barbara immediately offered to consult an online dictionary in the hope of placing the debate on firm ground, Sarah and Luigi continued to explore the cultural referents for that term, which, in the case of Luigi’s Star Trek reference, were surprisingly international. Ultimately, Barbara’s dictionary search proved futile when the dictionary implies that the words are synonyms. In the end, the students were left with a sense of the complexity of word choice in a FL and even of the ultimate impossibility of locating objective and authoritative meaning outside a cultural and political context.

CONCLUSION

These five principles for using the MOO in the language learning classroom represent the fundamental communicative goals that Underwood (1984) established for CALL more than 15 years ago. In fact, we believe that our use of the MOO offers a model for integrating technology into language learning—not, however, as a mere additional component or expansion of current classroom practices, but as an opportunity to transform the language learning process itself. In articulating the theoretical foundations for such a meaningful and transformative use of the MOO, we have drawn on specific examples from our first use of the MOO. Future empirical studies of its impact on learners will eventually prove helpful for assessing particular claims. In designing such studies, however, researchers should keep in mind that several considerations will most likely limit the ability of any one empirical study to evaluate satisfactorily the use of the MOO as a language learning tool. First, the definition of what constitutes ideal language learning—already contested in terms of pedagogical goals and methodologies employed—is in fact being altered by the possibilities that the MOO opens up. Rather than seeing language learning as the successful application of grammatical and lexical rules or even, as Turbee (1997) suggests, the internalization of “language structures within the broader contexts of dialogue and culture,” we would provisionally suggest a broader definition that emphasizes language as a developing and changing practice that not only reflects cultural differences but
shapes the very constitution of humanistic knowledge. Such a definition recognizes that language learning, like the use of language itself, is an inherently political project whose open-endedness may make it difficult to measure. Second, the conscious application of autonomous learning principles means that it may be impossible to decide in advance what is important for each language learner. Since each learner may be motivated in different ways, what constitutes success may vary greatly from one student to another. Measuring all students against the same proficiency goals may not provide an accurate picture of language learning successes, many of which are more intellectual and cultural than practical. This logic does not mean that practical goals should be devalued in favor of intellectual awareness, but rather only that instructors should help our students make informed decisions for themselves—and that means opening up, rather than narrowing down, their options in the language learning classroom.

Within a pedagogical context that values autonomous learning, peer teaching, individualized learning, play, and intellectual work, the MOO presents students with a range of self-empowering options for their own language learning while still providing them with significantly more intensive language practice than available in the traditional classroom. It is important to stress that the benefits of a MOO can even be realized in the absence of native speakers, because activities such as these used in the first part of the course—building rooms, discussing texts, role playing, and so on—should not be seen merely as a preliminary stage in the language learning process, but rather as the potential basis for an entire seminar. Ultimately, however, we think that using the MOO in language courses promises to do more than just offer a model for effectively integrating technology into the language learning classroom or even, for that matter, a way for making language learning more efficient and attractive. The MOO can help instructors realize the long-sought goal of securely anchoring intermediate or even elementary language learning back into the liberal arts curriculum. Indeed, the intellectually rich, highly self-reflective approach to language learning made possible by the MOO emphasizes “language study” and thus saves language learning from an instrumentalized and instrumentalizing fate as merely a “practical skill” that only needs to be “drilled” into a student. Of course, introducing cultural studies themes and approaches into the classroom is integral to changing the meaning and activities of language learning, and we hope that we have pointed in that direction.

In just two trial semesters, those students with the least developed language proficiency in the virtual exchanges—third-semester students of German—showed that they could complete in the target language many sophisticated tasks that previously were expected only in upper-level seminars. Thanks to the MOO, they were not only learning how to be better “users” of German, they were also realizing themselves through language—through the “foreign” language. By creating spaces and identities in the MOO, they explored new identities and began taking steps toward learning who they were, a process integral to gaining self-esteem as learners. By working on questions of culture, they were using a FL to develop critical thinking skills. Finally, by creating and maintaining a public culture in the FL in the MOO, they recognized that they were not just interpreters of culture, but producers of culture as well. These students have profited immensely from their hard work in the MOO—not only as FL learners, but also as curious, motivated individuals and citizens of the world. Their progress has given us, as teachers and scholars, deep satisfaction and increased motivation for our work and a renewed sense of what is possible in the FL classroom. Though we view this first experiment as an unqualified success, we at Vassar plan to experiment next year by adding an exchange with other students learning German before returning to an exchange with native speakers, which will happen in a later semester. Because MOOs are inexpensive and easy to use, we look forward to seeing this content-based application of MOOs tested in other university language programs.

