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THE STANFORD NON-NATIVE RAPPER CONTEST: FOSTERING TRANSCULTURAL COMPETENCES USING SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

The Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest is an annual event organized by the Digital Language Lab at Stanford University. Every year, language instructors encourage undergraduate learners to engage in a creative project: learners receive the opportunity to compose rap music, write lyrics in the target language, produce videos, and share their clips via a YouTube channel. The response from undergraduate students has been positive: since the contest's inception in 2008, almost 50 learners of world languages and of less-commonly taught languages have participated, and their clips have been viewed by more than 30,000 internet users in less than three years. The first part of this article describes the evolution of the project and outlines the roles of the language lab facilities and its staff members in organizing this collaborative learning environment. The second part of the article will contextualize Stanford's Non-Native Rapper Contest within current theoretical debates that relate to the acquisition of transcultural competences and to alternative assessment in collegiate language learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

The Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest is a campus-wide, world language, spoken-word event organized by the Stanford Digital Language Lab and hosted on

YouTube. The impetus for the contest was an extra-credit activity offered by an instructor of a beginning language class at Stanford's culture-centered communicative German language program. Learners were given an assignment to introduce themselves in the target language. One learner approached the task in a novel way by composing, performing, and recording a short rap number (<http://tinyurl.com/6ftwuz>). After seeing the video of his performance, the learner expressed interest in creating a technically and aesthetically more advanced version of the clip. Using the lab's teaching studio, lab personnel facilitated the production of a video clip with higher production value (<http://tinyurl.com/68etgx3>).

The success of this initial collaboration with a beginning language learner inspired the director of the language lab to launch an initiative inviting learners from all of the languages offered by the Stanford Language Center to write and record rap music in the their language of study. In order to encourage participation, the lab director decided to organize a contest, a format that is common for music and spoken-word events that showcase new artists.

The idea of engaging language learners in a creative, communicative, and culturally meaningful project and to disseminate the results of these efforts through a collaborative social media platform such as YouTube resonates strongly with the mission of Stanford's Digital Language Lab. The language lab explicitly defines its physical and virtual facilities as a space to foster cross-cultural encounters among learners and between learners and the target languages' cultures. Thus, the lab supports a diverse community of users who convene in the lab to learn, teach, and interact in multiple languages and thus constantly participate in cross-cultural encounters. In this manner, the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest clearly reflects the transition away from the language lab's traditional role as a passive repository of pre-published content towards a more dynamic environment that offers visions and infrastructures to support and showcase innovative teaching.

Organization of the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest

The language lab acted as the hub for all activities involved in the organization of the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest and fulfilled five functions: promotion, technical support, publication, contest rules, and funding.

The first step was to advertize the event among language learners and instructors. Pamphlets were distributed to language learners, and instructors were approached directly and encouraged to grant extra credit to students who would participate in the contest.

The second and by far most significant role of the language lab was to provide technical and production support as well as a learning environment for the development basic media production skills. In this regard, the lab offered two levels of assistance. For those participants, who felt confident in their abilities to produce

digital multimedia content independently and who were willing to invest the necessary time into the production process, the lab provided largely logistical functions. Through a partnership with the library's multimedia studio, the lab was able to accommodate these learners with a wide array of tools, such as digital high-definition camcorders, studio lighting kits, audio recording equipment, projection devices, and green screens for chroma key compositing. Through the language lab, students could reserve studio time and gain access to powerful digital edition stations configured for audio and video post-production. However, just offering tools is not sufficient to provide a meaningful learning experience for most students. Many undergraduates were simply not able to commit the necessary time to acquire skills to use cutting-edge digital production technologies. Therefore, the lab provided more structured support in the form of a teaching studio with a prearranged lighting and camera set-up. The teaching studio allowed a transparent shooting-to-streaming-workflow and was therefore not only a big timesaver, but also an excellent learning environment for the development of basic media production skills. In addition, the language lab personnel assisted students with the production of beat tracks, audio recording, and post-production. This level of technical support freed up time for instructors and students to focus on the linguistic aspects of their rap-music project. To sum it up, the lab provided tools, instruction, and workflow strategies that aided students to quickly produce video-clips of a high production value in an environment that provided the development of media production skills.

