



Universal language and our school's online tools

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This morning I visited an IBDP class to hear their debate about the pros and cons of adopting English as a required universal language. Just the day before I'd listened to faculty members debate the pros and cons of having a single, required, learning management system (LMS) and/or a single required type of course web page for our school. Now I'm wondering whether there might be some parallels between these two debates.

First, the students. They will grow to be better debaters, better listeners, and all around less personal in the manner they express their opinions. Amid their high school speech (and thought) patterns, however, were some fine points regarding a universal language.

Students argued that lots of languages have come and gone - lots more than the estimated 6,000 spoken on the planet today - but that we don't feel impoverished by their loss, right now, today. Suppose that common estimates are true and we drop to around 3,000 languages by mid century. Will we be worse off? Or do we just react to the finality of extinction so viscerally that we'd rather not think about languages dying out forever?

Students also argued that having a universal language (alongside those languages that still exist) would make many things easier. Fewer translations, fewer hurdles to working together, perhaps fewer conflicts (and fewer wars?). "But the loss in culture," argues the other side of the room. Passionately, convincingly, students argue that language defines culture and if the language goes, so too does the culture.

Now the faculty. Faculty members at LAS use the student information system (SIS) Powerschool to track attendance and grades. Faculty members may also use an LMS (e.g. Edmodo or Google classroom) and house the information and announcements for their class, including assignments, on web pages (e.g. Weebly, Wordpress, Google sites). A faculty member using the communication tools of Edmodo to share ideas with other faculty members is limited to the community of Edmodo users. A faculty member fluent in Weebly uses Weebly well. Wordpress may be, however, a foreign language. And there are faculty members who may use no LMS and not have a webpage. Any of the above strategies can lead to excellent teaching. But a bit like Babel after it crumbled, our digital talk has all the richness of multilingualism alongside all the inherent complexity of communication across systems.

For any particular teacher there is no particular problem with multilingual platforms, because teachers operate chiefly within their own platform. Not many (not any?) or our faculty use one platform for period A, another for periods B and C, and yet a third for period D. That would be a lot of extra work and something to avoid unless, of course, the teacher enjoys speaking all these



different platforms, or is perhaps collaborating with another teacher and has had to adopt that teacher's platform.

However, things change a bit when we consider the perspective of our students. Period A may indeed be organized using Google Classroom, periods B and C with Edmodo, and period D with neither. A student may be able to handle the complexity, or may not be. A student's mentor, or dorm staff member helping in the evening, may be able to handle the added complexity, or may not be. One would suppose that, on average, the added complexity translates to less clarity, and with less clarity, more time off task and less overall learning.

In the classroom debate, the students argued that a universal language would give rise to the death of individual languages. There indeed may be, faced with a universal language, additional pressure on smaller minority languages to diminish faster than they might otherwise. But the argument that a universal language necessarily kills off national languages is not correct. Similarly, a universally required use of a particular LMS, website platform, or particular combination of LMS and websites does not necessarily mean other platforms are dead. A universal requirement of the acceptable official way to communicate with students does mean, however, that some of the most immediate barriers of learning multiple systems, of staying up to date with those systems, and of getting assistance from teachers and mentors who may not be fluent in all those systems, will - on average - be easier.

Perhaps we need a classroom debate of teachers, half the room defending the benefit of multiple platforms, the other half the benefit of a common language for all. Or perhaps there isn't a whole lot of time for debating, and we should better go about the business of choosing a common manner to let our students know what is expected of them. In other words, the focus of the next debate might best be how to choose which platforms, considering variables like:

- do the platforms get done, easily, what we want them to get done for us (meaning we have to know what we want to get done!);
- do the platforms appeal to faculty and students alike;
- are the platforms currently used by enough faculty members that a switch to requiring everyone to use them is manageable;
- or do we want to debate the degree to which we need to be using a single platform, in other words, do we allow ourselves:
 - the freedom for individual teachers to use any platform they most like;
 - the freedom for individual teachers to decide if they use an accepted (universal) platform or opt out; or
 - the rigidity of requiring all teachers to manage their classes within one particular system?

These are some tough calls to make. The students get off easy in their debate - they don't need to actually act on a universal language (thank goodness - our world's language diversity is



fascinating). However, we teachers do need to act on an answer, with the voice of the students most loudly in mind.