

Preparing Chinese language teachers for online teaching

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Growth in Chinese language instruction in North Carolina has grown at a rate that is more than double the national average for Chinese language instruction in the K-12 environment. Not surprisingly, the fervor to study Chinese has created an incredible demand for Chinese language teachers. North Carolina has turned to distance education as a solution for addressing both needs. While the number of face-to-face Chinese language programs is increasing, online courses in Chinese language instruction make it possible to involve students across a greater geographic region, thereby extending the reach of Chinese language instruction. The solution sounds relatively simple. The unspoken reality of such online endeavors is that developing any online course requires a parallel development of quality online teachers. This article presents the development on online Mandarin Chinese language courses in North Carolina, with a focus on the role of teacher preparation for teaching them online.

Program inception

More than three years ago, North Carolina began a strategic planning process to develop and integrate online Mandarin Chinese language courses for high school and middle school students. This was one of several strategies undertaken by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to address current and future demands, while supporting the State Board of Education's mission to ". . . prepare globally competitive citizens." The online courses were funded by a federal Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) grant received by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). In conjunction with an Advanced Placement (AP) grant, this initiative brings five levels (I, II, III, IV, and AP) of Chinese language courses to students across North Carolina. The courses were developed by LEARN NC, a K-12 outreach program of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education, and offered through the North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS). LEARN NC has also published online digital textbooks containing the content of these courses, which are freely available via the organization's website. (<http://www.learnnc.org> - Search on the keyword "mandarin".) LEARN NC was involved due to its staff expertise in online course development, online instruction, and second language pedagogy.

The online classroom

Teaching online is different than teaching in a face-to-face setting. While this sounds obvious, it is nonetheless an essential realization toward developing a quality online learning experience. The frenzy to embrace online learning at all levels of education has resulted in many poorly designed, poorly taught, and poorly administered experiences for learners. Online learning goes beyond making the content of a course available. It is more than the teacher's notes, syllabus, assignments, and assessments. Far too often, educators make horrible assumptions regarding online pedagogy, among them, the notion that an effective teacher in the face-to-face classroom would be equally effective as an online teacher. To quote the classic song, "It ain't necessarily so."

Teaching online requires an additional skill set and a different perspective on how learning *can* occur. It goes beyond transference of what teachers know about curriculum design and teaching methodology. It requires an understanding of what the online environment affords both student and teacher, and how best to capitalize on those affordances.

From the beginning, the online Mandarin Chinese language courses were developed and taught with this critical perspective as a guide. For example, developing communicative competence, or learning to listen and speak, is an essential component of learning a second language. The development of communication skills is most often the primary reason we study a second language. Since students and teacher are not in the same physical space in an online classroom, we had to take advantage of the available technology tools to facilitate

the work a teacher would normally perform toward the cultivation of those particular skills. In this case, we began using the Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) software Skype, which makes it possible for participants to speak in real time with a native speaker in addition to their instructor on a weekly basis. Students also used the open source software Audacity to record their voices and share recordings with the instructor and with other students.

Teacher preparation for online teaching

Concurrent to the development of the online courses, LEARN NC assumed the role of identifying and preparing Chinese language teachers to develop and teach these courses. A national search was launched just prior to the development of each course to identify candidates with the content knowledge and openness to technology who could create a robust course. To ensure the quality and consistency of courses during the pilot offerings, the decision was made to secure a Chinese language teacher who would develop and then teach the course. In this way, the teacher of the pilot offering of each course would also possess an intimate understanding of the course content, layout, and design. Course development took ten months on average, from identification of the developer to launch of the pilot offering.

Selection criteria

We developed a set of criteria for selection of the teachers that would further ensure quality of the overall program. Teachers must be licensed to teach Chinese or in the process of obtaining certification, either through conversion of an out-of-state license or by way of the lateral entry method. In two cases, teachers were already licensed to teach other subjects and were able to add Chinese to their existing license.

Equally as important, it was necessary to determine the candidate's experience teaching American high school and/or middle school students. This decision impacted course design and pedagogy since the course experience needed to reflect the philosophical approach used in our state's classrooms for teaching American students. Simply stated, the course design and pedagogy required a student-centered approach for learning a second language. Candidates who had previous experience teaching the American teenager understood this. They were familiar with the interests, expectations, and characteristics of the American student. They also understood that the American education system is different than that of China or Taiwan, and similarly, there were different expectations for both learner and teachers. Along those lines, teachers were selected who understood and could articulate the importance of engaging the students in meaningful ways. Prior experience with technology integration was, therefore, also a strong consideration in the selection process.

