All A-Buzz: The 21st Century Language Classroom
John Ross

Last Fall I visited some schools in Henrico County, Virginia, which is on the outskirts of the Commonwealth's capital, Richmond. During those visits I had the great fortune to observe a fantastic 21st Century lesson delivered by Spanish teacher, Patrick Wininger. Patrick teaches Spanish to seventh grade students and works in a district that has a one-to-one laptop initiative. While that may be a plus for technology integration, his lesson was an excellent example of varied and seamless technology use that not only supported skills often referred to as 21st Century skills, but repeatedly gave students practice in the critical areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking Spanish. It was also one that could be accomplished in classrooms without the laptops, but maybe just not as efficiently. Patrick graciously agreed to a follow-up interview and has some great tips to share for incorporating technology in language acquisition instruction.

Focus on the Student

While I was invited to visit showcase lessons for 21st Century skills, you could tell this was pretty much just another day for Wininger—a day brimming with excited and active students very much engaged in the business of learning language. In fact, the class was so full it was almost bursting at the seams, with some students squeezed into corners to accommodate the visitors. The noise, at times, rose to a pleasant roar of excited students clearly engaged in learning, collaborating, and communicating with and without their laptops. I love that sound.

When you visit a classroom, it's usually pretty obvious when what you are watching is SOP—standard operating procedure. Students know what to expect, what to do, and are familiar with the transitions from one activity to the next. Wininger was a great conductor, but the students were truly the stars. He confirmed with me, later, that he really tries to give the students what they want. "Foreign languages, especially Spanish," he told me, "are growing in popularity and students really want to be able to use it to speak with others who speak Spanish." These may be other students who go to their schools, play on their sports teams, or others they meet in their communities. "Many people," he says, "now see Spanish as useful in day-to-day life. It changes the reason why students take a language." So he capitalizes on that.

In fact, Wininger is a career switcher who came to language instruction from corporate training and communications. In the business world, you focus on the customer, which is also what Wininger does in his classroom. He focuses on what the students want and uses the available technologies to engage them and help them learn language. "It has to be useful. If teachers can't explain why this matters, they shouldn't be teaching it." He notes that students are becoming more consumer-oriented, and if what you are offering doesn't have value, they won't buy it.

Freedom to Learn

Wininger notes that "It's more about *how* you teach than the tools you use." Yes, his students have laptops, but in many places increased access to different technologies is blurring what one can do in the classroom and at home. He incorporates a textbook series with many digital

resources, including handouts, recordings, presentations, and even a website where students can go online and listen to native speakers. The district has a web-based student information system, so students don't even have to turn in homework at school. In fact, it's probably better if they don't because then his instruction can focus more on active language acquisition than checking homework.

During the 45 minutes I was in the classroom, the students quickly moved through a logical sequence of instruction that was building to an assignment they'd complete for homework. Students focused on action verbs and vocabulary and worked through writing, listening, and speaking (and reading, of course) supported by digital handouts, presentation software, digital recordings and lots and lots of interaction. The digital resources served as a basis, but all activities were customized and required students to create their own examples, to relate it to their own lives, and to speak with others. They spoke with each other, they spoke with Wininger, and they responded to the digital voice that hovered over the room, with reminders all the way through—by Wininger—of where they were headed, why they were doing this, and constant reminders about the connection between reading, writing, listening and speaking. And what were they going to do? Students had to build on the sentences they wrote during class to post a blog response related to a favorite hobby or pastime. It was practical, relevant, and used tools the students enjoyed.

Wininger notes that foreign language classrooms have always had tools, like language labs, it's just that the tools are different now and can all be in one place. "It's not about what you have, it's about being *skilled* at what you have." Technology empowers students. Many of them are using it outside of school already, whether it's texting on their smartphone, mastering multi-player games, or chatting with friends online. His students just use technology to learn a new language in ways that feel comfortable.

Wininger says his students are like sponges. They love to try new things, especially with technology. He said he's never had a student *not* want to participate when technology was included. He says, "Whatever I've tried with technology, they've been willing to try it, too." Even if it's something new they don't know how to use. Once they begin to use it, even in small ways, they feel empowered. One example was when the young girl next to me had a problem with her document, before Wininger could get to her, she had several classmates at her computer who overcame the issue in a few seconds. He notes that the more students interface with technology, they build a repertoire of skills they can use elsewhere.

The Tips

So, what are some of the activities Wininger and his students participate in during class—and beyond? I've already described what could have been a very traditional worksheet-based lesson that was put into overdrive and ended up being a blog post. Following are some additional technology ideas Wininger shared.

