

"Is There a Metaphor in this Class?" Teaching Advanced Students of French how to become critical users of the Internet



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As part of teaching French at the University of Western Australia and as a way of conquering the tyranny of distance, we have developed programmes at all levels to make the best possible use of Internet resources available in French. This paper describes and assesses some activities devised at advanced levels to teach a critical approach to web resources for research purposes, this being a central generic skill at tertiary level. These exercises encourage a healthy suspicion of Internet resources, an awareness of their limitations ('the holes in the Net') and suggest ways of appraising contents quality. However students' use of the Internet outside such classes is still fraught with shortcomings in terms of assessment of sources, referencing, reliance on the Internet as the 'only' source of information, and zapping without taking information in, let alone turning it into personal knowledge. I am suggesting that the activities I have devised, pragmatic as they are, will only be effective if part of a wider 'education to images', itself dependent on an comprehensive metaphor for the Internet.

First year multimedia programmes at the University of Western Australia make use of the Internet as a language learning tool (see Bonnie Thomas, "Evaluating multimedia programmes as a tool for language learning at beginners and post-TEE levels", this conference). My input is at advanced levels, and my preoccupations lie not so much in language learning, as in students' (mis)use of the Internet as a source of research material, often their only access to contemporary, up-to-date French 'print' media, institutional documentation, and 'authentic' culture.

This presentation describes the specific Internet-based research activities I devised for 3rd year and Honours students of an advanced French language unit which I have been running since 1998. Independently of the success of such activities I assess the same students' Internet skills required for two research essays which were part of a separate topic I introduced in 2000 ("French for the Professions"). Here I will analyse the results for a total of 46 students in French 307 and 6 Honours students who all took both the language unit and the "French for the Professions" Topic in semester 1, 2001.

I interpret my findings as suggesting that students will only refine their research Internet skills if they are made aware of the existing metaphors of the Internet they're working in. We, as educators, need to develop appropriate images of the Internet if we expect students to make a critical use of the Internet for research.

French Cyberculture

I devote a lot of my time exploring and then informing students about old and new French cyber resources, existing indexes, and reliable websites. It should be noted that although the

French initially lagged behind most western countries in embracing the Internet, due in part to their very early adoption of a unique but limiting technology (the Minitel), use of, and thinking about, the Internet have recently expanded in an exponential fashion in France. The advantage of that late start is an abundance of quality websites, which often make good of advanced interactive technology, and which don't just replicate non-virtual material. Also French scholars have done a lot of government-funded research on the need to specifically educate French students' critical thinking about pictures and media (Castells, 2002; Templar, 2001). Conversely philosophers have expressed their concerns about "Internet mirages" (Finkielkraut & Soriano, 2001).

For our local students, access to French cyberculture is one thing. Researching it, assessing it, and interpreting it, quite another. Because of its magnitude and chaotic nature, use of the Internet mercilessly exposes students' weaknesses in research skills and critical thinking already at work with other media. This is why I devised some activities to refine students' Internet research and analytical skills with the overall objective to develop a healthy suspicion about, and a discriminating eye on, Internet resources as a database of information, in line with a critical use of other types of resources.

A pragmatic approach

With these broad objectives in mind I have designed some specific practical, and progressive exercises adapted to 3rd year and Honours students. The first three exercises are covered during guided Multimedia classes in the course of one semester, and the fourth one is done independently during 2nd semester. The specific objectives of the exercises are made explicit to the students in their course guides.

1. **FILL UP A QUESTIONNAIRE** on French culture: (geography, history, daily life, popular culture etc) using some URLs I have selected, but which don't necessarily contain the answers. The most pragmatic questions ("what is the price of a postal stamp" for instance) are the hardest to answer, and of the socio-cultural nature students would like to know most about. An opportunity for students to develop their own search techniques and question the tools that are given to them, the main objective of this exercise is to alert students to the 'holes in the Net', and the requirement to use other resources to complete their research (encyclopedias, Who's who, local French people, other students who have stayed in France or French-speaking countries). Fighting against the illusion the Net is the repository of all knowledge, it should be only seen as one path among others within a wider information road system.
2. **QUALITY ASSESSMENT:** students have to explore a particular website, and find a way of assessing its quality in terms of contents, author, user-friendliness, interactivity, uniqueness, language register, and objectives. I then provide a template to guide them towards a methodological approach to quality assessment which they can compare with their own approach. In 2001 I directed students to new resources developed by UWA Reid Library, InfoPathWays, and in particular "Tips on Evaluating what you find on the Internet"¹. If some points on enquiry remain without answer (for instance, "when was this site last updated?") students are meant to realise that undecidability in itself is a trigger for suspicion on the quality of some resources. I also provide some information about URL's domain names and (French) acronyms to distinguish between the strictly