After extolling the merits of learner autonomy, self-esteem, and self-motivation, we find it fitting to give students the final word by citing what one American learner wrote in her final self-evaluation of the semester:

The second half of this semester has been such an incredible experience for me. I have greatly improved my German “conversing” skills over the MOO. I have improved my knowledge of computer technology, and I have made two great German friends! And for those reasons, this has been the most memorable class that I have ever taken at Vassar. I am so proud of the progress that I made this semester. My German has improved at such an incredibly fast rate that I can hardly believe it! Even since the last portfolio, I feel that I have a much better understanding of the German language. I had a much easier time writing our presentation than the essays at the beginning of
the semester. . . . And as I sat in class reading the presentations of my fellow classmates, I was amazed at how easily I was able to follow the German. When I remembered how long it took me to get through stories at the beginning of the semester, I must say that I was very proud of myself! And besides that, I had a lot of fun going back and looking through everyone’s Web pages and pinwands [note-boards]—they were all so interesting! Although I’ve noticed my improvements in writing and reading German, I have noticed yet another improvement in my German skills. Although this improvement was only reflected by one grade point higher, it was a big triumph for me. The improvement that I’m speaking of is my [oral] interview grade.

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NOTES

1 For information on the use of MOOs in English composition and other seminars, see Crump (1998) and Fanderclai (1995).
2 For reports on uses of the MOO in a FL setting, see Donaldson and Kötter (1999), Schwenhorst (1998), Turbee (1996), Sanchez (1996), and Pinto (1996).
3 For an excellent introduction to using MOOs, see Holmevik and Haynes (2000). The book was designed for student use and can be assigned as required reading. For a useful overview to general practical, theoretical, and pedagogical issues in using MOOs in the classroom, see Haynes and Holmevik (1998).
4 MOOssiggang can be accessed via Netscape 4.5 (or higher) or Microsoft Explorer with the address http://iberia.vassar.edu:7000. Our MOO core, which represents the latest generation of MOOs, is open source freeware developed by Jan Rune Holmevik and Cynthia Haynes, the creators of LinguaMOO (based at the University of Texas at Dallas). The enCore MOO Educational Core Database can be downloaded free of charge from the LinguaMOO Web site (http://lingua.utdallas.edu).
5 The authors are still in the process of completing a German translation of all the commands and messages in MOOssiggang. Nevertheless, MOOssiggang already contains nearly 100 different German-language rooms that have been built by students and faculty members over the past couple years. The enCore Xpress interface provides an Xpress toolbar at the top of the screen, with menu options to powerful features such as mailing, object creation, editing and programming. The right half of the screen contains the Web window that displays graphics and descriptions of rooms and other objects as well as links to Web sites outside the MOO. The left side of the screen is divided into two windows: a large window at the top that displays running discussions and computer messages, and a smaller window at the bottom that allows users to type in their messages to others as well as specific program commands to the computer.
6 These results, based on several transatlantic MOO exchanges, will be forthcoming.
7 The relationship between cultural studies as an intellectual enterprise and language learning as a skill-based process of gaining proficiency has become one of the most important issues in the field of second language acquisition. For an overview of a recent attempt made by Stanford’s German program to combine the two, see Bernhardt and Berman (1999). For an overview of the MOO as a tool for reconceiving intermediate language courses as cultural studies courses, see Schneider and von der Emde (2000).
8 Because this article is addressed to an academic audience at American colleges and universities, we have decided to focus primarily on Vassar College’s perspective in analyzing the benefit of MOO technology in the FL classroom, especially because the American students learning German were less proficient in the target language than the German students studying English and had the most to gain from using the MOO. In addition, space prevents us from drawing specific conclusions about the potential impact of the MOO on language programs in Germany because the German academic system differs significantly from American undergraduate programs.
9 Though the question of assessment of student work is ultimately critical to measuring the success of the MOO, a discussion of this topic here would go beyond the scope of this article, which deals with the principles behind the effective use of the MOO in class. We plan to handle this question in future research on the MOO.
10 The newest versions of Encore Xpress MOOs now support special characters, such as umlauts.
11 See, for example, assessments and critiques of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, Oral Proficiency Interviews, and Simulated Oral Proficiency Interviews (Norris 1997; Fulcher, 1996; Bachman & Savignon, 1986).
12 For a more detailed discussion that addresses the strengths of MOO work completed in the absence of native speakers, see Schneider and von der Emde (2000).

REFERENCES


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New Book Series: Research in Second Language Learning

A new book series, Research in Second Language Learning (Series Editor, JoAnn Hammadou Sullivan), will begin publication by Information Age Publishing in 2002. The mission statement for the new series speaks to academic researchers, university instructors, and educators interested in research-based analysis that informs teaching practice.

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