

Googlez-vous? : A Collaborative Experiment in French Instruction via Google Docs

by Cynthia Marker

The following is an overview of the variety of ways I have adopted Google Docs, an online tool for collaborating on documents, for my high school classes. After assessing meaningful classroom applications of the technology, I suggest formats for virtual seminars to promote the sharing of technology-based lessons with French colleagues from around the world, and outline a collaborative project first proposed at the AATF Convention in Montreal in July 2011. Attendees of my session were invited to participate. In addition to probing our role as instructors in a constantly evolving technological age, I hope to forge an open dialogue among colleagues and compose, over the course of the 2011-12 school year, a database of relevant classroom materials for use at all levels of French instruction. Anyone interested in joining the group is encouraged to forward her/his professional affiliation and contact information to the email provided at the end of this article.¹

To Google or Not To Google

Most teachers have experienced the challenge of catering to increasing demands on students' ever-more rapid attention spans as a result of the influx of new media in the classroom. In the realm of language studies, remarkable advances have been made with regard to text-based Internet sites, online comprehension and

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speaking exercises, facilitated access to live radio and T.V. broadcasts as well as multiple audio and video resources made available by podcasts. While there is certainly value in including any technological component – video clips, live radio transmissions, tweets, etc. – to spice up a lesson or boost morale, the most meaningful applications of new technologies are, unsurprisingly, those with clear instructional intent and relevance to course content. No one technology offers a foolproof guarantee for aligning ideally with instructional objectives. Nonetheless, and with admittedly limited exposure to the vast resources currently available to teachers, I have found Google Docs to be a particularly practical tool. The concept is simple. In the increased reliance on the virtual “Cloud,” Google Docs features integral word-processing elements of Microsoft Word while creating a document that may be immediately shared and edited by selected viewers. The author has the option of awarding collaborators editing or merely viewing privileges - the latter option coming in handy if one has concerns about information in a document being accidentally or otherwise altered by viewers.

While options abound for virtual communications – Facebook, Twitter, blogs –, the likeness of Google Docs to Word offers a level of credibility and formality less commonly associated with the stream-of-consciousness approach of blogs and other online ponderings. Affirming its ease and speed, PCMag.com awards Google Docs “honorable mention” in their Best of 2010 list and writes this favorable review:

Cloud-based applications work best when they're fast enough to work over a slow connection and compact enough to work well in your browser. Google Docs excels at both, and the result is an impressive balance of efficient operation and elegant design.

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Google Docs isn't perfect...but overall, it's the best cloud-based application suite we've got. (Mendelson & Muchmore, par.1)

Google Docs' shared editing privileges lend themselves to collaborative exercises and group projects. Students in my upper-levels have successfully experimented with script-writing and the creation of group PowerPoints. Though it is not the only way to go about collaborative activities, I have seen how Google Docs facilitates curricular interactions with regard to providing relatively easy access and eliminating time constraints of sharing material in repeatedly printed or attached Word documents. It also ensures a more selective and readily supervised collaboration since the creator of a document assigns viewing and editing privileges to 'sharers.'

In another online review, the editors of PCMag heartily reiterate these attributes:

When you need to collaborate on a document or a worksheet, a cloud-based application, where two or more people can edit the document at the same time, is infinitely more convenient than a desktop-based app that requires you to send the document back and forth to other people and keep track of which is the latest version. Google Docs supports real-time collaboration on documents, worksheets, and presentations. I routinely use worksheets in which three or four other people need to enter data, and Google Docs is ideal for this purpose. Up to 50 people can edit a document, worksheet, or presentation at the same time, and the screen includes an optional chat window that lets me communicate privately with each collaborator. The names of every editor currently working on the document appears [sic] at the top of screen. (Mendelson, par. 5)

Without presuming to know all the ins and outs of this specific tool, I will impart in what follows the ways in which I have incorporated Google Docs for instructional

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and administrative purposes in my own classes and detail ideas for using Google Docs to organize virtual seminars for foreign language, and precisely French, studies.