¹ WILT, "Tips on Evaluating what you find on the Internet", *Reid Library "InfoPathWays"*, http://guest@webct.library.uwa.edu.au/SCRIPT/InfoPathways/scripts/serve_home (accessed 27 February 2002).

personal pages, and the official, institutional or journalistic sources. This should alert students to caution in relying exclusively on the Net for their search and see the Web as a "discourse within a discourse" (See Templar, 2001).

3. **RANKING:** students are given short extracts from various webpages originating from both organisations and private sites and have to rank them by order of credibility/quality. This kind of activity carried out asynchronously encourages "to distinguish between texts spontaneously placed on the Web and those submitted to scientific or editorial screening stringency, making visible the status and origins of discourse, and granting them more or less authorial power [...] This is a fundamental condition to master the undesirable effects of 'information' found through search engines".² The objective therefore is for students to take into account the authorial signature, and apply rules of cross-referencing if necessary. Ranking also suggests that sites will be of varying quality.
4. **VIRTUAL FRANCE:** In this final semester-long exercise, each student is to create an HTML index of about 6 existing high quality French websites on a particular theme (Modern music, Political parties, Museums, School system...), writing an abstract in French on the websites they've selected, and referencing precisely the words/images etc. they paste into their abstract if at all. A one-minute audio-visual presentation in French is shot by the student and included in each webpage. Each student has to do a brief oral presentation in French of their own webpage to the large group. The set of all webpages is gathered under a general index entitled "France virtuelle", as an Internet resource for the class and other students³. This activity combines research skills, information gathering, referencing, and critical assessment as well as reading, writing and speaking. It integrates all language skills we wish to develop, as well as higher generic skills.

It would be expected that, alerted by such activities, students would ask themselves classic questions about the communicative functions of the Internet: who published this site, what does it say, how and why; is it credible? Ideally they would then be able to determine whether the material they found on the Internet is of sufficient quality to trust it and use it as a source.

Shortcomings of Internet use for research purposes⁴

Despite the success of these exercises along usual students profiles, there seems however to be recurring faults in students' use of Internet resources *outside* guided, synchronous or asynchronous, classes and multimedia assignments. Only exceptional students (mostly Honours students) seem to be able to connect the skills learned in Multimedia classes with their own needs. Most students don't appear to establish any connection between what has been covered in those activities and their own Internet authoring, and their independent use of the Internet for subsequent tasks. It is obviously part of a well-known difficulty that students

² Roger Chartier, "Lecteurs et lectures à l'âge de la textualité électronique", (my translation), on line, <<http://www.text-e.org> (accessed 17 October 2001).

³ See the resulting Index for 1998:

<http://www.artsmmc.uwa.edu.au/student_projects/1998/French208308/start.htm>

⁴ For an historical perspective on publication screening and the Internet, Umberto Eco, "Auteurs et autorité", Paris: BnF, 2001, reproduced <http://www.Text-e.org> (accessed 1 March 2002)

encounter in going from abstract to concrete tasks and in establishing links between external and internal knowledge⁵.

I indicate in brackets the percentage of students out of 104 (52 students x 2 assignments) showing the following weaknesses in their two research assignments, and the steps I have taken to remedy those in future programmes:

