

The Start Here Module: Creating a First Day Impression in an Online Language Class

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Abstract

Students gain a lasting impression of a course and of the instructor on the first day of class (Lang, 2019). In asynchronous online or hybrid classes, the equivalent of the first day of class is the Start Here module. This orientation module should contain essential information about class expectations and technology requirements and provide help and accessibility resources. However, it is also the first opportunity for the instructor to establish a community of inquiry (Garrison et al., 2000) through a strong teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. The Start Here module in an online language class is also fertile ground to build anticipation about the language and cultures taught, and to provide a space to discuss potential language anxiety and common misconceptions about language learning.

Keywords: *asynchronous classes, first day of class, community of inquiry, community building online, language-learning anxiety, language-learning expectations, online course orientation, Start Here module*

Background

In 2017, I taught my first asynchronous online language course to address my institution's need to reach students on all five of our campuses (I am the only French instructor at Middle Georgia State University). I completed the training offered by our Center for Teaching Excellence but still felt unsure about the class. My concerns were threefold: (1) I was uncertain how I would interact with students and establish connections with them; (2) I was worried about losing the immediacy of the language practice; and (3) I was concerned whether students would receive enough exposure to the language. I attended professional development workshops, read literature about general online teaching and teaching languages online, and eventually found ways to establish my teaching presence and connect with my online students.

I believe that establishing strong foundations for the class in terms of teaching, social, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000), building a community of learning, and motivating students to learn the language and cultures begin with the Start Here module. For me, the Start Here module is the online equivalent of the first day of a face-to-face class. It should provide students with the orientation information they need to be successful in the class, but it should also be an opportunity for students to establish connections with their instructor and their peers (Asgarpoor, 2019;

Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). The Start Here module is also fertile ground to start building anticipation about the course content (Darby & Lang, 2019) and the language-learning journey (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). Boettcher and Conrad (2021) contend that presence, community, and clear expectations should be the three pillars of the beginning weeks of an online class. In this article, I will provide suggestions on key elements of the Start Here module that are supported by best practices for online learning and online language learning in asynchronous and hybrid language classes that can be adapted to other delivery modes.

Literature Review

Planned Online Language Education

In spring 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced instructors into teaching online, what happened was “crisis-prompted online language teaching” (Gacs et al., 2020, p. 380). Instructors had to find ways to adapt quickly, whether or not they had prior experience teaching in the online environment. In fall 2020, several U.S. institutions, mine included, partially returned to in-person instruction and chose among a variety of online delivery modes: synchronous (through videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom), asynchronous (in which students and instructor do not meet at the same time), hybrid (a mix of in-person and asynchronous online), or HyFlex (where students can attend in person, remotely, or by watching a recording of the class session on their own time).

Prior to 2020, online classes were already gaining in popularity due to their convenience and flexibility (Bolliger & Inan, 2012; Darby & Lang, 2019). With the pandemic-induced switch to emergency remote learning, some students who work full time, have personal responsibilities to family members, have long commutes, or disabilities (among other reasons), found that the flexibility and convenience of online classes worked better for their personal situation and expressed a desire to continue learning online (Anderson, 2021; Morris & Anthes, 2021). Because online education seems here to stay, shifting to *planned online language education* (Gacs et al., 2020; Goertler, 2019), meaning classes informed by best practices and research, should be a priority to ensure students receive a quality education. Planned online language education has been shown to be as effective as in-person learning, but it requires thoughtful and intentional preparation (Gacs et al, 2020; Goertler, 2019; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021).

Universal Design for Learning and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Accessibility is a key principle for teaching and learning online or in person—students of all backgrounds and abilities should be able to access the materials presented and engage in the class and with the course content (Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Quality Matters, 2020; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). The first step in ensuring accessibility is to apply Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. UDL, as defined by CAST (2018), is a set of practices that provides multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and expression to students. In the online environment, it means ensuring that audio and video material are accessible to people with visual and/or hearing impairments (e.g., captioning, providing transcripts, ensuring that

written text is compatible with screen readers, using *sans serif* fonts). In addition, CAST (2018) suggests allowing for multiple ways of communication and assessment. In an online language class, for instance, instructors can show flexibility by allowing students to hand in audio assignments instead of video. Sathy and Hogan (2019) highlighted how such inclusive practices benefit all students and advocated for a highly structured class environment where expectations are clearly set and expressed in a variety of ways (oral and text, for example). For more details about UDL, the CAST website offers a comprehensive set of resources.

Another essential aspect of teaching and learning is diversity, equity, and inclusion. Russell and Murphy-Judy (2021) underscored the importance of representation for all learners and for the languages and cultures taught. They recommend that “target cultures and ethnicities—each with its own products, practices, and perspectives” be “introduced to the learners in sensitive, non-judgmental ways that neither ignore nor underplay L1 biases that the learners will have to navigate to increase their intercultural competencies” (p. 61). In the online environment, diversity, equity, and inclusion practices may include using visuals that represent diverse populations and practices and discussing and using inclusive pronouns and language in the target language. UDL and diversity, equity, and inclusion practices will be grounding principles for all suggestions presented in this article.

Course Design

For Russell and Murphy-Judy (2021), the goal of an online language course should be to “increase learner proficiency in language and intercultural communication and to include the 21st century skills of digital literacy and autonomous learning” (p. 9). To this end, an online language course, beginning with the Start Here module, should be grounded in best practices for course design with backward design and the Analysis-Design-Development-Integration-Evaluation (ADDIE) Model (Kurt, 2018) and best practices for language education, guided by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) *Guiding Principles to Language Learning* (n.d.) and World Readiness Standards (NSCB, 2015).