As alluded to, most teachers come to the quick realization that the inclusion of a new tool as mere ornament to a lesson, or ‘technology for technology’s sake’ will only get one so far. The development of techniques guiding students to technology’s practical application to language learning renders it meaningful and worthy of either repetition or enhancement. This concept is convincingly posited by the authors of “The Use of New Technologies in the French Curriculum: A National Survey” in the March 2011 issue of *The French Review*. While the study found increased use of popular technologies (e-mail, Internet, and word-processing) among French teachers nationwide, the majority of interviewees limited themselves to more traditional applications of new technologies (i.e. accessing radio and T.V. broadcasts). In their conclusion, the authors stress the primacy of the quality over the quantity of technology-based exercises and suggest an emerging instructional imperative to experiment with new technological approaches:

...the results of this survey do not advocate that the amount or kind of technology used is implicit in good teaching. We consider, as Colpaert suggests, that educators should focus on the learner rather than the technology. Given that the emphasis should be placed on learning and the learner, Salaberry underscores the importance of task design: 'The success of a technology-driven activity will likely depend, as much, or more, on the successful accomplishment of pre-and post-activities than on the technology activity itself.' (Anderson and Williams 779-80)

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I like how one of my history colleagues², the first to introduce many at my school to Google Docs' potential for diversifying curriculum and saving paper, put it best. To motivate those more skeptical about the dominance of computer technology in academe, he made an excellent point: it is becoming more incumbent upon instructors to acquire the ability to demonstrate to our students new pedagogical uses of technology. For some, like Nicholas Carr, author of the best-selling analysis of the Internet's effects on our brains, our lifestyles, irrevocably governed by online experiences, encourage muddled and distracted thinking:

As with links, the ease and ready availability of searching make it much simpler to jump between digital documents than it ever was to jump between printed ones. Our attachment to any one text becomes more tenuous, more provisional. Searches also lead to fragmentation of online works. A search engine often draws our attention to a particular snippet of text, a few words or sentences that have strong relevance to whatever we're searching for at the moment, while providing little incentive for taking in the work as a whole. We don't see the forest when we search the Web. We don't even see the trees. We see twigs and leaves. As companies like Google and Microsoft perfect search engines for video and audio content, more products are undergoing the fragmentation that already characterizes written works. (Carr, Highlight loc. 1573-79)

While this critique is undeniably valid and aptly stated, it also points to a need for increased instructional assistance and vigilance with regard to the integrity of online exercises and research. This in no way suggests teachers must morph into technicians which is, in my opinion, an unfortunate misconception. Unfortunate because it has the undesired effect of convincing already reluctant teachers that any

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foray into technology is futile if they feel incapable or unwilling to acquire technical expertise, when quite the opposite is true. The fact is, as most of us know, our students require little prompting in the use of technology. What they need help with is learning about academic applications of technology. While middle and highschoolers know a great deal (many parents would say far too much!) about recreational technologies such as gaming and frivolous uses of YouTube and Facebook, they need considerable guidance regarding scholarly software or analyses of classic texts made accessible via new technologies. One can, for instance, send kids to a site like www.tv5.fr and have them review it on their own. There is even value in this initial exploratory exercise. However, it is much more substantive to provide instructions for guided exercises involving the site's news stories and cultural activities previewed by the instructor. The subsequent sampling of exercises integrating Google Docs in my own courses is intended to spark an ongoing virtual dialogue in the form of another specified Google Doc to be shared and updated among French colleagues and that I will describe in more depth at the conclusion of my remarks.

Collaboration and Corrections on Google Docs

Google Documents may be accessed from the Google mail main page. Look for the heading of "Documents" in the categories listed at the left top of the screen, and select among options for creating a new document, presentation, or template. The interface in its likeness to Word is, as previously attested, very user friendly. Editing, font preferences, and prompts for inserting links and images are all located in dropdown menus akin to those in Word documents. Once a document has been

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created, search under the 'sharing' menu, insert e-mail addresses in the appropriate window, and send the document to fellow editors who may be allowed to view or revise it. You are also able to attach an e-mail notification for those invited to share the document. Students, in turn, may send requests to have work forwarded to an address they check more regularly than their school account. Other features include uploading Word documents and PowerPoint presentations, and Google texts may be printed. A list of documents you share and those that have been shared with you appear on the program's main menu. Though it is preferable to read documents on bigger screens, Google Docs has an iPhone application which provides an easy reference for students interested, for instance, in quickly checking daily assignments on a posted syllabus.