The third function of the language lab was to organize the contributions and to publish the recordings to a world-wide audience via the internet. To this end, the lab set up a YouTube channel to function as a homepage for the event (<http://tinyurl.com/6gj2ugj>). In addition to hosting all submissions, the channel also features the contest rules and the announcement of the winner as voted by jury members.

The contest rules were developed by the language lab. Besides procedural and technical aspects, the rule set reflects important legal aspects that relate to the publication of the video clips. All participants had to agree to upload their contributions to YouTube and therefore make them available to internet users all over the world. In addition, participants were not allowed to use samples of previously published musical materials to record their contributions; this was done to avoid possible cases of copyright infringement. Instead of using copyrighted music, learners were encouraged to create their own scores by mixing freely available beats using the Macintosh application GarageBand. This software provides users who have little or no musical background with the opportunity to generate original and high-quality electronic music scores. Figure 1 represents the rules for the contest.

Figure 1: Contest Rules for the 2010 Competition

<p>Contest Rules</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Rhymes must be written and performed in a language studied at Stanford.2. Entries will be broadcast to a world audience on YouTube.3. IMPORTANT! Use of commercial music will lead to DISQUALIFICATION! Free music/beat tracks are available in the GARAGEBAND application for Macintosh and on some websites. You can also create your own score. More beats can be found at https://www.Stanford.edu/group/langlabstudio/data/1/2010nnrbeats/4. Please submit lyrics to YouTube in your video's information field. <p>Instructions for Submitting Rap Entries</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. WRITE RHYMES - Write rhymes. (It is a good idea to run them by your instructor.)2. RECORD YOURSELF - Record yourself performing the rhymes. You can submit your performance or create a video. See examples from previous contests for ideas.3. SUBMIT TO YOUTUBE - Upload your entry to YouTube along with lyrics. This contest is PUBLIC.4. SEND THE LINK - Send the link to your instructor and/or to Joseph Kautz in the Language Lab at [redacted]5. Judging - Celebrity Judge and Stanford Grad MC Lars will judge the entries. May 27th, 2010 <p>Please submit questions or requests for media production help to Joseph at the Language Lab at [redacted]</p> <p>Contest URL - http://www.youtube.com/nonnativerapper2010</p>

The organization of the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest generates direct and indirect costs. Therefore, an important task of the language lab was to locate funding sources and corporate sponsors for the initiative. Since 2008, the project has been generously supported by the Stanford Language Center, Stanford's Academic Technology Specialist Program, and the Stanford Bookstore.

Participation in the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest

The growth of the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest is documented in Table 1. Since 2008, a total of 48 language learners have participated in the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest. In total, they have submitted 29 video clips that have been viewed approximately 30,000 times.

The number of submission doubled from 2008 to 2010, and the number of students involved tripled. This indicates an increasingly collaborative approach of language learners towards the task. The number of instructors has more than tripled. The fact that the impressive increase in student participation correlates with the number of instructors involved indicates the important role of classroom instructors as partners in the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest. They provide encouragement, offer linguistic assistance, integrate the event into their courses, and award extra credit for participants.

The larger number of enthusiastic instructors has resulted in submissions from a wider diversity of languages. Whereas the years 2008 and 2009 only inspired

participation from three languages, a number that very closely corresponds to the number of instructors involved in those years, the year 2010 showed an impressive breadth of languages.

The growing number of languages over the three years stresses again the pivotal role of individual instructors who partner with the language lab: the fact that Portuguese dropped out completely and that German took a hiatus can be explained by considering changing teaching assignments and faculty attrition. The enthusiastic German instructor who inspired the inception of the project did not teach beginning language courses in spring quarter 2009, and a supportive Portuguese instructor left the institution to assume a position at another university.