1. **ASSESSMENT OF RESOURCES:** It was obvious that most students (65%) quoted resources they had not been able to assess because of their lack of extra knowledge, in particular about authorial signature. Besides, no students ever mentioned whether they tried to ascertain the quality of their resources by making use of interactive functions whenever they were on offer, such as emailing their questions or comments to authors, subscribing to newsletters, or joining forums or chat rooms. In my feedback I insisted on the need to expand on general knowledge about France by regular reading and watching of French news, and on making direct contact through interactive websites functions. In my curriculum this year (2002) I will have a guided multimedia class where students register and participate in public Forums (such as those of daily newspapers, Libération and Le Monde).
2. **REFERENCING:** Even though the medium appears to herald “the end of the inviolability of the written word” (“*La fin de l’intangibilité de l’écrit*”, Patino), students are not to ‘forget’ basic copyright rules. I ascertained plagiarism in parts of the essays in roughly 8% of the cases, and suspected in a further 10%. In fact students' biggest weakness lies in copying and not keeping track of their subsequent changes, again raising problems of authorship inherent to the web (Eco, 2001). Apart from the illegality of considering as their own words/graphs/images students had in fact copied and pasted at a click of a mouse, such actions show that, intellectually, students haven't appropriated the knowledge they came across. In the first activity described above students will be asked to cite their sources with utmost precision. Marks will be allocated to such citing.
3. **RELIANCE ON THE INTERNET AS ‘THE’ SOURCE:** After browsing the Net, once they found a few references and websites, students in about 85% of the cases assume their research to be over and done with. Some (half of the 104 students) even realised the poor quality or the arbitrariness of the sources, yet still relied on them as what they perceived to be their ‘only’ resources. Conversely 15% located nothing on the Internet pertaining to their topic, and assumed that nothing more could be done, overlooking other ways of gathering information. In future a whole class will be devoted to refining students' Internet search skills, and expand their knowledge of French printed material and local human resources.
4. **ZAPPING:** Virtually all students (92%) admitted not to have read carefully more than two screens of any given website. Only about 38% printed or copied to files pages of

⁵ Results of a survey carried out in 32 countries on 265,000 fifteen-year old students evaluating their language, mathematical and scientific skills and knowledge highlighted the difficulty French students have in applying abstract knowledge to concrete cases, making them good at maths, average at French, and weak at Science, compared to their European, Japanese and Korean counterparts. Although these findings do not necessarily apply to Australian students they are worth bearing in mind. See Gwen-Hael Denigot, “Peut mieux faire” [“*Can do better*”], *LE PETIT BOUQUET, Le quotidien électronique de l’actualité française*, nr. 1013 - Paris, 05 décembre 2001.

interest for future reading at their leisure. 85% of the students admitted they did a lot of zapping, stopping for pictures, pretty animations, audio or video material, and in general going for breadth rather than depth. This trend is particularly detrimental when websites are word-based, vast in page numbers, and branch off to numerous other links, and when the research requires analysis of data. Strolling the Net is a worthwhile mental exercise, but for research purposes students need to pause and read contents at some stage. Students miss the opportunity to learn from authentic French, lending credence to some critics' early fears that "computer literacy means illiteracy"⁶. The correlation between acquired knowledge and Internet strolling or zapping needs to be further explored, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

If there are gaps in information gathering, it can be assumed that there will be even bigger gaps in data interpretation, synthesis, and personal analysis, meaning that no lasting knowledge ensues from the research.

In truth the shortcomings I have just described apply to all types of users, new to the web, mature-age students - or even academics. But my contention is that it is mostly students who are not Internet beginners who tend to be shallow operators. In fact it is their very familiarity with the Internet that often makes them so. Brought up in the entertaining, chaotic culture of the web, they come to academic research with well-entrenched habits and mind-sets.

Metaphors for the Internet

The effects of media on knowledge are notoriously difficult to assess satisfactorily. As David Gauntlett writes: "It has become something of a cliché to observe that despite many decades of research and hundreds of studies, the connections between people's consumption of the mass media and their subsequent behaviour have remained persistently elusive [...] due to a lack of firm theory"⁷. Theory on the Internet used as a research tool too is still in its infancy.

The medium is the message, as McLuhan famously put it. In particular the already complex mental transmission from abstract to concrete knowledge is further mediated and distanced in case of the journey from virtuality to reality. The Internet does induce a certain numbness of the mind, in the same way as a television screen, an effect of the culture of the image we live in. The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, provides useful insights on the numbing effects of the television screen and media production practices. "[Logical reasoning] takes time, you need to deploy a series of clauses connected by 'therefore', 'hence', 'having said that', 'this being the case'. Now such an array of the *thinking* thought is intrinsically linked to time" (Bourdieu, 1996, 31 *my translation*) but media love 'fast-thinkers' who deliver cultural 'fastfood'. Internet users need to be doubly alerted to the fact that 'thinking on your feet' doesn't cover the whole gamut of *cogito* and "images are not sufficient in themselves, reality can't be reduced to its visible part."⁸

The multimedia activities I devise address the issue of critical appraisal as if in a vacuum, whereas a critical use of the Internet should be integrated in a broader "education to images"

⁶ Bernard Morrot, *Presse, la grande imposture*. Paris: Flammarion, 2001, 15.