In the past two years since I was first introduced to Google Docs, I have used it in a variety of ways for administrative and instructional purposes. The fact that documents may be immediately shared and constantly updated has made it a nice medium for posting course expectations, syllabi, and daily assignments. Inevitably, the idiosyncrasies of a typical high school schedule allow for a certain level of chaos in weekly and semester planning. Though the school calendar may be dependable, unexpected changes arise. The facility of editing Google Docs and the familiarity my students now have with my daily use of it ensure up-to-the-minute, reliable information about homework and class announcements. At the beginning of every week, I preview upcoming assignments and answer students' questions in class. Absent students also know that, based on their peers' inquiries, I will update homework precisions. This not only allows for students' easy access to course information but also becomes invaluable for planning future classes at the same

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level. Having a detailed record of course content and daily work saves much time in the following year's prep while permitting me to better gauge a class's progress as I compare where we are at the end of the first semester to the same time last year.

Other useful information posted to the main Google Doc programme I create for every class includes test formats, presentation sign-up sheets, useful vocabulary, additional grammar sites for new lessons, and special instructions for group and individual projects. When appropriate and not overly cumbersome, I include the most pertinent details in the programme. However, when necessary to go into broader explanations, additional Google documents are shared. It is advisable to avoid overwhelming students with an overflow of documents they may easily confuse and disorganize. Any additional documents I share are intended for temporary use only and strictly as brief addenda to our main syllabus. For the same purpose of avoiding information overload and messy formatting, and at my students' suggestion, every couple of weeks when students are caught up with daily work, past week assignments are removed and saved to a back-up document for subsequent academic years. This additional copy has proven useful when the occasional long-absent student benefits from consulting a full list of missed assignments conveniently located in a single online reference.

The time-saving aspects of permanent documents with the capability of constant updates and easy sharing of information should be fairly evident with a basic understanding of the Open Source advantages Google Docs offers. But, for a more in-depth understanding of the meaningful application of exercises designed

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with particular skill sets for every level in language-learning, I would like to elaborate on several ways I have used Google Docs to enhance not merely the administrative aspects of classes but, more substantively, course content and goals. These pertain chiefly to collaborative exercises. Two group efforts in my upper levels realized as a result of Google Docs were script-writing initiatives - one for an original film project, the other for a play-writing exchange with a school in Morocco. In the first instance, seniors in an advanced film studies class took the initiative to write a short original screenplay in French, develop their own characters, act in, and film the script in and around school. Inspired by the works of Henri Georges-Clouzot viewed in class (*Les Diaboliques* and *Le Corbeau*), students composed a psychological thriller with a modern spin entitled *Envoûté* about their imagined sudden and mysterious disappearances from class and a final meeting that took place at a pond near school. The final image was of a necklace dangling from a branch over the water, the supposed lure that had entranced all of the hypnotized class members. The working script, written individually and in pairs, combined French dialogue with English set directions. The main purpose of the document, evident from the basic structures below, was to capture the gist of the film's progression. Character monologues were recorded verbatim on individual computers and edited into the final product in iMovie. Group scenes generally reflected the original written moments and were adapted to fit the improvisational nature in which the film was directed. This brief excerpt illustrates the dialogue's patchwork quality and notes about our filming schedule in the last days of the semester:

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Madame: Alors aujourd'hui...

Shayna: Où est Raphaël?

(Elle commence à le chercher partout, en souriant. Elle regarde dans le placard mais il n'y est pas.)

Il est où? Il faut que je l'appelle! Il faut qu'on le cherche!

(Anna goes upstairs after class and finds jewel in locker and becomes entranced--see her face entranced in locker mirror.)

The next morning in class

(all in our heads)

Madame: Alors, aujourd'hui nous allons sortir pour finir nos poésies.

Shayna: Mais Raphael me manque!!!

Madame: Tu peux parler de lui dans ton poème.

Catherine: Où est Anna?

Madame: Mais où est tout le monde?!?!?

(Catherine et Shayna se regardent.)

As this draft was loosely intended as a shooting script, limited attention was given to grammatical revision. The immediacy and effortlessness of students' collaborative efforts on Google Docs saw this final group project to fruition in the last weeks of their senior year. The inherently collaborative nature of the requisite co-writing also gave insight into the collaborative process of film-making and complications that may arise among one's original artistic vision, practical considerations of on-site filming, and the intricacies of editing even with highly advanced features of iMovie. Thus, the Google Docs approach, in a more rudimentary and limited capacity over the course of writing an initial draft for a

short film, helped students reenact the imagined team-building of writers, producers, and designers on many of the classic French films under analysis throughout the year in our course.