The year 2010 marks a year of growth for the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest. Although the total number of views suggests the misleading interpretation that the event lost viewership, a more careful calculation of viewership, namely viewers per year, clearly shows an increased interest in the 2010 event compared to the previous installments. In addition, the numbers do not take into account the fact that the participants of the latest event constantly view the clips that their peers submitted in previous years and use these as models for their own entries.

Table 1: Participation in the Rapper Contest (2008-2010)

Year	2008	2009	2010	2008-2010
# of entries	8	5	16	29
# of learners involved	10	8	30	48
# of faculty involved	3	4	10	---
# of viewers (as of March 2011)	13,401	8,341	8,492	30,234
# of viewers per year (as of March 2011)	4,467	4,170	8,492	--
Languages represented	German Japanese Portuguese	French Japanese Spanish	Cantonese English French German Hungarian Italian Japanese Spanish French	Cantonese English French German Hungarian Italian Japanese Portuguese Spanish French

FOSTERING TRANSCULTURAL COMPETENCES

The Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest articulates a number of ideas and principles that relate to the concept of transcultural competence in foreign language learning. The concept of transcultural competence has gained considerable attention among foreign language educators in recent years. The term was introduced to the mainstream collegiate foreign language (FL) education debates in 2007 with the publication of a report issued by the Modern Language Association (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007). This white paper has generated countless discussions at professional meetings and in departments regarding how to redefine educational objectives, structure curricula, and design learning environments that help to prepare students for critical citizenship in increasingly globalized information ecologies.

The authors of the MLA report (2007) state that the “idea of transcultural and translanguingual competence places value on the multilingual ability to operate between languages” (pp. 3-4). This learning objective goes far beyond the instrumentalist view of language competence that provided the foundation for the communicative language teaching methodology and the proficiency movement of the 1980s. Learners in a curriculum that aims at transcultural competence develop linguistic skills and the cognitive and affective abilities that qualify them “to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture” (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007, p.4). This ability enables learners “to comprehend speakers of the target language as members of foreign societies and to grasp themselves as Americans—that is, as members of a society that is foreign to others” (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007, p.4). Therefore, language education that is geared toward transcultural competence transforms the way learners perceive themselves and their own cultural background and provides them with the tools to critically appreciate and challenge the cultural fabrics of the target languages’ societies.

The MLA report (2007) further suggests that transcultural competence is fundamentally rooted in language abilities. The development of this core competence requires an integrated curriculum that supports students in developing “critical language awareness [...] and aesthetic perception” (p. 4). In a more recent article, Kramsch (2012), one of the co-authors of the MLA report, further elaborates that language learning is “from the beginning to end, about the traffic in meaning through reflection, translation, and an awareness of the power of language in discourse” (p. 19).

In order to contextualize the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest with the curricular goal of transcultural competence, we will discuss the following issues. First, what are the potential contributions of rap music in a foreign language/culture class that targets the development of transcultural competence? Second, how does the integration of language, culture, creativity, and performativity of the contest

resonate with the philosophy underlying transcultural competence? Lastly, we will briefly describe and discuss the particular assessment strategy that was utilized in the context of the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest.

Potential Contributions of Rap to a Language Class

Music has the potential to provide language learners with adequate linguistic and cultural input. A number of research articles demonstrate the effectiveness of teaching approaches that use music, and countless best-practice articles provide concrete suggestions (Conrad, 1991; Esa, 2008; Luke, 2008; Putnam, 2006; Rundell, 2008; Schmidt, 2003; Schmidt, 2008). These articles span a variety of music genres, including rap music.

Rap lyrics and hip hop music are often misunderstood as uniquely American art forms. Admittedly, rap emerged from American urban centers in the 1970s, but in addition to being influenced by a variety of Afro-American musical styles, it incorporates a range of immigrant subcultures. In the middle of the 1980s, rap music entered the cultural mainstream due to its rapid commercial appropriation by the entertainment and advertising industries (Ogbar, 2007).

