# *SPECIAL ISSUE COMMENTARY*
# LCTLs and TECHNOLOGY: THE PROMISE OF OPEN EDUCATION

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LCTL educators are beginning to participate in the Open Education movement by developing and sharing their own pedagogical materials referred to as open educational resources (OERs). This new generation of collaborative LCTL materials will invariably challenge longstanding hegemonies in the fields of foreign language education and educational publishing.

## INTRODUCTION

Six years ago, I was invited to deliver a keynote presentation at a foreign language technology conference organized by the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE), a network of more than 100 small colleges throughout the United States. Established in 2001, NITLE seeks to advance the traditional liberal arts mission through the strategic application of technology. My talk focused on the iterative research and development process of *Français interactif*, an open access curriculum for beginning French, created at the University of Texas at Austin (Blyth, 2009). Following my keynote, a conference participant asked me if I would care to respond to her blog post about my talk. I told her that I would be delighted. Or so I thought. Here is how her post began:

> Q: What does a professor from a Research 1 university have to tell me about language technology?
>
> A: Not very much.

This incident came to my mind as I prepared my thoughts about technology and less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) from my perspective as a French professor and director of a national foreign language resource center. For me, this incident serves as a reminder of the asymmetric power that exists between small liberal arts colleges and large research institutions on the one hand, but also between LCTLs and more commonly taught European languages on the other. The blogger had found my examples of technology use and pedagogical practice too far removed from the realities of foreign language specialists teaching at small liberal arts colleges. I recall her emphatically stating that she had neither graduate students nor technologists to help her realize sophisticated digital projects. Given the meager resources at her small college, she saw herself as a do-it-yourself educator who favored simple and inexpensive solutions to language technology. To this professor, *Français interactif* was too similar to commercial textbooks—online or offline—that left little room for adaptation and creativity. Her post went on to describe an alternative vision for conceptualizing and applying technology in the field of foreign language education that aligned with her Web 2.0 sensibilities. In short, the blogger rejected what she perceived as my hegemonic worldview of language technology that perpetuated the values of the large and powerful against the little guy.

In a recent special issue of *Language Learning & Technology* devoted to hegemonies in CALL, the guest editors maintain that "hegemonies take varied and subtle shapes and forms"—technological, pedagogical, educational, cultural, and sociopolitical" (Lamy & Pegrum, 2012, p. 1). I would like to follow their lead by framing the issue of technology and LCTLs in terms of resistance to received norms and ideologies in foreign language publishing. More specifically I would like to suggest that Open Education is particularly relevant to the LCTL context because it represents a promising alternative to traditional conceptualizations of foreign language publishing associated with the values and praxis of the commonly taught European languages (Blyth, 2012).

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## THE LCTL CONTEXT

There is a general consensus that the academic context of LCTLs in American higher education differs in many important respects from that of the dominant European languages. Despite the rapid growth of enrollments of a handful of "critical languages" in the post-9/11 era, LCTLs continue to be defined by their small enrollments, small faculties, and small textbook markets compared to the major European languages. Their small enrollment numbers make LCTLs particularly vulnerable during the current economic crisis in higher education. Frequently offered on an irregular basis due to low enrollment, LCTL programs often do not even have a departmental home and must be administered through language centers. These language centers must employ technology in innovative ways to organize courses. For example, the language centers of Columbia, Cornell, and Yale recently formed a collaborative arrangement to share responsibility for LCTLs not normally offered on their campuses. Starting in the fall of 2012, these universities will offer several LCTL courses via videoconferencing from a partner institution.

The field must also contend with a common insecurity about its perceived lack of expertise in language technology. LCTL instructors are typically specialists in literary and cultural studies with limited formal training in language technology and applied linguistics. A study of the role of applied linguists in foreign language departments in American higher education discovered that faculty members who self-identify as applied linguists were largely restricted to French, German, and Spanish programs (Katz & Watzinger-Tharp, 2005). In addition to a lack of technology experts, many LCTLs suffer from a lack of high quality pedagogical resources. Commercial textbook companies focus on the mass market and leave the LCTL niche market to university publishers and Title VI National Foreign Language Resource Centers (LRCs). While all 15 LRCs work on LCTL technology projects, five centers are devoted to specific language regions and focus on developing LCTL materials: CeLCAR at Indiana University for central Asian languages, NALRC at Indiana University for African languages, NEALRC at the Ohio State University for east Asian languages, NMELRC at Brigham Young University for Middle Eastern languages, and SEELRC at Duke University for Slavic and East European languages. Other important sources of LCTL language technology and pedagogical materials are the 26 language flagship programs offering degrees in nine critical languages. Created in 1991 to develop "global professionals," the Language Flagships are administered by the National Security Education Program (NSEP) at the US Department of Defense.