The ADDIE model offers a useful framework for starting the design of an online course. Russell and Murphy-Judy (2021) provide a comprehensive implementation plan of this model for online language courses; I will only summarize each step here. *Analysis*, the first stage of the model, is a phase of reflection in which the designers identify the reasons for starting an online course or program, identify the learners (demographics, level), the stakeholders in the project, the learning goals, the available support provided for faculty and students, and an appropriate online delivery mode (e.g. asynchronous, synchronous, hybrid, HyFlex), that works best for the students to achieve the goals. Gacs et al. (2020) also underline the importance of this planning stage for online language classes.

The second phase of the model is *design*, which defines the structure through which the instruction will be carried: which Learning Management System (LMS) to be used, if any, technology tools that will help achieve the desired results, and any other useful resources. At a fundamental level, the design phase is the planning stage where the goals for the class are set, using the backward design framework. Backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) is an instructional design framework by which instructors start with the end in mind. With backward design, instructors first

reflect on the learning goals—what they want students to be able to do at the end of the course; then on assessment—determine acceptable evidence that students have achieved those goals; and finally, instructors create learning activities that will help students achieve the learning goals. Backward design is a learner-centered approach that encourages instructors to be more intentional about the learning goals they set for students and the ways in which they assess students. In a language class, the learning goals are grounded in (1) the ACTFL *World Readiness Standards for Language Learning* (NSCB, 2015), which establish the link between communication and culture and identify the competences needed to be part of a global community; (2) the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012), which identify what a learner can do at each level of proficiency; and (3) the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements (ACTFL, 2017), which help set communication learning targets.

The third and fourth phases of the ADDIE framework are *development* and *integration*. The development phase focuses on production (Kurt, 2018) and on creating the learning materials and environment that will foster student engagement and a sense of autonomy (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021) while integration is where teaching occurs. As Russell and Murphy-Judy (2021) underline, a central question of an online language class should be “How will these materials deploy in the target language grounded in its authentic culture(s) in an online environment?” (p. 75). The development and integration phases create a structure that provides paced and scaffolded material so that students can progress toward their proficiency goals. Russell and Murphy-Judy (2021) propose adapting communicative language teaching (CLT) to the online environment by using authentic materials, focusing on meaning over form, focusing on what students can do at the targeted proficiency level, and creating a meaningful cultural context for language instruction as just a few of the ten guidelines.

The last phase of the ADDIE model is *evaluation*. Kurt (2018) explains that the evaluation phase really starts at the development stage to ensure that the material put together helps reach the learning goals and to allow stakeholders to make adjustments as necessary. Evaluation takes place again at the end of the course to gain a big-picture consideration of what worked and what needed improvement.

An essential aspect of course design is to ensure that the materials are accessible and easy to find. In a face-to-face class, students know how to behave: Come to class and share the same physical space as the other students and the professor (Darby & Lang, 2019). In the online environment, this structure exists virtually instead of physically. Consequently, an online course must be easy to navigate with a clear and consistent design that facilitates students’ access to their professor, their peers, and the course materials and assignments (Asgarpoor, 2019; Darby & Lang, 2019; Gacs et al., 2020; Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Riggs & Linder, 2016; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). Many institutions use an LMS to house students’ courses; however, use of the LMS might not be intuitive for students, so offering an orientation to the class organization in the form of a Start Here module is essential (Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). While it may not always be possible, Kumar and Skyrocki (2016) recommend offering a synchronous session for the orientation module.

Finally, “a good online language course should include all communication modes (interpretive, presentational, and interpersonal) and skills (listening, reading,

speaking, and writing)” (Gacs et al., 2020, p. 386). Integrating these various modes and skills in the class material means that students will interact with their instructor and their peers in a variety of ways. Even though the asynchronous online environment removes the immediacy of the physical space and the verbal cues, intonation, and gestures that are important in communication and teaching (Swan, 2002), the online environment can adapt by fostering communication and interaction in different ways.

Community of Inquiry and the Concept of Presence

Online classes are structured around three types of interaction: student-content, student-instructor, and student-student (Nilson & Goodson, 2018). Despite the seemingly interactive nature of the online environment, students may feel lonely and disconnected in online classes because they are not directly in the presence of their peers and of their instructor, and such feelings of disconnectedness can lead to higher attrition in online classes (Bolliger & Inan, 2012; Drouin & Vartanian, 2010; Nilson & Goodson, 2018). The Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework (Garrison et al., 2000) puts the concept of community at the center of the online learning environment and presents best practices to counteract such feelings of disconnectedness in students.

The CoI Framework posits that learning occurs at the intersection of three forms of presence: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. Teaching presence is defined as both the design of the educational experience, i.e., the course materials the instructor creates and curates; and the facilitator role the instructor takes. Cognitive presence is the construction of meaning that occurs in the class while social presence is the “ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people’” (Garrison et al., 2000; p. 89). Social presence is the socio-emotional aspect of the class where the feeling of connection is fostered and sustained. For Boettcher and Conrad (2021), presence is the most important best practice in an online class and “establishing connections through social presence is a prerequisite to students shifting their attention to content and knowledge” (p. 84).

