

Title: Online Paths to Cultural and Language Learning
Author: Hope Wilson, The Ohio State University

Abstract:

Study abroad to Russia has never been easy, but the past few years have thrown further obstacles in the path of students seeking Russian cultural and linguistic immersion as international tension has heightened anxieties and reduced funding opportunities. Moreover, study abroad to Russia has always been difficult for students with socioeconomic limitations, who cannot afford it; it is also difficult for those with physical disabilities, as Russia is a country with few accommodations. It is, therefore, imperative to open alternative paths to exploring Russian language and culture for those for whom travel is impractical or impossible.

One potential method for cultural exploration uses the affordances of the Internet. The boundless connectivity of the web means that foreign language learners can independently access languacultural resources. However, past studies of online interactions have shown that “failed” exchanges are frequent on the internet; these failed exchanges can lead to regression in cultural attitudes and non-acquisition of language (Belz & Kinginger, 2003; O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006). Instructor support and guidance seems to be key in ensuring that these exchanges are productive (Ware & Kramsch, 2005).

This presentation discusses a course that takes students through a semi-autonomous guided online learning project. I discuss two versions of an online course designed to guide Russian students as they explore Russian online languaculture. The first is a program that is independent of a pre-existing curriculum, offered as an optional learning enhancement for students. The second is a course designed specifically to be integrated into a pre-existing Russian course. Cultural and sociolinguistic learning outcomes are measured using mixed methods. This presentation focuses especially on the effects of course integration on student engagement and on ways in which this program can be integrated with different types of Russian language courses.