## OPEN EDUCATION

The term *Open Education* refers to forms of education in which ideas or important aspects of teaching methodology or infrastructure are shared freely over the Internet. Richard Baraniuk, a professor of computer engineering at Rice University and a leading advocate of open education, describes the movement in terms of its values and goals:

> The Open Education (OE) movement is based on a set of intuitions shared by a remarkably wide range of academics: that knowledge should be free and open to use and re-use; that collaboration should be easier, not harder; that people should receive credit and kudos for contributing to education and research; and that concepts and ideas are linked in unusual and surprising ways and not the simple linear forms that today's textbook present. OE promises to fundamentally change the way authors, instructors, and students interact worldwide. (Baraniuk, 2007, p. 229)

Open educators frequently invoke the concept of "knowledge ecosystem" to describe the relations between the various stakeholders in educational systems: students, teachers, parents, administrators, textbook publishers and other businesses such as testing services. Baraniuk (2007, p. 230) contends that academic publishing constitutes a closed, and therefore hegemonic "knowledge ecosystem" because it shuts out "talented K–12 teachers, community college instructors, scientists and engineers out in industry,

and the world majority who do not read and write English." Baraniuk's main point is that educational publishing is largely controlled by a small group of people in developed countries—publishers, editors, and academics—who are highly resistant to sharing control with the majority of end-users. Baranuiuk could easily add LCTL educators to his list of "shut outs" who are unable to participate fully in the current ecosystem of educational publishing. Fortunately, things are beginning to change thanks to open educational resources (OERs).

## OERS AND LCTLS

First coined in 2002 during a UNESCO forum on the use of digitized materials and tools for global education, the term *open educational resource* (OER) was meant to emphasize knowledge construction as an ongoing process that required dynamic pedagogical materials. According to Plotkin (2010, p. 1), OERs refer to "teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits sharing, accessing, repurposing—including for commercial purposes—and collaborating with others." In other words, OERs differ from traditional copyrighted materials because they are explicitly intended to promote "4R" activities:

- revise—adapt and improve the OER so it better meets your needs.
- remix—combine or "mash up" the OER with other OERs to produce new materials.
- reuse—use the original or your new version of the OER in a wide range of contexts.
- redistribute—make copies and share the original OER or your new version with others.

Central to the Open Education movement is the belief that educational materials should be free and accessible to all learners and teachers. But why would LCTL educators go to the trouble of producing and sharing materials with the world without seeking any financial gain? According to Wiley and Green (2012, p. 82) the answer lies in the value system of education itself: "Education is a matter of sharing, and the open educational resources approach is designed specifically to enable extremely efficient and affordable sharing." Therefore, for the first time in history, the Internet and digital technologies have leveled the playing field for LCTL educators who now have the tools of mass production (e.g., video recorders and multimedia software) as well as the means of mass distribution (e.g., social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter). In other words, LCTL educators finally have the means to circumvent the current academic publishing system altogether by creating their own knowledge ecology.

Despite an enthusiastic reception from instructors and administrators at community colleges (Plotkin, 2010), open education is still an unfamiliar concept to many faculty members in American higher education, including LCTL educators. A recent study of more than 2000 tenure and tenure-track faculty members at Florida public colleges indicated that just over 10% of instructors had actually used OERs, mainly as a supplement to traditional materials (Henderson, 2011). While the Florida survey found widespread support for efforts to reduce the cost of textbooks, it also showed deep concern about the quality of OERs. A similar survey conducted by NITLE to assess the impact of Open Education on small liberal arts colleges found that faculty had minimal knowledge of these innovations. According to the authors of the NITLE survey, the data "suggest that there is potential interest in OER, but that there is a need for more quality resources relevant to the liberal arts curriculum, that these resources should be more easily discoverable, and that faculty may need to be convinced that they are sufficient quality" (Spiro & Alexander, 2012, p. 18). LCTL specialists who remain skeptical about the potential of OERs would be wise to examine a few convincing exemplars. To that end, in the next section, I briefly discuss three high-quality OERs that all exemplify the potential of LCTL materials.

