Perspectives of Foreign Language Preservice Teachers on the Use of a Web-based Instructional Environment in a Methods Course

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an analysis of the ideas and attitudes of preservice teachers about the integration of technology into foreign language classroom instruction. Specifically, this study focuses on the usefulness, strengths, and weaknesses of web-based instructional environments (WBIEs) facilitated by course management systems such as *WebCT*. Sources that were used for data analysis include interviews, field notes, and *WebCT* postings. This study demonstrates that preservice teachers perceive the advantages of using courseware tools in the methods class. They feel that these tools greatly enhance their experiences by providing (a) greater interactivity and connectivity between the instructor and students as well as among the students themselves and (b) more opportunities for academic exchanges.

KEYWORDS

Web-based Instructional Environments, Methods Class, Preservice Teachers, Connectivity, Academic Exchanges

INTRODUCTION

Technology-enhanced instruction and the integration of new technologies into foreign language curricula have become a growing and significant component of foreign language instruction. Much research has been carried out to describe the impact of these new technologies on students' foreign language development. Traditionally, researchers have focused on the impact of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) instruction (Armstrong & Yetter-Vassot, 1994; Beauvois, 1997; Borras & Lafayette, 1994; Burnett, 1998; Bush & Terry, 1997; Herron & Moos, 1993; Hwu, 2003; Kelm, 1992; Kost, 1999; Kubota, 1999; L. Lee, 2002; MacDonald, 2003; Oliva & Pollastrini, 1995; Warschauer, 1997). Other related areas of study have focused on efforts to enhance online education across disciplines (Hernandez, 2000; Hutchins, 2001; Knee, Ariza, & Long, 2002) as well as to overcome the shortage of foreign language teachers (Gaide, 2004; Johnson, Bishop, Holt, Stirling, & Zane, 2001; Kouritzin, 2002; Kraemer, 2003; K. S. Y. Lee, 2004; McAvinia & Hughes, 2003).

An important aspect of this research that has rarely been described is the attitudes of the foreign language preservice teachers who actually use the technology. Most foreign language preservice teachers know very little about the effective use of technology in education. Knowledge, however, is different from beliefs. Therefore, a careful analysis of *attitudes* regarding the use of the integration of technology provides a preliminary understanding of what preservice teachers understand or do not understand. This level of understanding, which serves to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the educational process used to train these teachers, is the significance of the study at hand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have pointed out the shortcomings pertaining to foreign language teacher education and the general topic of how these teachers learn or actually proceed to integrate technology into their emerging teaching practices (Gibson, 2002; Lam, 2000; Rodriguez-van Olphen, 2002). Likewise, foreign language preservice teachers' views about the use of web-based classroom management systems have not been extensively studied. Because of the scarcity of specific research on this topic, studies conducted in other disciplines that address the use of course management software and students' perceptions in general are included in the present article.

Web-based Course Management Systems across Disciplines

Product reviews have claimed both strengths and weaknesses of web-based course management systems such as *WebCT* or *Blackboard*, leading universities and their faculty to consider and implement these new technologies in their learning communities (Clark, 2002; Garrett, 2004; Kaiden, 2002; Lichtenberg, 1999; Siekmann, 2001). Faculty across disciplines and nations who have implemented a web-based instructional environment (WBIE) via these systems have widely reported their experiences and the lessons they have learned (Al Musawi & Abdelraheem, 2004; Auyeung, 2004; Carey, 1999; Carter, 2002; Cerri & Bonomi Barufi, 2003; Curtin, 2002; Gore, 2000; Iyer, 2003; Jackson, 2003; Musgrove & Musgrove, 2004; Savenye, Dwyer, & Niemczyk, 2003). For instance, in the medical field, web-based course management systems have been used to supplement clinical teaching experiences, to facilitate communication and cohesion in team-taught courses, to support the transition from student to neophyte practitioner, and to enhance student preparations for national board exams, among other purposes (Baier & Mueggenburg, 2001; DeBourgh, 2001; Good, 2004; Suen, 2005; Whitehead & Knee, 2000). Colleges of arts and sciences have echoed the requests for more technology. Librarians have adopted the use of web-based systems to facilitate access to electronic reserves (Bales, Taylor, & Havert, 2001) and to establish mentoring programs for adults (Galbraith, 2003). Some institutions have established collaborations at departmental or college levels to integrate library resources into their institutions' course management software to encourage students, particularly nonresident students, to make better use of the library resources (Buehler, 2004; Kraemer, 2003). Faculty who teach courses with large enrollments (e.g., introductory geology, chemistry, etc.) have reported that course management software, when used as a complementary learning environment, alleviates some customary burdens that these courses impose on instructors while increasing the confidence of students in their learning (Cervato, 2003; Charlesworth & Vician, 2003; Cole, 2000; Henly & Reid, 2001; Pienta, 2003). Foreman and Widmayer (2000), in their account of how a course management system was implemented in a college-level business English course, contend that although the course site had all the materials that a committed student needed to excel, face-to-face interactions and activities were overlooked. In their experience, this issue opens up a new dimension in course design. In the foreign languages, Conroy (2004) describes the implementation of *WebCT* in his advanced French composition class in which the use of *WebCT* has helped to solve the high demands of instantaneous correction that composition courses have.

International faculty have also reported on the implementation of web-based courseware tools in their home institutions. Evidence of the successful implementation of a WBIE facilitated by *WebCT* was reported in the Sultan Qaboos University (the only state university) in the Sultanate of Oman (Al Musawi & Abdelraheem, 2004). Another example is the case of the Department of Journalism at Technikon-Pretoria in South Africa. This department implemented a student-centered approach to help students develop technology competence. The

strategy used was a combination of face-to-face instruction and a WBIE by means of *WebCT* (Axmann, Fourie, & Papo, 2002).