Two developments of the genre that occurred in the second half of the 1980s make hip hop music and rap lyrics very attractive as teaching materials in foreign language classes: the politicization and the internationalization of the genre.

Initially, rap music was dance music and non-political. However, since the middle of the 1980s, socially aware lyrics and radical political rap albums have gained a wider audience. Lyrics reflect the racism, social injustice, and oppression experienced by the artists and their communities (Ogbar, 2007). Obviously, rap lyrics with sociopolitical messages provide more substantial materials in collegiate foreign language classrooms than songs that are mainly produced as dance music (Putnam, 2006).

Rap and hip hop did not stay in North American's urban centers. American cultural and media hegemony brought rap music around the globe, with the music often supplemented by auxiliary practices of urban youth cultures, such as graffiti art and break dance. As a result, local musical patterns, native languages, and regional themes entered the genre, and distinct regional styles crystallized across the globe (Christgau, 2008). This rich diversity of hybrid products that integrates local practices from several cultural and linguistic contexts can be illustrated with the following examples. Brazilian hip hop artists incorporate Latin rhythms and describe life in the favela and thus provide testimonies concerning the negative aspects of globalized economies (Behague, 2006; Yüdice, 1994). In their lyrics, German-Turkish rappers switch not only between linguistic codes but also between the conflicting sociocultural identities and value systems that shape their multicultural environment (Brown, 1997; Elflein, 1998). The Palestinian-Israeli group DAM uses

Arabic along with Hebrew to describe life in a violent conflict zone to sounds that blur the cultural tensions between East and West (Al-Tae, 2002; El-Sabawi, 2005). French hip hop serves as a medium for the cultural expression and political articulation of North African adolescent immigrants in the banlieus (Prevos, 2001; Gross, 1994). To sum up: in many parts of the world, rap music reflects themes distinct to the local sociocultural context of musicians and lyricists whose biographies frequently include narratives of migration and marginalization and who personify the transnational characteristics of their artistic products.

A critical appreciation of this multicultural art form helps learners to develop and understand how processes of migration and marginalization generate cultural products. Rap music from around the globe is particular suited to raise the learner's level of transcultural awareness.

Integrating Transcultural Competence

Participating in the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest provides language learners with an opportunity not only to interact with rap music as a passive consumer—a role that the culture-centered language instruction frequently attributes to learners—but also to actively and creatively engage in the production of cultural content. This liberating shift from the language learner towards language user helps students to develop and integrate a variety of competences in their second language learning process. This skill set is anchored in the integration of language and culture but, in addition, includes the development of the students' creativity.

The question of how to integrate language and culture in collegiate foreign language instruction has been raised frequently since the middle of the 1990s. As a result, a variety of curricular guidelines and concrete models exist that show how language programs can successfully integrate cultural content with language learning from the first day of instruction (Bernhardt & Berman, 1999; Byrnes & Kord, 2002; Swaffar & Arens 2005). These concepts, however, place the learner solely in the role of the recipient of cultural products from the target language's societies. The Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest provides participants with an opportunity for learners to use their emergent linguistic skills and to creativity engage in a creative process.

The interdisciplinary group projects tap into a variety of talents and foster various competences not only in areas such as creative writing and word play in the second language but also in music production, audio recording, film making, and editing. The creative and logistic processes involved in the creation of the clips give learners concrete and critical insights into the complexities of the creation of artworks and aesthetics of commercial media products.

Moreover, the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest provides each student with an opportunity to reevaluate his or her status of being a native speaker and to

embrace this identity instead of regarding it as a stigma. This de-stigmatization of native speakership provides a transformation of the identity from language learner to language user. The deconstruction of the native speaker as the golden standard of language education is closely linked to Kramsch (1997), who has made a large number of foreign language educators sensitive to the problematic notion of language-learning environments at the post-secondary level that are narrowly focused on the attainment of native speakership. She argues that in globalized contexts shaped by linguistic travel and migration, the notion of native speakership loses relevance. Within this context, the individual who expresses his or her complex global identity benefits from the usage of a multiplicity of languages. Two recent monographs by Glenn Levine (2011) and Virginia Scott (2010) that further problematize the notion of native speakership and monolingualism in the foreign language classroom indicate how important and relevant these issues have remained to the research community and practitioners alike.