The above excerpt may be contrasted with a significantly more edited scene for a play-writing program our school has with a high school in Morocco. Thanks to a private grant and the initiative of an independent local theater group (Pegasus Players in Chicago), the Global Voices program enacts a writing exchange between American highschoolers studying French and students of English in Casablanca.³ Both groups are charged with the task of collectively writing a script in the target language that addresses social and cultural issues of their respective countries. At the end of the year, plays are exchanged, and students from both groups perform selected scenes at a final Skype conference. Last year was the first time I used Google Docs, and it immeasurably improved the team-writing experience. In an initial document, students were provided the following instructions for proposing script ideas:

Chaque étudiant/e va écrire ici deux petits paragraphes (3 à 5 phrases) sur deux idées que vous aimeriez proposer pour notre pièce. Tout le monde est OBLIGÉ d'écrire deux idées et ceci va compter comme une note pour une INTERRO en classe.
 En classe le lundi 21 février, nous choisirons deux de vos suggestions et essaierons de développer quelques idées générales pour une pièce complète. [Our external theatrical consultant] regardera les deux thèmes et nous aidera à en choisir un mardi en classe pour qu'on commence à écrire notre pièce pour les Marocains!
 N'oubliez pas d'inclure votre nom avec vos idées. **DONNEZ AUSSI UN TITRE POUR CHACUNE DE VOS IDEES.

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After much deliberation and by combining ideas of several classmates, my French III students elected to write a script called “Mise à l’épreuve,” inspired by the T.V. satire, Glee, and recounting the experience of popular students mocked by peers for joining their school’s ‘geeky’ French Club. Students paired to outline and write scenes. Below is a scene, in an advanced revision stage, co-written by two students in which the young hero, popular athlete Chaz, is cornered by teammates in the locker room and forced to defend his new allegiance to the French Club. This and all other scenes were read aloud and edited by the class as a whole on Google Docs. The marked revisions were completed instantaneously thanks to students’ shared work.

Scène 4

(Dans le vestiaire après l’entraînement de l’équipe de football américain.)

Athlète 1: Bonjour, Chaz.

Chaz : Salut.

Athlète 1: Je ne peux pas croire que tu es dans le club de français. C’est stupide, non ?

(Les autres dans le vestiaire rient.)

Chaz: Ahahaha....oui. (Ne disant pas la vérité.)

Athlète 1: Comment? Tu n’es pas sûr ?

Athlète 2: Hé, les gars. Une belle idée me vient à l’esprit! Pourquoi pas jouer un peu avec les étudiants dans le club de français ? J’veux dire maintenant que nous avons un espion derrière les lignes d’ennemi ? (Regardant Chaz.) C’est une opportunité.

Les autres athlètes: Ouais, super ! Faisons-le !

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Athlète 2: Tu vois, on peut les coincer à leur prochaine réunion. Où se retrouvent-ils, Chaz ? A ce café débile à côté de l'école ? On va leur faire manger leur 'bon appétit !'

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Les autres: Ah ça oui. Allez !

Athlète 2: Dis, Chaz, t'es avec nous ?

Chaz: Mais...(Panique ant et hésiteant)

Athlète 1: Comment ? Tu ne veutx pas les tricher, tes nouveaux potes 'chic alors ?!'

Athlète 2: Qu'est-ce qui se passe, Chaz ?

Chaz: Uh...je ne veux pas...

Athlète 1: Je ne veux pas quoi, Chaz ? (Plus sérieux.)

Chaz: Je ne veux pas faire mal au club de français.

Athlète 1: Mais, Chaz, ils ne sont pas populairess. Ils sont nuls.

Athlète 2: Sauf pour cette joliee Sally May. J'aimerais bien 'parler français' avec elle...

Chaz: CA SUFFIT !! Ils sont gentilss dans le club de français, et je m'entends bien avec eux. Je vais y rester y.

Les athlètes: (choqués) : Quoi ? Tu es idiot.

Chaz: Non, c'est vous !

Athlète 1: Comment ?

Chaz: Les personnes dans le club de français ne disent diraient jamais ce que vous venez de me dire. Vous n'etes_êtes pas vraiment mes amis.