I will offer several suggestions as to how to begin to establish social presence in the Start Here module in this article, but the literature highlights two key elements. The first is an introductory discussion board where the students and the instructor offer personal information in an effort to reveal themselves as *real people* (Boettcher & Conrad, 2021; Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Darby & Lang, 2019). The second element is for instructors to be visible and accessible. For example, frequently posting announcements (on a weekly basis, for instance), providing timely feedback/replies to inquiries, and being engaged in class discussions show students that the instructor is present and teaching the class (Asgarpoor, 2019; Crews et al., 2015; Darby & Lang, 2019; Gacs et al., 2020; Meskill & Anthony, 2015; Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Riggs & Linder, 2016; Swan, 2002). Gacs et al. (2020) sum up instructor presence online as being visible, present, and authentic (p. 388).

Language-Learning Mindset, Anxiety, and Misconceptions

A *fixed language-learning mindset* is the belief that one’s ability to learn a language is fixed and predetermined while a *growth language-learning mindset* is the belief that with effort and strategy, one can learn a language (Lou & Noels, 2019, p.

2). *Language Educator* authors Spino and Wu (2021) and Gearhart (2021) stated that fostering a growth mindset for language learners transfers ownership of the learning back to the students.

In addition to a possible fixed language-mindset, anxiety can run high in language classes (Russell, 2020). Russell (2020) called attention to the idea that students who enroll in language classes online do so for a variety of reasons, including language-learning anxiety. Students may believe they will engage in fewer interactions in the target language with their peers in the online environment (Russell, 2020). However, online language classes often include oral activities conducted through audio and video tools (Russell, 2020). Students may then experience two kinds of anxiety: one related to language learning and one related to the use of technology tools with which they are not familiar (Russell, 2020). Offering a robust Start Here module with key technical information and help navigating the class can be a good start to alleviating students' perceived levels of language anxiety (Gacs et al., 2020; Goertler, 2019; Russell, 2020).

Anxiety may also stem from misconceptions students may have about the language-learning process. For instance, some students believe that they should not speak in the target language unless they can express themselves without making mistakes (Horwitz, 1988); others believe that it only takes two years to learn a language (Zalba, 2021). For Zalba (2021), addressing those preconceived ideas is important in terms of academic success, expectations, commitment to the class, and overall satisfaction. The combination of a fixed-mindset, anxiety, and false beliefs about how languages are acquired can have a powerful negative impact on the way students approach their language learning in the class. Russell (2020) recommended asking learners to engage in a discussion about their fears, either through a written discussion board or an oral voice board (p. 345). Zalba (2021) suggested playing a myth buster game and openly discussing language-learning misconceptions with the class while Gearhart (2021) related how, on the first day of class, he talks to his students about his own challenges in learning the language.

The Start Here Module

The Start Here module is the opportunity for the instructor to start laying the groundwork for a successful semester. Essential orientation elements that must be present in the Start Here module (and that I will expand upon in the article), are (Asgarpoor, 2019; Darby & Lang, 2019; Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Riggs & Linder, 2016; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021):

- An explanation of how to navigate the course
- Syllabus, course requirements, learning outcomes, and institutional policies
- Technology requirements and expectations
- If applicable, information about proctoring expectations and third-party providers for proctoring
- An instructor introduction
- A space for students to introduce themselves
- A low-stakes syllabus quiz whose successful completion is the prerequisite to gaining access to the content of the course

The Start Here module should thus house key orientation information for students regarding course expectations and requirements, but it should also provide opportunities for the instructor to start establishing teaching, social, and cognitive presence.

Suggested Sections for the Start Here Module

Keeping in mind the principles outlined in the literature review—UDL, diversity, equity, and inclusion, the community of inquiry framework, and course design considerations for online language learning—I now offer some suggestions of sections that I have used in the Start Module of my asynchronous online French classes to successfully start the semester and to set my students on a path to proficiency. Many of these suggestions can be adapted to other online delivery modes, such as hybrid, HyFlex, and synchronous.

An “About Your Professor” Page

The “About Your Professor” page is the instructor’s chance to showcase their personality and their enthusiasm for the language and cultures they teach. Below are common options from which instructors can choose for the “About your Professor” page:

- A self-introduction video in which the instructor outlines their credentials and expresses why they are excited to teach the class is the best option. Because the asynchronous online environment does not immediately provide verbal and non-verbal cues, instructors need to be intentional in the way they create social presence (Swan, 2002). An introductory video can help establish visibility, presence, and authenticity in the class (Gacs et al, 2020). The video format allows for a more personal connection with the instructor (Asgarpoor, 2019; Darby & Lang, 2019; Nilson & Goodson, 2018). The video does not need to be highly produced; on the contrary, Darby and Lang (2019) recommend more natural and authentic videos.

In the self-introduction video, the instructor can share some personal and professional information: How did they learn the language? Are they a native speaker? What got them interested in the language and cultures they teach in the first place? Instructors can discuss their traveling experiences and aspects of the language and cultures about which they are the most passionate. In addition, the video can address how the class and its content will contribute to the student’s personal and academic successes.

- A narrated presentation in which students hear the instructor discuss the same information as recommended for the self-introduction video is another option. Students will miss the benefits of seeing the instructor, but hearing their instructor discuss their travels and other personal experiences can also make an impact.
- At minimum, a written paragraph about the instructor including the same information as outlined for the self-introduction video can suffice especially if it is accompanied by some personal pictures.

