Chapter 10
Integrative Language and Culture Learning: Connecting Formal and Non-Formal Learning in Virtual Language Studies

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Drake University Virtual Language Studies (VLS) program was an innovative, network-based instructional and mentorship program, focusing on language and culture learning. In short, the VLS curriculum contained an integrated mix of formal instruction and non-formal approaches and activities to foster language and culture development and set the stage for a lifetime of language and culture learning in Russian and Chinese languages at multiple academic levels.

The VLS consortial infrastructure involved multiple major technology systems—Adobe Connect for virtual classrooms, Moodle for course management, and WordPress for online publishing, community-building, and electronic portfolios.

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The VLS approach focused not only on linguistic ability, but also on the broader set of complex skills, strategies, dispositions, and integrated understandings that a digitally connected world makes possible and that language and culture learning in the 21st Century requires.

VLS provided a model that supports study in less commonly taught languages at smaller and medium size colleges and universities, and that can also inform distance education or self-directed on-line study of languages in a broad range of institutions, organizations, and agencies.

BACKGROUND

Pedagogically, the VLS program unfolded at an exciting, dynamic time in second language and culture education. As evidenced by the focuses of the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages' Standards of the late 1990's, language educators are moving beyond a linguistic-only view of the language learning process:

The Standards (1999) grew out of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act... and represent an effort to go beyond a limited four-skills view of language education, proposing in the process to change radically current teaching paradigms.[...] Rather than seeing language study as a fundamentally skill-oriented, self-contained enterprise that only tangentially includes culture in terms of practical competencies, the Standards encourage language instruction that focuses on its interdisciplinary implications and ability to influence learners in terms of developing an increased awareness of self and others and in terms of encouraging deep cognitive processing skills (Schultz, 2001, p. 13).

Post-secondary institutions throughout the U.S. and abroad were and are challenged by this complex view of language and culture education, with Drake University emerging over the past decade as an early proponent of language instruction, transformed from classroom-style language training into a more complex vision of language and cultural development on the part of learners.

DULAP's (Drake University Language Acquisition Program) early experience with innovative pedagogy in a technology-rich teaching environment stretched back to 2002, and was highlighted in 2007 by a major foundation grant to disseminate program experience via the NELL consortium. NELL (The Network for Effective Language Learning), under the auspices of the CIC (Council of Independent Colleges) and the direction of Dr. Jan Marston, aimed to provide participating institutions with an opportunity to explore twenty-first century pedagogies strongly enriched by the use of technology. A further goal was to help participating institutions—all