Athlète 2: Si tu es dans le club de français, tu ne fais plus partie de notre bande.

Chaz : Je m'en fous ! J'adore le club de français. C'est sont vous les...les imbéciles !

(Il repart en colère ère laissant les autres bouche-bé.)

In contrast to the excerpt cited earlier, grammar was more carefully revised in this instance prior to submitting our script to the Moroccans. Students' original work contained a considerably high number of basic errors. I highlighted errors and provided students with a correction key to edit based on my comments. (See also the sample of a corrected Petit Prince essay below.) Due to time constraints of the play exchange deadlines, I also edited students' work in real time as they collaborated with partners in class and had them read through my revisions and ask additional questions. While I would have preferred more emphasis on advanced grammar in this process, grammar review is a major component of the overall course. The play exchange, however, was conceived as a rich intercultural experience as opposed to an exercise in grammatical mastery. Despite the sacrifice of intensive self-editing, students benefited from reading the more authentically French version of the dialogue in my corrections and comparing it to their original structures. As it is generally advisable to implement a variety of instructional approaches, this accelerated review process allowed them to experience more immediately the sense of contrasting styles and vocabulary choice in French and English and will hopefully help them make more informed choices in future essays and creative pieces.

In addition to the naturally collaborative features of Google Docs, its sharing features facilitate completion of group work such as PowerPoints and class projects

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on a common theme. In preparation for our communications with the Moroccan high school, students were assigned different aspects of Moroccan culture and three to five detailed slides to submit on their topics (history, politics, literature, arts, cuisine, religion, etc) for inclusion in a Google Docs Presentation akin to PowerPoint. After posting their research to the shared Google site, students explained the information on their slides, thus contributing to an automatic group presentation based on the collection of information and images uploaded. Moreover, rather than being restricted to an in-class presentation, this shared document allowed for unlimited further access to the dynamic collection of materials on Morocco.

Because of the easy manipulation of Google Docs and its mimicry of Word features, I have relied to date primarily on the formatting capacities of Google Documents. However, there are other formats from which to choose: in addition to Presentations, one may select from templates and forms that may be exported and shared in an Excel sheet. Google Docs ensures relative ease with regard to the inclusion of images and live links to Web sites, insertion of comments, and immediate revisions of student work. Ways in which I have adopted these qualities for my courses include virtual recipe books, guided discussions, and the posting of student comments about cultural field trips and extracurriculars. In their creation of a virtual Francophone recipe book, French IV students were directed to research recipes online and list them along with images of their prepared dishes in our shared class document. Posted recipes ranged from Belgian mousse and pralines to Moroccan stuffed dates and Algerian semolina cookies. When students presented their dish, they referred to the recipe projected on screen in class. The fact that all

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material for the class presentation had been posted to the same Google Doc that remained open throughout the class period saved a tremendous amount of time in contrast to previous experiences of hooking up student laptops or USB drives for individual PowerPoint presentations. The time-saving naturally improved the overall flow and linkage of ideas in the presentations. Even while students worked individually, their contributions simultaneously and organically, like the other Google Doc activities mentioned here, were automatically collaborative. It is easy to further the inherent collaboration of such activities by adding a follow-up assignment in which students post replies to peers' presentations or, in a fun variation on the same idea, attempt a recipe presented by a classmate and report back on their success or failure. Such exercises, while moving beyond peers composing texts together in the same time and space, offer the potential for a new type of virtual interaction emanating from an inherently collaborative online experience.

A Word About Assessments

My classes have an ample amount of individually graded assignments that offset group and pair work. With Google Docs projects, I give students grades for individual presentations that result from collaborative work, thereby avoiding unnecessary complications of awarding individual grades for group effort. For those in need of a grade for Open Source work, I recommend the assignment of an additional self-reflection on students' participation and experience of the exercise as opposed to doing practically impossible detective work on exactly how much of the collaborative product was based on individuals' contributions.