## CONVINCING EXEMPLARS OF LCTL OERs

OERs represent a heterogeneous category of pedagogical materials that differ widely in scale, sophistication, and goals: online textbooks, supplementary exercises, lesson plans, language corpora, annotation tools, and so forth. Claiming that critics often compare apples to oranges when discussing OERs, Weller (2010) conceptualizes OERs as falling on a continuum of size that facilitates more appropriate comparisons—from the large-scale OERs such as online courses typically produced by well-funded institutions to the small-scale OERs such as a set of lesson plans produced by a single instructor.

An example of a large-scale OER is *Yorùbá Yé Mi*, an online introductory Yoruba course authored by Fehintola Mosadomi, professor of Yoruba at the University of Texas at Austin, and produced by the Center of Open Educational Resources and Language Learning (COERLL). Yoruba, despite being the most widely spoken language in Nigeria, is taught at few American colleges and universities, typically only those with African Studies programs. Because commercial publishing companies do not publish Yoruba materials, Mosadomi was forced to produce her own materials, a good example of the do-it-yourself spirit that animates the Open Education movement. *Yorùbá Yé Mi* features a printed "textbook" of activities for the classroom that carries a Creative Commons 3.0 licence (i.e., CC-BY-NC-ND, which is to say "attribution, non-commercial, no derivatives"). The textbook is available as a free, downloadable PDF or as a print-on-demand textbook that may be purchased for less than $30. The term "print-on-demand" refers to a growing movement in the publishing industry in which new copies of a book are not printed until an order has been received. Open, print-on-demand textbooks avoid the publishing and inventory costs associated with traditional textbooks. The textbook also contains QR codes to facilitate the downloading of audio content onto mobile devices.

Large-scale OERs such as *Yorùbá Yé Mi* have several advantages. First and foremost, the quality of its content can be trusted thanks to its institutional affiliation. Second, it can be used "out of the box" without requiring any adaptation. Exemplars of this kind are useful in helping LCTL educators to overcome their associations of OERs with poor quality, user-generated materials. However, as Weller (2010) points out, large-scale OERs tend to inhibit the 4R activities that lie at the heart of open education's participatory culture.

*Brazilpod* represents a very different approach to OER design and implementation. According to its primary author Orlando Kelm, Professor of Portuguese at the University of Texas at Austin, *Brazilpod* is an umbrella site that brings together multiple, independent language projects for users to mix, match, and remix. To further open up the materials, *Brazilpod* includes Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, student blogs, and user-generated content. In addition, an open Creative Commons license (CC-BY) gives end users the right to remix and publish derivative works. In fact, *Brazilpod* even includes a database where users may upload their own *Brazilpod*-inspired content and tag it with relevant metadata to make it easily searchable for others.

Finally, on the small end of the continuum resides *Presenting Hindi*, a series of PowerPoint slides created by Jishnu Shankar, Senior Lecturer in the Hindi-Urdu Flagship at the University of Texas at Austin. While the slides do not carry an open license, the author states on the website that he created them for use in his own classes and wishes to share them with anyone interested in learning or teaching Hindi. Shankar advises that the slides be used as a supplement, not as the basis for a course: "While the topics in question have a grammar orientation to them, they are not the only text the instructor should use in class. They should be used in conjunction with the instructor's own creative lesson plan, supplementing material with these PowerPoints where grammar and cultural points need to be highlighted." Weller (2010) cites modular design that lends itself to adaptation as one of the major advantages of such small OERs. Moreover, since the content of *Presenting Hindi* has been created in PowerPoint, it is easy for end users to down load, edit, and remix.

## CONCLUSION

The collaborative practices associated with the production and dissemination of OERs exemplify what the new media scholar Clay Shirky calls *cognitive surplus*, that is, the increase in our ability to create things together for the common good thanks largely to the affordances of the Internet. Once relegated to the technological margins of foreign language education due to small enrollments and lack of economic clout, LCTL programs suddenly find themselves in the catbird seat. Armed with digital tools, an entrepreneurial spirit, and online communities of practice, LCTL educators are beginning to collaborate with their colleagues and students to produce their own high quality materials. This new generation of open, user-generated LCTL materials will invariably challenge longstanding hegemonies in the fields of foreign language education and educational publishing.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carl S. Blyth (PhD, Cornell University) is the Director of the Center of Open Educational Resources and Language Learning (COERLL) at the University of Texas at Austin. His research lies at the intersection of language, culture, and interaction. In particular, he is interested in cultural linguistic approaches to interaction, including the application of cognitive frames to the analysis of online cross-cultural communication. A proponent of Open Education, he has been deeply involved in the development of several foreign language OERs.

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