⁷ See David Gauntlett, "Ten things wrong with the 'effects model'", 1998, on line

<http://www.theory.org.uk/effects.htm> (accessed 5 December 2001), also in Roger Dickinson, Ramaswani Harindranath & Olga Linné (eds), *Approaches to Audiences – A Reader*, London: Arnold, 1998.

⁸ A report requested by the French Ministry of Education on "Teaching images in the Humanities" underlines the importance of educating students to understand the images they view on television and the Internet, as part of a holistic education to citizenship. [Le rapport de l'Inspection générale sur l'enseignement de l'image dans les Lettres](#) 2001, French Education Ministry Report, online (accessed 30 November 2001).

(*éducation à l'image*), involving not only a pragmatic, conscious approach, but also a circuitous, long-term one.

My pragmatic approach although not wholly inefficient and certainly opened to improvements, should be accompanied by a reflexion on metaphors of the Internet, as a basis to promote a critical disposition towards the medium.

Brent Wilson, an educator, stresses the central role played by metaphors in learning instructions (Wilson, 1995). In fact metaphors are widely used in teaching as "educators in many domains believe that students can import conceptual relations and operations from one domain to another" via analogies (Smilowitz, *no date*). It is worth remembering that Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, himself says that his first software (a programme called "Enquire") started from a "not perfect analogy": a "portal to a world of information" (Berners-Lee, 1999). The architectural image was further developed with notions such as 'sites', and 'edifice'⁹. As the title of his 1999 book suggests, Berners-Lee has since then settled on the metaphor of the "web" implying that it is indeed a quasi-infinite but punctured structure, a net full of holes with threads that need teasing apart to weave your own fabric. Elissa Smilowitz conducted a series of experiments to test how efficient metaphors are in software design, using the World Wide Web as an application domain. Her results showed "that UI [user interface] metaphors can facilitate users' interactions.[...] However various metaphors are not equally effective, some are no better than non-metaphoric interfaces". Smilowitz found that "integral" metaphors (where all parts of the software programme are in total correspondence with a guiding principle, for instance the Web as a library) were more effective than "composite" ones ("a combination of metaphors that are not necessarily related to each other but together represent the structure of the system", for instance the Web as both travel and a library). Her conclusions remain tentative: "Perhaps, an essential characteristic of a good metaphor is its mapping to the target domain, or its similarity." (ibid)

The early and still prevalent composite metaphor of the Internet is that of a space where information flow on the 'super highway'. Indeed virtual 'navigation' is ideally suited to a student-centered learning environment, as long as students are given good 'maps' to orientate themselves and resist wandering and meandering. Mehdi Serdidi, a French sociologist, believes that within such a spatial metaphor, "nodes [or knots] are more appropriate in pedagogy for clarifying what is at stakes. What is being knotted in virtual worlds is an ever finer tangle of real and virtual, of actual and potential, of sentient and intelligible" (Serdidi, 2001 *my translation*). Nodes (an image used by early inventors of hypertext programmes) and knots also recall the metaphor of the "rhizomes" imagined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the French philosophers and literary critics (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). The rhizome image finds its most accomplished deployment with Caribbean French-speaking writer Edouard Glissant¹⁰¹¹.

⁹ See Canadian poet, Huguette Bertrand, "Un entretien avec Huguette Bertrand, poète passionnée par l'Internet", avec Jean-Marie Volet, *Mots Pluriels* no. 19. octobre 2001. <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1901hb.html> (accessed 10 March 2002) For Bertrand, the Web is no more than the "keystone of her wider poetic edifice".

¹¹ See Kathleen Gyssels, "The world wide web and rhyzomatic identity in *Traité du tout-monde* by Edouard Glissant", *Mots Pluriels* 18, August 2001, <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1801kg.html> (accessed 11 March 2002)

Virtual information reaches us via a screen, that is a flat surface where viewers project as much as is projected onto it by the authors - and research on literary reception theory could be helpful here. We come to the screen with our preconceived ideas, schematas and desires and, accordingly, interpret or miss what is actually there. A screen screens from reality, sometimes hiding something, sometimes protecting, sometimes deceiving as in the famous painting by Magritte “ This is not a pipe”.

Computer science, pedagogy, media studies, art and literary criticism... many disciplines must be called upon to propose a metaphor preparing the right intellectual terrain that will help students becoming expert and critical users of the Internet. Obviously the LOTE teacher can't work in isolation to make sure that "there is indeed a metaphor in the classroom".

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