Finally, candidates were required to be native speakers or fluent non-native speakers. Each candidate participated in a second interview with a native speaker to assess their fluency as well as their ability to collaborate electronically in English with students and with all members of the course development team.

Professional development for online teachers

All developers/teachers were required to take three online professional development courses designed to prepare online teachers. These courses were selected from among a catalog of courses that make up the Carolina Online Teacher Program (COLT <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/2802>). The three courses are:

- *Teaching Online Courses* (5 weeks) - Adapt to the challenges of teaching online. Gain firsthand experience as an online learner within a dynamic learning community. This course addresses the complex relationship between content, pedagogy, and delivery in the virtual classroom."
- *Facilitating Online Collaboration* (4 weeks)- Develop strategies and skills to facilitate online communication, moderate online discussion, and promote accomplishment of instructional goals. Communication is the lifeblood of online courses. Learn how to make the most of it.

- *Teaching World Languages Online* (6 weeks) - Explore how language teachers can take advantage of the online environment and new technology to provide an authentic context for language learning.

As teachers were developing the courses they would soon teach, they developed their skills and understanding of quality online teaching through this series of online courses. In addition to these courses, the North Carolina Virtual Public School offered an online self-led study of the Course Management System (CMS) used for their courses called BlackBoard. Teachers reviewed this course to develop their understanding of the environment in which they would be teaching.

Monitoring student progress

Teachers also participated in professional development to understand and integrate LinguaFolio into all levels of the program. LinguaFolio is a formative assessment tool for language learners, based on the European Language Portfolio, where students document their progress in listening, speaking, reading, and writing another language. LinguaFolio also has an interculturality component in which students reflect on what they are learning about culture.

Students evaluate their own progress as they check off the appropriate “I can. . .” statements on a checklist built into LinguaFolio. For example, “I can greet a friend.” or “I can greet an adult.” This component is linked to the Dossier where student artifacts like writings or audio recordings are collected to show the student’s growing proficiency with the language. LinguaFolio is used strictly as a formative assessment tool, it does not figure into the formal evaluation of student learning. Teachers do not grade this student work, but use it as an important feedback tool. Since online teachers cannot rely on student body language to convey their understanding of what is happening during a lesson, teachers learn to monitor student self-reporting via LinguaFolio to inform their teaching.

Instructional design mentoring

Designing instruction for online learning and teaching doesn’t come naturally to teachers who’ve been teaching in face-to-face classrooms. We were attentive to this programmatic consideration, knowing that we had selected a classroom teacher to not only teach online, but to develop the course as well.

Teachers in the online Chinese language courses experienced quality instructional design across the three online courses they took. This was not enough to prepare them to in turn design for online instruction. Fortunately, the development team included an instructional designer who received the content from the teacher and loaded it into the content management system (CMS) Blackboard, used by the North Carolina Virtual Public School for all its courses. The teacher developed the content of the course in Microsoft Word, and the instructional designer handled formatting and loading the content into Blackboard. Ultimately, teachers were mentored in instructional design throughout the development process by virtue of collaboration with the instructional designer. The instructional designer provided templates and guidelines to each teacher, which facilitated content development for this environment. As development proceeded, each developer grew in his or her understanding of how the content and student activities would appear online. The instructional designer and teacher engaged in an informal mentor-mentee relationship as a result of their ongoing collaboration during the development process.

Virtual Chinese mentoring

The issue of teaching American students and teaching in the American system is significant for this program. Almost all of the online teachers/developers in this program are not native English speakers, coming from either China or Taiwan. Though they have been teaching in the states, they sometimes resorted to design and pedagogy based on the way they experienced it as young learners, in traditional, native language classrooms, in a different country. Our awareness of this issue informed our decision to develop an online, virtual mentoring course for native Chinese language speakers who were new to teaching in the states, or

new to teaching Chinese. The course was open to both online teachers and teachers in face-to-face classrooms. A native English speaker who teaches Chinese and has worked with other Chinese teachers developed the course. The course was co-led by this teacher and a native Chinese-speaking teacher who has taught in the U.S. The pair of teachers was thus able to facilitate the experience from two different perspectives.