Lang (2019) states that “highly effective college instructors recollect what first fascinated them about their discipline, pay attention to what fascinates students today, and make a connection with those issues at the opening of the semester” (para. 7). An enthusiastic self-introduction (in any format) in which students see their in-

structor discussing their own love of the language and its cultures, their own language-learning process, and why this class matters can help the instructor establish their teaching persona as someone who is open, accessible, and authentic and it can spark students' curiosity.

A “Benefits of Learning Another Language” Section

In the current higher education climate with the threat of language programs disappearing or being considerably reduced (Hamilton & Berdan, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Looney & Lusin, 2019), explaining to students the benefits of learning another language is an advocacy and retention tool and it can also be a good way to activate their interest in the class. Boettcher and Conrad (2021) argue that a best practice for online classes is to help students customize and personalize their learning (Best Practice 9) as it can make the learning more meaningful. Questions that instructors can ask are: *What will learning a new language bring to their careers? How will it enhance their personal lives?* My institution's focus is on job outcomes and the School of Arts and Letters, to which my language program belongs, prides itself on providing students with credentials and learning skills that prepare them for their future jobs. Therefore, in this section of the Start Here module, I share *The Language Educator's* short article, *U.S. Businesses Need More Multilingual Employees* (2019) which details the critical demand for employees who speak a language other than English. ACTFL's Lead with Languages (2017) website also provides concise and attractive material promoting reasons to learn a language that is easy to share with students and can make an impact. Other information that could be valuable to include are foreign companies that have business ties to the institution's region; if the instructor's program offers service-learning or internship opportunities, highlighting them in this section would be beneficial as well. Whatever connection the instructor can establish between the class and its real-world applications helps showcase to students that the language they choose to learn can enhance their personal life and help build their future career.

A “What to Expect in your Language-Learning Journey this Semester?” Section

My students often wish to know what they will be able to say in the target language at the end of the semester. Student learning outcomes may sound dry to students, and they might not always understand what they mean (Darby & Lang, 2019). Therefore, it is useful to include concrete examples of what can be achieved. Russell and Murphy-Judy (2021) recommend that the Start Here module “contain models of successful online language learning for the proficiency level of the target audience. ... Short profiles of successful students and clips of them engaging in best practices, for example, can be extremely instrumental” (pp. 45-46). If the instructor does not have such audio or video examples, they could show samples of written work produced by previous students who took the class (shared with permission). Russell & Murphy-Judy (2021) further note that “integrating learning standards and proficiency targets in introductory materials helps direct the learners and their learning” (p. 46), and they suggest introducing the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements (2017). Discussing ACTFL's Proficiency Guidelines (2012) can help set the right expectations for the class and can help students better understand the language acquisition process as well.

To further establish clear expectations for students, an essential feature of course design for Boettcher and Conrad (2021), it may also be useful to include an overview of assessments and their grading rubrics. For instance, in my class, I assign discussion boards, video and audio journals, short written assignments, and listening comprehension exercises. Each type of homework has a consistent rubric I use throughout the semester. In the overview of assessments, I explain how this type of exercise contributes to the students' progress in proficiency and I attach the rubric so that students know how they will be assessed [Appendix 1 Discussion Board Rubric Example].

An Outcomes Map

One way to engage students with the course learning outcomes is to introduce an overview of the course content at the very beginning of the class that can be in the form of an outcomes map (Nilson & Goodson, 2018). An outcomes map offers a visual representation of the course content while also making explicit the organization of the class and how each skill builds upon another. For advanced language classes such as literature, culture, business, and others, the outcomes map will illustrate the various concepts students will learn and the way they build on each other. For elementary and intermediate language classes, an outcomes map works particularly well at the unit level for classes that focus on essential questions and/or the NCSSEFL-ACTFL Can-Do statements (2017). The outcomes map will let students see that even at the elementary level, they will discuss interesting topics. An outcomes map also links the course content to the assessments and shows how they align so that for each unit, students know what they will be asked to produce. For instance, in a French 1 class with a unit focused on the essential question “What makes a strong friendship?” an outcomes map might look like the following:

Figure 1

Outcomes Map Example from a French 1 Course



The outcomes map provides an informative and appealing visual for students who get an at-a-glance view of how content and assessment are linked.

Introductory Discussion Board

Interacting with other students and the instructor helps establish the social presence Boettcher and Conrad (2021) identify as necessary to any learning happening. It is an essential aspect of community building in the online learning environment (Quality Matters, 2020; Swan, 2002). To me, the introductory discussion board is a central piece of the Start Here module as it is the first opportunity for students to interact with me and their classmates. The introductory discussion board can also be a valuable place to initiate conversations about the language-learning process and to address potential anxiety and nervousness about the class. The discussion board can be written, audio, or video and instructors can leave the choice of format to students.

For an elementary level course, the introductory discussion board should be in English but from the novice mid-level, it could be in the target language. In intermediate level courses, the instructor can decide to include some basic questions in the target language with encouragement to respond in the target language—questions such as “What kind of music do you like?”—while questions that require more complex answers can be kept in English. The introductory discussion board should not overwhelm or discourage students; rather, it should feel like a safe place to connect with others.

The Chinese Portrait and Proust’s Questionnaire

In traditional ice breaker questions, students may be asked to share their major and why they chose it, to discuss their tastes in music and film, or talk about their hobbies. To dig deeper, encourage more meaningful interactions with their peers, and bring in a cultural aspect to the class, instructors can use cultural alternatives such as the Chinese Portrait and Proust’s Questionnaire. The Chinese portrait originated in 17th century Europe (Alleau, 1964) and is a game of associations and comparisons through which one paints a portrait of oneself. Essentially, it is a series of “If I were X” questions that can be a playful way to learn about students. It is also simple enough that it could be done in the target language starting at the novice mid level. Here are some examples of what could be asked:

- If I were an animal / a city / an object / a dish / a piece of clothing / a song / etc., I would be a... because...

