USING COLLABORATIVE GOOGLE MAPS TO EXPLORE A FRANCHOPHONE CITY

History

My high school French teacher used slides to show us her travels in Francophone countries. The pictures were enticing, but they may have been taken 20 years earlier. They were static. She also distributed maps that she had collected so that we could pinpoint the local monuments and buildings that were in the slides. This type of activity allowed us to construct a cognitive bridge of what we saw in the slides and what we discovered with the maps. By joining the two media, our geographical and cultural perspectives were widened, even if the information that we were using was not current.

Students and teachers can now instantly search pictures and maps on Flickr, SmugMug, Picasa, Google Earth, Google Images, and Bing. The availability of current, moment-to-moment data is exciting (and sometimes a bit overwhelming). Photographers electronically tag their pictures, allowing people to search the photos using key words; and photos contain dates, time, longitude and latitude. No longer are students limited to the textbook and slides in order to explore the Francophone world.

A collaborative lab-based lesson

Last May, I developed an interactive exploratory project for my second-year students using the combined media of my own realia and the electronic resources of the Web. I did not want to use the routine project of "find a French city and do a report" as this did not use any different skills than a book report. The goal was to teach students how to use a collaborative Google Map (My Maps) and photo sharing sites as they mastered the vocabulary and structures necessary to describe what one would see in a city (squares, businesses, parks, etc). The grammar objectives included:

1. the verb *aller;*
2. the contractions with the preposition *à;*
3. the use of the infinitive after the preposition *pour;*
4. vocabulary of items found in businesses and sites in the city.

Teachers can use this unit of instruction to elicit such sentences as "on va à la boulangerie pour acheter du pain" and "on va au stade pour regarder un match de football." Learning about a French city and its businesses imparts not only vocabulary and grammar; it develops cultural and social awareness through contrasts and comparisons.

Using Google and its educational applications

Before beginning any technology-based activity, consider verifying the following information:

1. Do you and your students have access to a computer lab with Internet? Many of my students do not have computers at home, so this project was done entirely during class time.
2. Are you able to access Google Groups from your district? Some districts block Gmail and Google Groups. If these are blocked, visit with your Information Technology contact, and explain the academic purpose of the project.
3. Students must be 13 years old to register for a Google account.
4. Do you need parent permission to enroll your students in Gmail (Google's e-mail) and to form Google Groups (classes)? If so, prepare a short letter introducing the project, its goals, and its educational merits.

Harnessing Google educational tools for effective learning

The project I developed uses Google Maps, Google Groups, my class Web site, various external links, and photo sharing sites. The teacher and the learner share information provided by both parties in a non-static, research-driven environment, and the activity meets the needs of multiple learning styles and multiple levels of intelligence. Google Maps allows students to experience a Francophone city in "real-time" and to conceptualize concretely their own position in the global community. By using this enriching activity, students developed their map reading and analytical skills. Additionally, they learned how to collaborate on a project, thus enhancing their technological intelligences for future careers. It should be noted that although students may "know" a lot about technology, they do not always know how to implement the available tools and software to further their knowledge.

Introducing the activity:

The students in second-year French made two Google maps, one for our town of Mount Vernon, Washington and the other for Angers, France. As a first step, the class took one period to walk through downtown Mount Vernon and took pictures of the city with our digital cameras. The students used their pictures to help create the Mount Vernon Google Map.

We compared the two towns in terms of size, architecture, history, and businesses. I have been to Angers several times and have collected brochures from business that offer them. This includes take-out menus, tourist brochures, business brochures, and maps. To introduce the project, I showed a short video presentation that I had made about Angers that included the schools in town, the grocery stores, the churches, etc. I asked the students to compare Angers with Mount Vernon. We reviewed adjectives, comparisons, and city-related vocabulary. This multimedia introduction piqued the curiosity of the students. The second step involved using Google Earth projected on the screen. We were able to find Angers and pinpoint its location in relation to other French cities that we had explored. The class discussed the region of *Pays de la Loire* and its specialties. My third step was to distribute the brochures, pamphlets, and menus that I had collected within the past two years. The students were able to explore the places with which they were going to work. Each student chose one or two places in Angers for which they would be responsible. Students used the information that they learned about the place from the specified Web sites or from the available brochures to make a Placemark on a collaborative Google Map set up by the teacher.

Lab/project requirements:

The requirements of the Google Maps activity were as follows:

1. Find the Web site (if available) for the business or place.
2. Find and save a picture.
3. If possible, find a video (YouTube or DailyMotion) to embed on the map. (Please note that many school districts do not allow students to access videos at school. If you have video site access, the students could send you the embed code that you would add to the collaborative map.)
4. Write a short paragraph describing the place and why one would go there. Also to be included: opening hours, prices, specialties, or historical information.
5. If applicable, write a review of a restaurant (or a *boulangerie*), including what one could eat there and what you would order.