The Non-Native Rapper Contest is an opportunity for language students to celebrate their status as non-native language users in a creative environment that allows more space for experimentation with their identity than does the traditional language classroom setting. The status as a non-native speaker is not regarded as a deficit of the learner. It serves as a precondition for the students' playful and open creativity. This is highly authentic, since creativity, playfulness, and linguistic experimentation can also be found in the global contemporary hip hop community.

Alternative Assessment for Creative Learning

The Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest was offered as an extracurricular activity for language students. The clips produced and submitted were counted as extra credit by some instructors, but participation was not a requirement for any of the language classes. In addition, instructors offered a variety of other extra-credit activities, including tasks that are more traditional, to make sure that nobody participated who would feel uncomfortable about any aspect of the public event. Although the activity was not embedded in a course, we still felt it was important to evaluate the creative efforts of the participants in order to provide formative feedback. In addition, a ranking of the entries was necessary in order to frame the event as a contest and to award a prize—an Apple iPod—to the winner.

Assessing the quality of creative work is very challenging for language instructors. As a consequence, many instructors simply give credit for submitted creative work and assess the student output based on linguistic criteria. In absence of any defined standards, it is impossible to systematically assess the merits of creative work in second language classes. In this particular context, there is a further difficulty: none of the faculty and university staff involved with the organization of the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest have any real expertise in this specific musical genre.

Therefore, the creative value of the contributions is judged by a panel of Stanford alumni who work in the music industry. The jury, chaired by recording artist MC Lars (<http://www.mclars.com>), views all entries, awards points in a variety of categories, and finally records its verdict as a public video clip for participants (<http://tinyurl.com/4n8wsev>). Besides praising the individual entries, the jury also formulates constructive advice.

The jury's qualified and constructive feedback regarding the non-linguistic aspects of the learners' performances is more relevant than a language teacher's opinion; moreover, the involvement of agents outside the actual classroom in tandem with the YouTube distribution provides the possibility for the emergent second-language user to obtain feedback from general and expert audiences beyond the limitations of the classroom or campus.

CONCLUSION

The most important factor for the success of the project was a strong partnership between the lab personal and teaching staff. The data suggests that student participation in the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest depends to a large degree on the involvement of language instructors. The more involved the language instructors become, the more students will participate. Therefore, it is highly important for learners to partner with language instructors during all stages of the contest. Lab personnel and language instructors must collaborate to promote the event and to develop a strategy for integrating the contest into the language classroom. Also, instructors must be willing to support their students during their office hours and must honor their students' achievements. In order to generate a high level of enthusiasm among language instructors, the lab director must be proactive in promoting the event to his teaching staff and to a variety of stakeholders in the campus's language programs, such as language coordinators and departmental chairs. These colleagues must be educated about the potential of rap music and creative expression for language programs that target the development of transcultural competences and understand that the project articulates core principles of the MLA report (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007).

Another way to further promote the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest and to strengthen its pedagogical value is to encourage instructors to use rap music in the language classroom. Students will become familiar with recording artists in their target language and develop a more nuanced appreciation for the regional varieties that exist, and the lyrics will provide an opportunity to discuss social and political issues in the target languages' societies. This experience may stimulate contestants to generate lyrics that address or comment on social issues of the target languages' societies. Integrating rap music from a target culture into the classroom certainly depends on even stronger cooperation between lab personal and language teachers. In order to facilitate this process, language teachers must be provided with specific

training and detailed teaching materials that help them to effectively use rap music in their classes.

Finally, the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest could be strengthened by the organization of a concert in the real world. YouTube is almost perfectly suited to host individual entries and to connect participants with each other. However, music is also a communal experience, and providing an opportunity for all participants to perform live, in front of each other and their friends, would be a natural next step for the Stanford Non-Native Rapper Contest.

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