Instructors can also ask students to create their own “If I were” statement to ask their classmates so they are more actively engaged in the activity.

Proust’s Questionnaire, incidentally not created by Marcel Proust, the 19th century iconic French writer, but made famous by his answers, can also be a unique way of asking engaging get to know each other questions. Some questions are light while others are more serious and choosing some of both can bring a good balance to the exercise. Here are a few of the questions I have used in the past:

- What is your idea of perfect happiness?
- Which talent would you most like to have?
- If you were to die and come back as a person or a thing, what would it be?
- Where would you most like to live?
- What do you most value in your friends?

In my experience, answers to this questionnaire are often insightful, and the students appreciate the cultural aspect of it. The questionnaire can be used in the target language in advanced-level classes, but I strongly advise keeping it in English at the novice levels. (The full questionnaire is available in English in *Vanity Fair* (2011) and in French on the *Apprendre, réviser, mémoriser* website (2020) and can be adapted to various languages.)

Finally, I always ask students to formulate a question to ask their classmates as I believe doing so allows them to be more active and engaged in the exercise. In my experience, many students ask such basic questions as “What is your favorite food?” or “Are you a cat person or a dog person?” but some students have asked more insightful questions such as:

- Do you prefer taking online classes or in-person classes? Which setting do you feel you learn better in?
- Why did you choose to learn French?
- Is anyone nervous about speaking in French?

The last question received a lot of replies and comments from other students in the class who confirmed they were nervous about speaking French as well. It provided me with the perfect opportunity to address anxiety in the language classroom and provide some reassurance (see more suggestions in the section *Follow up to the Introductory Discussion Board: Announcement Recap*).

Discussing Mindset and Language Learning Myths in the Introductory Discussion Board

As outlined in the literature review and the example above, students can be anxious about the experience of learning a language and may have misconceptions about language learning. The aforementioned *What to Expect in Your Language-Learning Journey this Semester* section can help set expectations while the introductory discussion board can provide a platform for students to voice potential concerns. Therefore, the discussion board can ask students to “share a crazy idea about language learning” (Zalba, 2021, slide 16). Zalba (2021) suggests providing examples of such myths of language learning; for instance, “Acquiring a second language is a special ‘gift’ that only some have,” “A maximum of 2 years is sufficient to learn a language,” or “Adults are physiologically unable to speak a second language without an accent” (slide 11). Instructors can also ask students to share what they are most anxious about in the class (Russell, 2020), and what they are most excited about in learning the language and discovering its cultures as a way to not focus only on the negative. The instructor can then address student answers in a general announcement (see more about this in the section *Follow up to the Introductory Discussion Board: Announcement Recap*).

Follow-up to the Introductory Discussion Board: Provide Your Own Answers

Darby and Lang (2019) remind instructors that establishing presence in an online class requires effort and that it includes “sharing more of who we are as people” (p. 90). Therefore, the first post students see in the introductory discussion board is my own with my personal answers to the questions I asked. To me, writing my own answers accomplishes three things. First, I was able to see which questions made me uncomfortable, and I edited those out of my list. In the prompt, I provide the option for students to skip one question out of the list (and I do not call them out if they skip

more than one). Second, it provides a model for students. Third, and most important to me, it helps me establish my social presence by revealing aspects of my life and my personality. I believe that by providing my answers, I show students that I am engaged with the class, I am willing to let myself be known, and I want to connect with them. Lang (2019) and Russell and Judy-Murphy (2021) refer to such techniques as humanizing; Garrison et al. (2000) refer to it as “becoming real people” (p.2).

Follow-up to the Introductory Discussion Board: Answer Every Student

In the same way that providing personal answers to the introductory discussion board questions demonstrates engagement on the instructor’s part, I believe that replying to each student with a personal comment or follow-up question is a way to establish connections. Students tend not to enjoy ice breaker activities on the first day of class (Eskine & Hammer, 2017; Robinson, 2019), but Boettcher and Conrad (2021) insist on the value of the introductory discussion board in terms of establishing social interaction and community-building (Course Beginning Tip 8) and identify discussion boards as the place where “students and faculty become a learning community” (Best Practice 7, p. 51). This practice can be time-consuming in large classes, but it is a worthwhile investment to begin building a CoI and to establish instructor presence.

Inclusive Learning

Another essential aspect of building a CoI and one that may help with retention as well (Gannon, 2018) is striving to ensure that all students feel comfortable in the class by creating a welcoming and respectful environment (CIRTL Includes, 2017). As a complement to UDL principles being used for all materials, a simple way to let students know that the instructor cares is to ask for their pronouns (Brown et al., 2020). The following is a model that has been circulating on the Pandemic Pedagogy and the Higher Ed Learning Collective Facebook pages as an effective way to ask for students’ preferred name and pronouns. I suggest setting it up as a no-stakes quiz or assignment whose answers are only visible to the instructor.

