Chapter 43

Challenges in Using Cloud Technology for Promoting Learner Autonomy in a Spanish Language Course:
Reshaping Pedagogical Design

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ABSTRACT

In a digitally networked classroom, the learner connects with peers, instructors, and open resources, be they human experts or online resources in non-linear combinations. As a result, the learner must navigate a complex web of associations and pathways. Thus the teacher practitioner who uses the networked medium as the platform for facilitating language learning has the challenge of developing methodologies, task-based activities, and a selection of tools to frame a learning ground that will provide maximum opportunity for the student to strengthen learning. This chapter will present a case study of a teacher practitioner's pedagogical design process in an online undergraduate course, "Advanced Grammar and Culture through Social Media." The main focus of this case study is to identify key challenges for pedagogical design and offer the rhizomatic approach as a model to promote learner autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

Empowering language learning students to develop autonomously seems more attainable today than ever before because of networked environments using cloud technology tools. These tools have the innate ability to create connected learning communities and to place language learning within a globalized sociocultural context. This should be an immense advantage to educators in promoting autonomy.

Learners could take charge of their learning (Holec, 1981, p.3) by framing thier own language learning gaols and sculpting their individualized paths to develop autonomously. Merely situating students with a networked environment, however, cannot guarantee the emergence of autonomy. Pedagogical design also has a crucial role to play in shaping student participation and attitudes, and in providing accessible opportunities. Pedagogical design is defined by Romiszowski as "any systematic choice and use of procedures, methods, prescriptions, and devices in order to bring about effective, efficient, and productive learning" (as qtd. in Halttunen, 2011, p. 62). In a digitally networked classroom, the learner connects with peers, instructors, and open resources, be they human experts or online resources in non-linear combinations. As a result, the learner must navigate a complex web of associations and pathways. Thus the teacher practitioner who uses the networked medium as the platform for facilitating language learning has the challenge of developing methodologies, activities, and a selection of tools to frame a learning ground that will provide maximum opportunity for the student to strengthen learning. Formulating this design and arriving at such an optimal template can pose several challenges for course design. (For a review about the importance of networked learning, see Goodyear et al., 2004).

Even before this age of digital disruption, foreign language teaching has been at the forefront of autonomy studies for more than four decades, starting with the publication of *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* by Holec in 1979. According to Little (2003), "if language learning depends crucially on language use, learners who enjoy a high degree of social autonomy in their learning environment should find it easier than otherwise to master the full range of discourse roles on which effective spontaneous communication depends."

The learning space within the digitally networked classroom is non-linear by default. The inability to predict what the next nodal connection will bring to the student's learning path is the norm, not the outlier. Under these conditions, how can the teacher practitioner, who is working within a formal education system that imposes the boundaries of a Learning Management System (LMS) space and semester-based timelines, design a course that truly promotes autonomy?

This chapter will present a case study of a teacher practitioner's pedagogical design process in an online undergraduate course, "Advanced Grammar and Culture through Social Media." The main focus of this case study is a professional development exercise in which the teacher practitioner went through one cycle of planning, piloting, reflecting on results, and identifying key challenges.

There were three main pedagogical objectives for integrating cloud technologies in this course: the first was to innovatively use an assemblage of cloud technology tools in order to build a suitable learning environment for the students in a way that cannot usually be achieved in face-to-face settings. The second objective was to map out a methodology for exposing students to the sociocultural components available in a global setting via cloud technology tools. The third objective, in keeping with the decades of foreign language research in autonomy studies, was to use multiple pathways of learning as an avenue for the development of learner autonomy.

The final assignment in the course was for each student to create his or her own personal learning network (PLN) for the continuation of their Spanish studies. Students were required to do this using cloud technology tools such as Google+ communities, Google Hangouts, Tackk, and Instagram. Each student creating a PLN with these cloud technology tools employed a unique process to arrive at a final product, and was expected to autonomously enhance his or her Spanish language competency. Warschauer and Liaw's (2011) evaluation of emerging technologies validates the potential of emerging technologies for

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