IU Offers Haitian Creole through Interactive Video

Midwestern universities within the consortium, Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), have long discussed the desirability of being able to share the rich course offerings available at individual campuses in the less commonly taught languages (LCTLs), particularly in times of shrinking resources and small class enrollments. Indiana University Bloomington is a national leader in providing a rich array of LCTLs through its area studies centers and other programs. Among these languages is Haitian Creole, which is taught at only a handful of institutions. This year, a pilot project teaching Haitian Creole via interactive video between IU Bloomington and IUPUI may serve as just such a model for sharing these courses across campuses.

IU Bloomington's College of Arts and Sciences, Office of Distributed Education, and the Creole Institute have combined resources to offer two semesters of Haitian Creole in the academic year 2000-01 using instructional technology. Students on the Bloomington and Indianapolis campuses are being instructed via IU's systemwide Virtual Indiana Classroom (VIC) network, which uses two-way video and audio channels to allow IU students and instructors to interact.

Albert Valdman, Rudy Professor of French and Italian and of Linguistics and director of IU's Creole Institute, says that IU is uniquely positioned to provide such an interactive course on Haitian Creole because the institute is the only one of its kind in the United States. Erwin Boschmann, IU associate vice president for distributed education, points out how technologies such as interactive video and the Internet enable universities to pool their resources effectively. The Haitian Creole course also embodies one of the action items in IU's strategic plan to integrate technology into mainstream teaching and learning.

Ben Hebblethwaite, a graduate student in IUB's Department of French and Italian studying for his M.A. in French linguistics, has been teaching Haitian Creole for the past two years, although this year is the first time that he has taught it simultaneously on two campuses via interactive video. He admits that the technology takes a bit more training and adaptation, especially learning how to manipulate the camera to focus on students as they interact. Nevertheless, he feels rewarded by the realization that LCTLs now have the potential to be accessible to a wider audience at more than one physical location. Last year, one of his students had to regularly commute from Indianapolis three times a week to take the course in Bloomington.

This semester's class has six students, three in Bloomington and three in Indianapolis. They seem comfortable with the classroom setting, speaking easily into the individual microphones at each desk, and being able to look at either of two sets of monitors, front and back, to see their remote classmates, or even to check written materials that can be put on the document reader. There is also a fax line available for transmitting such documents as pop quizzes. Otherwise, the class seems remarkably similar to most traditional LCTL classrooms: small enrollments, immersion techniques, and communicative, interactive learning. With the help of graduate students from the Department of Instructional Systems Technology of the School of Education, a Web site is being designed for the course. Currently, it features class notes, homework assignments, and a gallery of photos taken by a former Haitian Creole student, Don Miller, with a series of questions related to them. Hebblethwaite hopes that IUB will continue to offer Haitian Creole in this mode and that it will attract members of the Indianapolis community involved in Haiti-related work or volunteerism.

—RMN

Visit the course Web site: www.indiana.edu/~kreyol