Name you want me to call in you in class and how to pronounce it: _____

Pronouns (ex: he/him/his; she/her/hers; they/them/their): _____

- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| • May I use these pronouns in front of the class? | Yes | No |
| • May I use these pronouns when I contact home? | Yes | No |
| • May I use these pronouns in front of the other teachers? | Yes | No |
| • Would you like to follow up with me (in a private conversation) about your pronouns? | Yes | No |

A Language Diagnostic and Goal Setting Assignment

Because it is important for students to quickly become familiar with the assignment tools that will be necessary for them to be successful in the class (Boettcher & Conrad, 2021; Nilson & Goodson, 2018), my institution requires a blank document be submitted in the Start Here module as evidence that students understand the submission process. I have taken this opportunity to turn this requirement into a more

active and productive task: a language diagnostic and goal setting document. This assignment is worth no points and students are allowed unlimited submissions, but its completion is mandatory. I adapted the language diagnostic from a document used by the language program at the University of Miami where I was a graduate teaching assistant. The document has several sections, and the objectives are to establish a baseline for students' individual proficiency levels as well as to help them set goals for their language learning and success in the class.

Section 1: Background Information and Goal Setting.

1. Have you ever taken French before, and if so, when was the last class you took?
2. Do you speak other languages? If yes, which ones?
3. How does this class relate to your career goals?
4. What are some aspects of francophone cultures that you find interesting? (Francophone means from the French-speaking world.)
5. What is your main goal in this class? (It could be because you have family who speaks French and you would like to communicate with them in the language, etc. It's ok to say that this class is a requirement and you just want to pass, but also try to find something that you would like to achieve other than pass.)
6. Identify a potential challenge that could interfere with you achieving this goal. (Example: I work full time.)
7. Identify a way that you will overcome this challenge. Be specific. (Example: I will create a schedule and set aside an hour a day to work on my French, etc.).

Section 2: Language Diagnostic. This second part is all in French. If you don't know how to say it in French, just write "Je ne sais pas" (I don't know). This is NOT a test, and it will not impact your grade in any way. Do not use Google Translate or other tools or ask for help from others to complete this part. This is just to gauge everyone's level.

8. Describe yourself in French. What do you enjoy doing? What activities do you not like to do?
9. Tell me in French what you did this past weekend.
10. In French. If you could change three things in your community, what would they be?

Questions 3-5 provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their relationship with the class—in what way could it help them in their personal lives and their careers? It reinforces what the instructor explained in the "Benefits of Learning of Another Language" section and creates self-reflection regarding the students' relationship with the language. These goal-setting questions also participate in developing students' cognitive presence by crafting personal and customized goals for the class (Boettcher & Conrad, 2021; Course Beginning Tip 8). Meanwhile, questions 6-7 are adapted from Darby and Lang's (2019) idea of a *Goals Contract*. Darby and Lang (2019) state that "helping our students take ownership of their learning is

a strategic way to help them persist and complete online classes” (p. 140). Asking students to devise personal goals and specific ways to reach those goals can thus increase accountability and perseverance. If a student starts falling behind in the course work, the instructor could refer them to the strategy they had proposed or help them to consider whether other strategies are needed.

The language diagnostic itself (questions 8-10) can serve as a placement tool if the instructor’s institution (like mine) does not have a mandatory language placement exam. The language diagnostic, in my experience, provides the language instructors at my institution important insight into students’ written proficiency, and they can contact students early on about possible placement issues. Another advantage of the language diagnostic is that I can use it as a *look how far you’ve come* reference at the end of the semester when I ask students to revisit the questions and assess whether they are now able to answer in French (if it is a French 1 class, they should be able to answer question 8, for instance) and whether they achieved the goals they set for themselves. In my experience, students are usually able to respond to the questions, and they often comment they are excited to see their progress.

Just as I reply to every student’s post in the introductory discussion board, I recommend leaving some feedback for this assignment as well. It could be commenting on the cultural aspects the student mentioned were of interest to them and whether they will indeed be addressed in class. It could also be commenting on the student’s stated goals and potential challenges in achieving those goals. Interacting with students often is part of being present and it is a key component of good online teaching and establishing an instructor’s social presence in the class (Boettcher & Conrad, 2021; Darby & Lang, 2019; Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). For Russell and Murphy-Judy (2021), “fostering teaching presence is a powerful way to promote learning” (p. 96) and Darby and Lang (2019) add that “your interactions in class can be minor. The important thing is to be present, and to make sure your students know it, on a very regular basis” (p. 87). Leaving feedback on assignments is another opportunity to connect with students and help them in their learning.

Lesson 1

On the first day of my elementary French 1 face-to-face class, I spend the first 30 minutes of class fully in French introducing myself (pre-pandemic, I would shake everyone’s hand) and having students introduce themselves using “Je m’appelle” (my name is). It is a great way for students to learn their classmates’ names and to practice basic introductions and greetings. Lang (2019) insists on the importance of engaging students in learning and in the types of activities they will often do in the class on the first day of the face-to-face semester. While I have not found a way to replicate the immediacy of my introduction exercise in the asynchronous online setting, I nevertheless believe it is important to start teaching students language and content in the Start Here module. Short input-based activities based on authentic material grounded in ACTFL’s core practices for world language learning (Glisan & Donato, 2017) can be a good introduction to the class material. At the elementary level, the instructor can provide an authentic video presentation of greetings (from LangMedia or YouTube’s Easy Languages Channel for instance) or a highly comprehensible short authentic text along with self-check comprehension questions. For an introduction to literature

class, the instructor can use a short poem or text with a visual representation and self-check comprehension questions. The instructor can also share an authentic cultural video or image related to the first topic in the class with reflection questions or self-check comprehension questions. In any case, the lesson should reflect what students will learn in the class and should pique their interest. As a follow-up, I usually assign a self-reflection activity (not graded or low stakes and that the instructor does not necessarily grade) in which students write about what they have read or watched. Finally, the instructor can add a retrieval question in the introductory discussion board about this initial content. For instance, in my French 1 class, I tell students: “Start your post with a greeting you learned in today’s presentation.” The first lesson should create anticipation and excitement for the course content while being low or no stakes.

