Teaching methods courses often have mixed results when it comes to actually changing teachers’ pedagogical practices. One reason for this is an over-emphasis on theory at the expense of practice. Novice teachers who graduate from such courses may understand the new methods at the conceptual level, but often have difficulty implementing them in their classrooms.

Beginning teachers face intense performance pressure, and incorporating innovation in teaching methods requires trial and error. Thus, for methods classes to achieve real results, teachers must feel comfortable enough to risk failure, that is, to try out new techniques and to develop at their own pace. In 2010, COERLL launched a unique online course for pre-service and in-service teachers called Foreign Language Teaching Methods. The result of a grant from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the course focuses on 12 different aspects of language teaching, each taught by a different expert instructor. The site contains video footage from an actual methods course held at the University of Texas at Austin. The goal of the grant was to design a flexible resource for use as a component of a classroom methods course or as a stand-alone course for independent learners. The course features faculty members representing seven different foreign languages (Arabic, ESL, French, German, Hebrew, Russian, Spanish).

The course contains a wealth of practical information for foreign language teachers:

- Best practices for instruction that can be applied to any language.
- Design ideas for activities and lesson plans that can be adapted for any language classroom.
- Opportunities to learn by observing the development of actual teachers.

Professional Development as Self-Discovery

What sets this course apart from methods textbooks and other online courses is its focus on professional development as a process of self-discovery. In other words, the videos of novice teachers participating in an actual methods class afford the end user an excellent point of comparison and a virtual participatory experience. Within each module, the sequencing of content mirrors the real-life class. As the user progresses through the module, she is presented with the same experience as the teachers in the videos. She looks at the same examples, completes the same tasks, and “sits in” on the classroom discussions. Each module ends by showing how the beginning teachers put into practice what they learned by creating activities and lesson plans. As such, the focus of the course is the professional development process itself, that is, how teachers react to new pedagogical ideas and struggle to make them their own. The course begins with engaging interviews of the novice teachers who recount their own stories about foreign language learning and why they decided to become a language teacher. For example, one of the students, TJ Checkly, an M.A. student in Germanic Studies, says:
“At first I still thought I was gonna be a philosophy professor or something like that. And then I realized that language, in and of itself, was sort of the door for all this stuff. Without language you really can’t describe science. Without language you couldn’t describe math, or any field, especially philosophy. And that by learning the language, it opened the door to figuring out all kinds of other things and seeing all kinds of different worlds.”

Embracing Open Education

Since its launch in 2010, the Foreign Language Teaching Methods course has been used around the country as both a supplement to a traditional methods textbook and a replacement for the traditional textbook. Last fall, two professors—Dr. Gillian Lord (Associate Professor of Spanish, University of Florida) and Dr. Lara Lomicka Anderson (Associate Professor of French, University of South Carolina)—used the online course as the centerpiece of their foreign language methods courses at their respective universities. But they didn’t stop there. They combined their two courses via an Internet forum where students from both universities discussed their reactions to the online videos and activities.

Once they had completed the online course, the instructors sent COERLL helpful feedback about ways to improve the course, including corrections of errata. This kind of ongoing collaboration between content developers and end users is testimony to the power of Open Educational Resources (OERs). (See “From the Director” on p. 3.) At COERLL, we believe that by opening up the development process to end users who share their good ideas with us, our OERs can only get better.

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