6. Participate in a forum discussing the work of classmates. Students must comment and critique three classmates' placemarks.

Students completed the written portion of the activity using Microsoft Word and its French spell checking function. Before a student could post his or her work, it was to be sent to me via Gmail for editing. I marked errors in red on the document and returned them for correction. Students resubmitted their corrections for final approval. This is a short writing activity, but it involves investigation and organization of materials, corrections and revisions of published work, and use of technology at a professional level. Students were credited for task completion of the review and revision process.

The collaborative Google Map

Instead of each student making his or her own map detailing the locals, student collaborated on one map that I set up. Our map was called "Angers, France."

To begin the collaborative portion of the activity, students used their Gmail accounts (see instructions on the Web site) to access the invitation to collaborate that I had sent them. Additionally, students used the Web site that I had previously prepared with links to as many of the places in Angers as I could find. In this way, students would be able to quickly find the church, the restaurant, or the municipal building that they were researching. Using photos sharing sites such as Flickr, Google Images, or Picasa, students found and saved pictures of their places.

Once students had organized the components for the place they had chosen, they accessed the class Google Map to add the information collected. Each student added a blue placemark to the map. Inside the placemark, they added a picture (or video), a link, and the previously prepared paragraph. When finished, students saved their work and everyone who collaborated on the activity was able to click on the placemark, see the picture (or video), read the description, and view the structure using Google Earth or Google Maps (satellite view).

One particularly fascinating tool with Google Maps is the ability to "Street Walk" using "Street View." To the left of any Google Map, there is a small person in yellow. When clicked on, he can be placed on the street that you are visiting providing you with a street-level, 360 degree view of the area. Although you might not be able to physically take your student to that town, the "Street View" function of Google Maps is as close as one can get to being there.

After having posted all of the placemarks, students explored their classmates' work. If available, a group discussion with compliments or suggestions may be conducted through Google Groups discussion. Not only can the students see their own work, they can explore and critique the research of their peers in French in the discussion forum. For this activity, I observed the students working through the steps and noted the major issues that confused or delighted them. Items graded included grammar, vocabulary usage, and activity completion. Students were required to compliment or correct at least three of their peers in the discussion group.

Outcomes

The project took three days (approximately 84 minutes) in the computer lab to finish. As it was a trial-and-error group, the activity took longer than I had expected, but I had worked in extra time in the class schedule. In the future, these students will be able to finish in 1.5-2 class periods and I will be better able to explain the project to new students. Throughout the lab time, I circulated around the room assisting students with copy/pasting, language questions, and technical issues. Students assisted each other as they mastered the collaborative map process. There were a few mishaps, including one group accidentally erasing the work of the previous class. However, this was quickly rectified. In addition to the cultural aspect of the project, students worked on grammar and vocabulary exercises on the accompanying student Web site [www.catherine-meissner.org/francais2.htm]. Upon formal assessment, students demonstrated strong abilities using the verb "*aller*," the contractions of *à*, the use of the infinitive after "*pour*," and the vocabulary associated with places in a city.

The most enjoyable aspect of the project, as stated by the students, was the ability to "walk around Angers as though I were actually there." Several students researched the soccer stadiums on their own and produced an excellent written piece about French football teams and stadiums. Many students have now requested that I add Angers to our 2011 class trip. They wish to complete the circle of knowledge by standing in front of the building that they described on their Google Maps. The students showed interest and enthusiasm throughout the three days and expressed their willingness to expand on the project next year.

With the knowledge that some teachers face challenges in terms of using technology-based activities (lab time, tech availability, Internet access, district regulations, etc.), I have designed a step-by-step, easy-to-use project. It is of course preferable to explore and create on your own before you present it to your class. Teaching with technology calls for ingenuity, flexibility, and patience, all excellent traits to be shared with students. If the project does not meet expectations, share the experience with your colleagues and students and brainstorm for solutions. Any experience you give to your students that allows them to learn from success (or even failure) will only add to their comprehension of real-world situations in technology. I encourage you to take that first step into the collaborative and constructivist arena that is Google Maps, and invite you to contact me with your questions and outcomes.

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Notes

I have posted supporting documents, Web pages, and videos on my Web site, including examples of my class Google Maps, screen shots, and videos on how to organize a Google Group for your classes, as well as helpful hints on using Google products in the World Language classroom.

[www.catherine-meissner.org/technology.htm] Technology for WL teachers. Click on "Google Maps" for the tutorial.

[www.catherine-meissner.org/endroits2.htm] Student grammar and culture pages with several sites to explore.