While we refer to this opportunity as a “course,” there is a reluctance to do so. Virtual Chinese Mentoring was designed more as a professional learning community, with support and guidance coming not only from course instructors, but from among course participants as well. The experience spanned a semester and included pre-designed activities that required some information gathering on the part of the participant, like “What is your classroom management plan?” to more informal sharing through discussions initiated by participants themselves. The experience also included several synchronous opportunities where participants used web conferencing software to conduct “conference calls” to engage in professional discussions.

Virtual Chinese Mentoring was recently piloted. Future offerings have not yet been scheduled, but participants and instructors deemed the experience valuable and worth repeating with modifications to course workload and interaction. The experience cultivated professional and personal relationships for teachers who often feel isolated and in need of support from other teachers in their discipline.

Professional development from the outside in

As the online Chinese language program has grown in our state, there are experiences and opportunities outside of the course development and teaching processes that have resulted in unintended growth opportunities for online teachers. These external supports were born from the enthusiasm and interest in Chinese language instruction, coupled with the need for increasing access to Chinese language study. The end result is the development of a community around Chinese language study that includes teachers, students, program administrators, and other educators who share an interest in program success.

Developing teaching skills through the Culture Café

Online language teachers develop their abilities through informal experiences outside of the courses themselves. Among these, the North Carolina Virtual Public School offers periodic synchronous events that focus on cultural aspects of the various languages taught online in North Carolina. These online events create opportunities for students and teachers to share their knowledge on all aspects of culture from daily life to special events in the target culture. The Culture Café presentations are open to current and former students, as well as other teachers at NCVPS.

Online Chinese language teachers like Henry Ruan use experiences like the Culture Café to enhance their online teaching experience in a less formal setting. For example, in December 2009, Ruan facilitated a discussion and presentation about Chinese food. Earlier in the month, the Culture Café hosted a “Chinese Fun Night” with online games and stories. Experiences like these benefit new online teachers as they deepen their understanding of what it means to facilitate learning when they are not in the same room as their students. With each experience, online teachers further develop their online identity and their online voice.

Developing a cadre of online teachers

We never could have imagined that the course design alone could provide a source of professional development for online teacher preparation. The North Carolina approach to offering online Chinese language courses includes an additional course “teacher” called the *Conversation Coach*, who provides the conversation practice via Skype or other software as mentioned earlier. As the program progressed, we realized that we could benefit from the incorporation of this role as a vehicle for cultivating future course instructors. By virtue of their work with students, they become intimately familiar with the course content, scope and sequence. Consequently, their work with students and exposure to the course serves as a practicum for teaching the course, similar to the concept of “student teaching.”

The selection process for Conversation Coaches was different than that for the course developers/teachers since they were not required to have a teaching license. Preference was given to candidates who had some

teaching experience with high school or middle school students in any environment. In most cases, Conversation Coaches had served as teachers. In some instances, the experience has motivated the individual to explore licensure.

Mandarin Advisory Board

Since the planning stages of the program began in 2006, a Mandarin Advisory Board has served as a sounding board for course development and instruction. Advisory Board meetings were held using web conferencing software and conference calls. The Board also used a wiki to share relevant documents and progress reports.

Course developers and teachers have participated in these meetings to share their experience developing and teaching the courses. The Board has supported online teachers through feedback on the courses and by sharing opportunities for course enhancements. For example, the Confucius Institute provided support via several staff members who appeared as actors in videos and audio recordings that appear in the courses. (Examples of these resources can be seen in the freely available online Mandarin digital textbooks published by LEARN NC. Visit the LEARN NC website at www.learnnc.org and use the keyword search “mandarin” to locate these online digital textbooks.)

Advisory Board experiences contributed to the professional growth of online teachers. Along with conference presentations, they provided an opportunity for teachers to articulate the details of their experience to others. Teachers benefitted from interactions with the range of expertise of Board members that included

- Chinese language educators,
- K-12 foreign language specialists,
- instructional designers,
- other online teachers,
- representatives from the Confucius Institute,
- a national advisor formerly of Asia Society, and now with the National Foreign Language Center.

Ongoing teacher preparation

Professional development for teachers in any setting should be ongoing. The North Carolina Virtual Public School takes advantage of the LEARN NC courses described above to prepare all new online teachers, not just online language teachers, to teach their courses. Teachers in the online Chinese language courses program continue their professional growth by alternating the levels of courses they teach each year. Once an instructor has taught a given level more than once, they are invited to teach a different level. This opportunity also contributes to the overall quality of the program, bringing a fresh set of eyes to each course level, and providing a perspective on the scope and sequence of course content.