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In terms of using new techniques for correction, Google Docs offers creative approaches for grammatical revisions in real time. For a French III Petit Prince essay, I asked students to write an original piece imagining the hero's visit to our city. I color-coded corrections for verb errors, adjective agreement, vocabulary, etc. in the documents they shared. Students worked on revisions on laptops in class so they could ask questions about corrections or comments they had difficulty understanding. Here is an excerpt of an essay with original color codes intact, errors remaining to be corrected, and an instructional comment about the author's problematic choice of verb tenses:

Si le petit prince **vient** à Chicago, il serait très **confondu** parce que Chicago est très grand! Quand il **arrive** à Chicago la première chose qu'il **voit est** les gratte-ciels et tout le monde marchant autour **seront** pressés. Le petit prince est très petit et il **a** peur et il voudra **retourne** à sa planète. Quand il **voit** tout le monde pressé, il **est** très **confondu** pourquoi ils **étaient pressés** parce qu'il ne comprend pas pourquoi les gens se **précipitent**. Pendant qu'il **marchait** autour de Chicago il **trouve** un parc où il **décidera** de rester un peu parce qu'il sera fatigué. (Your verb tenses appear random and don't make a lot of sense. Stick to the present or past in your narration, and avoid jumping bw the two.) -teacher comment 4/27/10 11:29 PM

While I found the process of color-coding and adding pointed comments about grammar corrections time-consuming, this particular exercise received favorable response from students who requested more practice with online in-class essays. It is a procedure with which I would like to continue to experiment and better streamline for future assignments.

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It is appropriate here to return to one of the main points in my opening commentary - that technology alone, even while greatly facilitating instructional options, should not operate in a vacuum. For the meaningful formation of new exercises, instructional guidance, sensitivities, and at times improvisations, are required. In other words, it is obviously not by opening a Google Doc that a student improves her fluency. Rather, precise directions and a thorough explanation of the rationale behind group and collaborative enterprises promoted by Open Source technology must be part and parcel of class work for students to fully invest and benefit from activities conceived with respect to new collaborative approaches via technology. I would therefore like to avoid any misunderstanding that I am endorsing shared documents as a panacea for all lessons. This is merely one, among other options, that I have found environmentally friendly and pedagogically effective at all levels of language instruction. What ends up saving paper and reducing time constraints of in-person meetings outside of class has the sizable added benefit of being continually reinvented for a variety of collaborative academic uses. While specific technologies never cease to replace one another, initial forays into Open Source references have the potential of reinvigorating and enhancing all disciplines. On this note and in an effort to bridge the possibilities between student and professional collaborations via Google Docs, I will conclude with a proposal to experiment with Google Docs for an interactive database of materials to be co-authored and shared by members of AATF.

At my session in July 2011, I circulated a sign-up sheet for instructors who would like to participate in a collaboration on Google Docs over the course of the next year to craft an expanding collection of tech-based resources for all levels of

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French. Demands placed on participants are minimal – a request to enter over the duration of the academic year a total of five activities they successfully used in class. At the benevolent suggestion of an attendee, we will ideally follow up with a workshop at the 2012 AATF Convention in Chicago to assess results of the present interaction and envision future professional consultations via Google Docs or other Open Source media proposed by participants. I have already shared a document along with a sample entry with initial participants.

My role as facilitator will amount to sending reminders about approaching deadlines for entering information in the table provided and constructing a summary of our shared work for future discussions and the anticipated workshop at the 2012 convention. If our experiment is successful, there is potential for other topics of virtual collaborations ranging from book and film clubs to yearly seminars on special topics such as the impact of technology on French instruction, French intellectuals' contributions to analyses of the Cloud, and a host of culture or region-specific socio-political issues.

Though the technology is incapable of providing a one-size-fits-all solution for any single academic subject, the promise Open resources like Google Docs offer for collapsing geographic and logistical divides and realizing a more active, ongoing dialogue among professionals in a field as specified as French instruction is undeniable. While it may never be for some their *raison d'être*, the medium of open, online sources is evolving incontrovertibly as a universal language –all the more reason to embrace the spirit of googlons-nous!

FRANCIS W. PARKER SCHOOL

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Notes

¹ Please forward inquiries to cmarker@fwparker.org.

² Many thanks to Marty Moran, whose generous sharing of technological resources has helped colleagues at my school and throughout the cybersphere reinvigorate their curriculum.

³ Much credit goes to the Director of Global Voices, Arlene Crewdson, and our teacher-facilitator, Emilio Robles, for the success of student online exchanges at all levels of our French program. More information about this play-writing initiative can be found at <http://www.globalvoicesinitiative.org/theatre>.

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