Create games to play in class or online. Many applications have multiple functions, like the ubiquitous Microsoft Word and PowerPoint. With these, you can manipulate text, images, video,

and include hyperlinks that connect information together. You can create a presentation to use during class, or add buttons and links that branch to different parts of the presentation.

Bring in the world. Most teachers have Internet access, and so Wininger uses it to go beyond the walls of his classroom to engage his students with cultural artifacts as a subject for language acquisition. One example involved a painting by the artist Frida Kahlo. He provided background information through a lecture supported by presentation software, and the students read a section about the picture in their text. But then Wininger "visited" the Smithsonian where the students not only got to see the image projected larger than life in class but explored more information about it. Students followed up by writing a reaction paper, which could be in Spanish for more advanced students.

Build a website. There are many different tools that you and your students can use to create a website, it's how you frame those activities that matters. Wininger has had his students participate in the traditional travelogue activity in which students plan a trip to another country where Spanish is spoken, but he also requires students to create budgets and build a website based on their trip that includes a daily blog that they keep while they are "traveling."

In another web-based project Wininger identifies 20 contemporary Spanish songs that students select. They learn the song, of course, but they also learn about the performer and partner with another student to develop a fan website. Some of the students didn't want to stop, and even during the class I visited I could hear students singing along to some of the Spanish pop songs that played in the background during one activity.

Shoot a video. Again, you don't have to have access to an expensive videocamera and suite of editing software to incorporate video into your instruction. Wininger's students researched, wrote, and produced daily weather reports in Spanish…for Spanish-speaking countries. They searched the Internet for real-time data and presented the whole project in Spanish on video, even using green-screen technology so it could look like they were "on location." He said the students were not only engaged, but motivated to do a good job and to deliver the reports convincingly.

Make it interactive. Wininger admitted he was a little reluctant to get a video beam projector, not wanting to give up his trusty overhead projector. But now that he has one he absolutely loves it. It projects large, clear images that the students find engaging and focuses their attention unlike everyone staring at their textbook, and is useful for a variety of video resources, as well. He'd like to have an interactive whiteboard, because he feels it would make it that much easier to move images and objects around and he'd like to get his students up and interacting with the content—highlighting, summarizing, matching, ordering…there are many possibilities. While he doesn't have one currently, he suggested—my favorite tip—you can create your own interactive whiteboard out of a Wii game remote and an infrared pointer for about $40. Honest! There are dozens of videos on YouTube that show you how, so go check it out.

Practice What You Preach

Wininger does more than have his students do all the work; he has modeled 21st century communications for his students, friends, and teachers. He participated in a Fulbright-Hays

Study Abroad seminar in 2009 that took him to Mexico with 15 other teachers, and to keep everyone informed he kept up a daily blog (http://patrick-wininger.blogspot.com/). A blog alone can be a lot of work, a daily blog even more so, but while traveling?!?

However, "the experience was really valuable," says Wininger, as he was not only able to communicate with friends and colleagues back home, but it really helped him understand the potential of this form of communication. His blog entries include reflections, new learnings, and incorporate images and even videos. Some of the images make it into his instruction, as do some of the things he learned, like how the textbook he uses inaccurately described the Sun Stone in the Aztec room in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

The textbook describes the stone as a calendar, but that's not what the museum reports. Wininger can now not only describe its real purposes to his students but show them pictures he's taken of the stone. His excitement on his blog is palpable, "…now I get to teach my students the RIGHT thing instead of the wrong." The 21st Century has already emphasized the shift from receiving information to creating information, a key characteristic of Web 2.0 and social networking technologies. Wininger's blog is a great example of creating information that is available not only for his students but with anyone with a web browser.

No, not those Natives vs. Immigrants again!

I get a little tired of people telling me I'm not a "digital native," Marc Prensky's famous description of students who grow up with digital technologies. And, no, I didn't. I'm comfortable not being a digital native, because I think I do pretty well. I work in educational technologies, after all, and I work with others to try to help them figure out how to use them to support teaching and learning. I have never been one to think it matters much. But Wininger may have changed my mind…*may* have.

He notes that it's not the digital natives that we have to be concerned about right now, it's us digital immigrants. He agrees that 21st Century skills that promote communication and collaboration, solving complex real-world problems, and being creative and innovative are valuable. The issue is that most digital immigrants have never been shown how to teach them. He said they're very different teaching skills, and since they haven't really been valued so much in education until recently, teaching digital natives is a bigger challenge than being one.

I'd like to thank Henrico County Schools and especially Patrick Wininger for allowing me not only to visit but to follow-up with my many questions. Patrick may not be a digital native either, but his students don't care. They're learning, and having a great time while they're doing it, and it doesn't matter whether you're an immigrant or not when you make that happen.