

Chapter 15

Conclusion



Abstract This concluding chapter encourages readers to find their own ways to interpret and apply the ideas in this work. It points out that effective language and culture pedagogy is highly personal, and is informed by the insights and experiences of the educator. It argues that there is a need for deep learning approaches to language and culture pedagogy, because globalization and information technology lends itself to surface forms of intercultural contact. It explains that the DMLL is simply one approach to deep learning pedagogy, and calls for an ongoing conversation about different paths that can lead us to deeper forms of language and culture learning.

15.1 A Deep Learning Mission

A scholarly tone This book has adopted a writing style typical of scholarly work—aiming for a balanced view of competing ideas, and a recognition of the limitations inherent in the perspective on offer. When that sort of writing is done well, it creates an impression of clarity and reasonableness. It permits the reader to draw conclusions based on the evidence presented. For a book like this one, which presents a learning model intended to shape pedagogy, this guiding principle of reasonableness is particularly important. Every reader needs to decide whether the ideas on offer make sense to them, based on their thinking and experience, and in relation to their unique context.

This nominal tone of fairness and balance can, however, mask important truths. Effective language and culture pedagogy is highly personal. It is always informed by the experiences, insights, personality, and passion of the educator. It is driven by the teacher's own linguistic and cultural discoveries. No amount of theorizing can turn an indifferent educator into an inspirational one, and a lack of theoretical knowledge does not necessarily detract from a passionate educator's work. Motivated teachers find ways to bring their personal experiences and unique insights into their classroom. The ultimate goal of this work, then, is not to convince skeptics, or supersede other approaches. It simply offers some ideas that may make the work of passionate educators a bit easier.

A personal perspective Like every educator, I bring my own perspective and personal motivations to my work. In high school, I was a poor student who nearly failed my required Spanish classes. I disliked schoolwork and had no professional ambitions to speak of. Interacting with Spanish speakers, however, piqued my curiosity. For the first time in my life, I started to learn something on my own, writing down phrases and vocabulary words on a small notebook I kept in my shirt pocket. Succeeding in using new expressions with Spanish speakers gave me a nervous thrill.

This tiny starting point shifted the direction of my life—I went on a homestay in Mexico, improved my Spanish, and discovered travel and foreign living. Moving to Japan and learning Japanese challenged me at deep levels of the self—I remember being squeezed into packed commuter trains, struck by how silent and self-contained everyone seemed. While my Mexican friends had told me Americans were cold and lacked heart, my new Japanese friends said we are open and friendly. I underestimated the difficulty of learning Japanese, and adjusting more deeply to Japanese thinking and social relationships. Later, I rediscovered my “Western” self by learning French and living in Paris for two years. More recently, I have been learning Indonesian. In Bali, I have made friends who are connected to the world virtually, but who may never have left the village of their birth. Language and culture learning has been, for me, personally meaningful and life changing.

The need for deep cultural learning Such experiences have led to my belief in the idea of *deep* cultural learning—the notion that foreign experiences can be transformative, changing the way we see the world, relate to others, and understand our self. I have been inspired by the work of Edward Hall, who felt that intercultural understanding is the critical challenge of our global age. I consider my work to be built on his foundational insights.

Unfortunately, globalization and the convenience of information technology can insulate us from deeper forms of growth and change. Ironically, just as millions have the opportunity to meet diverse peoples, and experience life in foreign places, we are tending toward more superficial forms of intercultural relations. We can choose virtual interaction at the expense of face-to-face contact, and isolate ourselves in cocoons of like-mindedness. I believe this contributes to social division and increased intolerance. While the twentieth century struggled with the dangers of centralized totalitarianism, the twenty-first century faces a crisis of social fragmentation, isolation, and the politics of intolerance.

In this context, I believe that language and culture educators have a special role to play. You cannot fake your way to foreign language ability. You must seek out intercultural contact if you are to practice and learn. You must humble yourself in the face of your own ignorance and helplessness. As we embody new ways of communicating, the feeling of being limited by the foreign language gradually shifts. When things go well, we become comfortable with our foreign language self and develop a sense for ourselves as a cultural bridge person. This deep form of learning is powerful and unique to language and cultural learning.

Many paths to deep learning I don't believe the model presented in this book is better than other approaches. There are many paths to deep learning. I know educators, for example, who use drama techniques that deeply engage students; I see wonderful work with near-peer role models; I know teachers who start with cultural learning from the very first class with absolute beginners; I know teachers experimenting with mindfulness and insights from positive psychology in their classes; I have seen virtual exchange produce wonderful results. These things may or may not fit into the pedagogical framework of DMILL. They do, however, represent what I see as a shared a core mission. Such practice seeks to go beyond purely intellectual approaches to pedagogy. It seeks to be relevant to real life and be personally meaningful; to touch learners at many levels of self; to encourage experimentation and self-discovery; it treats learners as whole human beings; it nurtures personal growth; it seeks deeper forms of learning.

These approaches do not, however, predominate. I regularly meet expatriates who skim along the surface of their foreign experiences. I meet students who see foreign language learning purely as a practical skill, or a box to tick off on their resume—many of whom who lose motivation to learn. There are many textbooks and syllabi that treat language learning purely as a form of information exchange. I work with language teachers who teach their L2, and who feel that their knowledge and ability is inadequate—there are always words and expressions they don't know, and they have trouble keeping up with L1 speakers. They don't see that their perseverance is inspirational. They have successfully made a transformative journey and can show students how they did it. They have a tendency, however, to trap themselves with the thought that language learning is primarily about explanations and right answers. For their part, policymakers are often focused on measurable results and predictable outcomes.

A conversation about deep learning Despite these challenges, it's not so hard to make progress. I recently gave a workshop to students who had signed up to take academic courses in a foreign language. Many were stressed by the difficulty of keeping up, and a number were considering giving up. I spoke to them about what it means to learn a foreign language—that the measure of success is not the number of words that we know, but our ability to feel comfortable with our foreign language self. I told them that learning a foreign language is not simply an academic challenge, it's a life challenge. I told them to greet their teachers, since forming personal relationships in a foreign language engages us at deeper levels of self. Afterward, I received great feedback from participants—they seemed to have been starved for an explanation of the deeper significance of the challenge they had taken on for themselves.

This, for me, is the essence of a deep learning approach—a focus on development and growth, and the transformative potential that comes from experiencing new ways of thinking, relating, and being. This book is an exercise in theorizing, and is informed by some rather technical disciplines, such as cultural and cognitive neuroscience. I hope that it contributes something to language and culture scholarship. At the same time, its ultimate goal is to stimulate conversations about how we can encourage

deeper forms of learning. I hope it encourages increased community among like-minded educators, and helps students to take advantage of the many opportunities they have for deeply meaningful language and culture learning.