“How to Be Successful in Your Language Class” Page

Boettcher and Conrad (2021) advise instructors in the online environment to think of their role as that of facilitator or coach, helping students become more independent and take a more active role in their learning (Course Beginning Tip 6). However, Nilson and Goodson (2018) remind instructors that students may not always know best strategies to study and be successful in a class and that sharing strategies for success encourages self-efficacy in students. For all online courses, my institution provides a required page that lists useful advice for students on how to be successful in their online class. Strategies include logging in frequently, reaching out to the professor and asking questions, spending time becoming familiar with the LMS and the course site, and being aware of deadlines by making a calendar. I created an additional page that offers advice specifically about language learning. Here are some of the bullet points I include:

- Carefully read the course material, watch the videos, listen to all the recordings on each page, and complete the activities. This material will help you develop proficiency in the language.
- Pause the videos and recordings to repeat and/or answer the questions.
- Take notes and start a language diary in which you use relevant vocabulary.
- Reach out to other students via the “Student Lounge” (found in the “Discussions” tool). The Student Lounge is your space to communicate, form a study group and practice the language together, or just ask questions. Online learning does not have to be a solo adventure! Note that I do not monitor that space; it is yours. [In synchronous and hybrid classes, instructors can ask students who are comfortable doing so to exchange their contact information with others in the class.]
- Reach out to me with questions, comments, anything!
- Tutors are here to help. [Include tutoring hours and a way to book an appointment. I suggest redundancy and posting this information on other pages on the site as well.]
- Netflix and other streaming services have a plethora of great shows and films from various countries. Watching those will immerse you in the cultures of the language you are learning; watching them in the original language (with or without English subtitles) will help you get used to listening to the language and develop your listening comprehension skills.

If the instructor has a list of useful sites and other resources to help students in their learning, the instructor can house them on this page as well or create an additional resource section.

A “Syllabus Highlights” Page

Course expectations and policies should be included in the syllabus, which should be provided in full in the Start Here module (Asgarpoor, 2019; Nilson & Goodson, 2018). I tell students I expect them to read the entire syllabus, but the *Syllabus Highlights* page emphasizes important course policies. The format can be a question-and-answer page for easy reference or a video. My *Syllabus Highlights* page includes information such as how to reach me and when to expect a reply, what course material is needed and how to access it, when assignments are due, what the late work policy is, how the tests will be administered (with information about test proctoring), grade distribution and overview of assignments, an overview of technology requirements (with a link to the technology requirements section), an explanation of the academic integrity policy, and extra credit opportunities.

Technology Requirements and Computer Skills Section

While the *Syllabus Highlights* page mentioned a brief list of technological tools needed, a more comprehensive page providing details for such tools as well as essential computer skills needed to complete the class successfully is crucial in online classes (Asgarpoor, 2019; Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). It is even more necessary in language classes as “students must be prepared to work on all four skills across the three modes of communication (interpretive reading or listening, interpersonal speaking or writing, and presentational speaking and/or writing) by means of tools for audio-visual recording and online collaboration and communication” (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021, p. 46). The technology requirements and computer skills section can include the following elements:

- Whether the work can be completed through a mobile device or whether some material can only be accessed through a computer can be an important consideration for some students.
- Any technology tool used in the class besides the LMS. For instance, if the instructor requires the use of a conversation platform such as TalkAbroad, a short tutorial should be linked, and the information on cost and registration should be included.
- Access and registration information about plagiarism prevention tools if they are used in the class.
- Access and registration information for a proctoring service if it is used in the class. If a webcam is used, this should be explicitly stated. If alternates modes of proctoring can be arranged, the instructor should explain how to set up the process.
- Netiquette, defined as *the protocols for civil communication online* (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021), advice such as, do not use all caps, do not use offensive language, use emojis to convey tone in written conversations. If the class is synchronous, the instructor can explain the expectations regarding cameras on or off.
- How to access technical support for all software and platforms used in the class.

“How to Know What is Due When?” Page

Being able to easily find course material and assignments is a must in online classes. A “How to Know What is Due When?” video can explain this information and serve as a walkthrough of the class (Asgarpoor, 2019; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). For Asgarpoor (2019), a *tour de class* video adds a personal touch and is a sign of the instructor’s engagement with the class (p. 3). In the video that I created for my classes (using Screencast-O-Matic, a screen recorder, and video editor software), I begin the tour with the course landing page of my LMS and demonstrate through screensharing how to access the daily folders, navigate the course material, find the assignments, and determine their due dates. In the video, I also explain that the order in which the material is organized and listed on the daily checklist is intentional and that students should follow it to benefit fully from the class.

Entry Quiz

The entry quiz should be the last item in the Start Here module and its successful completion should be a prerequisite to students accessing the rest of the course content (Asgarpoor, 2019). The entry quiz questions can refer to important policies and aspects of the course stated in the course syllabus and/or mentioned throughout the material in the Start Here module. Through this quiz, students demonstrate basic knowledge of the requirements of the class. Some questions I have used in my classes include:

- What is the title of the textbook?
- When are assignments due?
- What is the course policy concerning late work?
- What are the technology requirements for the class?
- What is the proctoring policy for the class?

Answers to all the questions in my entry quiz can be found in my *Syllabus Highlights* page. The quiz should be auto graded with multiple-choice questions so that students receive their result immediately upon completion. In addition, I recommend that students must score 100% on the quiz as it demonstrates awareness of the important policies in the class. Most LMSs allow for multiple attempts for quizzes, and the entry quiz should be allowed unlimited attempts. Finally, I recommend checking that all students have completed the quiz and obtained the required score and to contact those who did not, ideally the day after it is due.

Follow-Up to the Start Here Module: General Announcement Recap

The last piece of the Start Here module, for me, after I have read and commented on my students’ introductory discussion board answers and course goal assignments, is to offer a summary in the form of an announcement to the class. Announcements in general are a great tool for teaching presence (Boettcher & Conrad, 2021). The general announcement is another way to foster my community of inquiry by reinforcing teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence as I touch upon and expand on students’ answers and questions. I suggest recording an informal video, but a written announcement could be effective as well. In the general

announcement, I reiterate my excitement about the class. I comment on how well the students interacted in the introductory discussion board or give suggestions on how to engage more meaningfully with one another (teaching presence). I also address the language-learning myths and concerns students expressed, point students back to the resources shared, such as the *Proficiency Guidelines* (ACTFL, 2012), and reinforce the idea that language learning is not a one-size fits all endeavor (cognitive presence). Finally, I start fostering a sense of community and class identity by highlighting some of the common answers students gave to the introductory discussion board questions (social presence). When I read my students' introductory posts, I take note of interesting answers, and I try to identify common traits. I am often struck by the number of similar answers in each class—classes with an overwhelming number of students who state they are introverted or wish they could sing—and I mention those in my general announcement. I also like to create a word cloud with the most common traits I have gleaned from the students' answers, and I share it in addition to my video, as an initial snapshot of our class.

Conclusion

On the first day of face-to-face classes, students expect to receive information about the course requirement, policies, and major assignments, and advice on how to succeed in the class (Eskine & Hammer, 2017; Lang, 2019; Robinson, 2019). They also enjoy when instructors discuss their background and teaching style and when they seem approachable, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic about the class (Eskine & Hammer, 2017; Robinson, 2019). The first day of class can influence student motivation and success (Eskine & Hammer, 2017) and creates a “lasting impression not just of you as a teacher but of your course, too” (Lang, 2019, para. 3). I argue that the Start Here module is the equivalent of the first day of a face-to-face in the asynchronous online environment and that it can, too, be the place to create a lasting impression for students.

Although there is no research specifically about the impact of the Start Here module in online classes, most pedagogical resources related to online course design indicate the importance of having a module to orient learners to the online environment (Asgarpoor, 2019; Darby & Lang, 2019; Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). The Start Here module, and the entire course, should be grounded in the principles of universal design for learning, inclusive teaching, good course design, and strong language learning principles—ACTFL's *Proficiency Guidelines* (2012), *Core Principles* (2017), and *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements* (2017). As the orientation to the class, the Start Here module should set clear expectations for the class (Boettcher & Conrad, 2021; Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). It should contain the syllabus and a *Syllabus Highlights* page with key support information and resources and a breakdown of main course policies and expectations, along with technology and computer skills requirements.

I also argue that the Start Here module should go beyond focusing on orientation material. Research on online learning indicates that students often feel disconnected in the online learning environment because contact with their classmates and instructor is not immediate and in a shared physical space (Bolliger & Inan, 2012; Drouin & Vartanian, 2010; Swan, 2002). Garrison et al. (2000) proposed the Com-

munity of Inquiry framework whose central idea is presence (social, teaching, and cognitive) that can be used as a tool to counter such feelings of disconnectedness and foster a community of learning for students. Boettcher and Conrad (2021) promote being present as the first best practice of online teaching. Through carefully crafted course material and use of presence tools (such as announcements and feedback), the Start Here module can begin to foster presence as the central tenant of the learning experience. Instructors can make themselves known through a personal introduction (in the form of a video, for instance), through participation in an introductory discussion board where they share more of themselves and interact with students, and by offering feedback on assignments.

In turn, students can feel engaged in the class by participating and interacting with others in the introductory discussion board (which could be video, audio, or written) and by being asked to reflect on their goals for the class and how learning the language can help them enhance their personal life and their career goals. Students' interest in the class will be piqued by providing a visual representation of the course content in the form of an outcomes map and through a level-appropriate first lesson grounded in authentic cultural material. The Start Here module also presents an excellent opportunity to help students set realistic language learning goals and to help them understand the language learning process. Introducing them to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012), providing them with examples of what they will be able to achieve at the end of the class, and discussing language learning misconceptions and anxiety can help alleviate nervousness about the class (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021).

As Darby and Lang (2019) put it, "When we facilitate the development of a dynamic community of learners in an online class, we significantly increase the potential for individual student learning and success. When we don't attend to this essential ingredient, we see high attrition rates, low engagement, and minimal participation" (p. 72). By creating an accessible, inclusive, encouraging environment through carefully crafted and engaging course materials and strong social presence, the Start Here module can set students on the path to be successful in an online language class.

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Appendix A

Discussion Board Rubric

My contribution is relevant to the task.	/ 4 pts
The vocabulary is adequate and the message is communicated.	/4 pts
I engage with my classmates' replies.	/4 pts