In brief, the cases presented above provide an overview of current uses and applications for web-based course management systems.

Foreign Language Teacher Education and WBIEs

Twenty-one years ago, Lindenau (1984) asserted that faculty involved in foreign language education needed to develop a greater understanding of what technology can bring to the field of foreign language education. She cited insufficient teacher training and an acceptance of the status quo as the major challenges that the field would need to overcome in order to develop a technology-based approach. Two decades have passed, and foreign language teacher preparation programs, as well as the field of general teacher education, still face the same challenges. The inadequacies of teacher preparation programs in preparing teachers to use technology-enhanced instruction are still very much a current affair.

Gibson (2002), in her study of a technology-enhanced social studies curriculum, discussed the shortcomings of teacher education programs with respect to the integration of innovative technologies as part of the teacher education core curriculum. Gibson used *WebCT* to design a virtual field trip, framed within constructivist theory, with the purpose of providing preservice teachers with an opportunity to rethink and reflect upon traditional teaching models. She concluded that because most of the novice teachers entering into the profession have a slim knowledge of ways to integrate technology into the classroom, this should be a priority of teacher education programs in general. In the same vein, Krueger, Bobac, and Smaldino, 2004 brought up the existing dearth in preparing preservice teachers to integrate new technologies in the PreK-12 classrooms using sound pedagogical models. Rilling, Dahlman, Dodson, Boyles, and Pazvant (2005) and Tognozzi (2001) presented a similar argument for more training in teacher preparation programs for foreign language teachers.

Researchers have also addressed issues such as the consistency or frequency with which teachers use technology in their classrooms. Moore, Morales, and Carel (1998), in a state-wide survey of language teachers, found that teachers chose not to use much of the technology available to them, such as computer facilities or interactive media. Shelley (1997), in a study of foreign language teachers and email use, demonstrated that diffusion-based instruction proved to be effective in sustaining foreign language teachers' use of electronic mail. In a later study, Shelley (1998) reiterated that issues such as training, user-friendly systems, hands-on experience, and school support are major factors influencing foreign language teachers' use of email and**,** by extension, other technologies. Higham and Morris (1993) described an in-service and initial teacher program designed to develop informational technology (IT) competence embedded in the development of language learning materials. Their findings are consistent with Shelley's (1997, 1998) conclusions about the relationship between training and teachers' decisions. Likewise, rural states have undertaken great efforts to promote and sustain foreign language teachers with opportunities to expand their technological skills (Rosenbusch, Garcia-Villada, & Padgitt, 2003).

Besides the issues mentioned above, researchers have called for action and have raised public awareness of the importance of the overall quality of technology-enhanced instruction, specifically web-based instruction. In fact, researchers have pointed out basic principles for sound implementation of technology as well as common problems to avoid during the planning and integration processes (Bickle & Carroll, 2003; Brickman, 2003; Dabbagh, 2000; Dabbagh & Schmitt, 1998). Firdyiwek (1999), in an analysis of courseware systems that aimed to iden-

tify underlying pedagogical assumptions of these systems, found that courseware tools need to consist of a well balanced combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools, independent web authoring and presentation tools, and flexible distribution of responsibilities and access for teachers, administrators, and students, among others. Also, K. S. Y. Lee (2004) provided suggestions for designing courses using *WebCT* across disciplines using constructivist approaches and focusing on the pedagogical dimension rather the technical one.

In sum, an analysis of the current literature provides evidence indicating that (a) teachers, regardless of their discipline, choose not to integrate new technologies into their plan of instruction because of factors such as unfamiliarity with the software, paucity of user-friendly systems, absence of sustained technical assistance, and lack of hands-on experience and (b) when technology is integrated within student-centered approaches and in a manner that focuses on the pedagogical facet instead of the technical one, it proves to be beneficial for students and instructors.

STUDY

Purpose and Theoretical Framework

This study draws from a larger qualitative study that examined the experiences of foreign language preservice teachers who were learning how to integrate technology while they were taking their foreign language methods. The purpose of this article is to report on one particular section of the larger study. Specifically, it provides an account of foreign language preservice teachers' perceptions about the use of web-based course management systems such as *WebCT* in a foreign language methods course.

Because this study involves learning about preservice teachers' perspectives, a theoretical framework within the phenomenology tradition is most suitable. Phenomenological research addresses people's lived experiences and "aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (Van Manen, 1991, p. 9). Furthermore, phenomenology is concerned with how these lived experiences make sense in the context of their occurrence (Patton, 1990).

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study are the following:

1. What are the perspectives of foreign language preservice teachers about the use of courseware management systems (*WebCT*) in their methods course?

2. Do they find it beneficial or not? If they find it beneficial, what are the features and reasons that make it so? If they do not find it beneficial, what are the reasons?

Context and Participants

The context of this study was the foreign language methods course offered at a Midwestern university. This three-credit-hour course, which is always offered in the fall semester, focuses

on preparing prospective secondary foreign language teachers for their professional practice. Major components of the methods course are lectures, a WBIE, guided field experiences at a professional development school (PDS), and in-class workshops. Students attend classes on campus throughout the semester except when they conduct their 9-week field experience. During these 9 weeks, the professor visits them at the school site. After this field experience, campus classes resume (Garfinkel & Sosa, 1996).

There were seven students enrolled in the methods class (two in French and five in Spanish). All of the students agreed to participate in this study. The group, which included females whose ages ranged from 21 to 24, did not have any minority students.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data presented at this time reflect the reactions and perceptions of the preservice teachers about the use of courseware tools (*WebCT*) in their foreign language methods course. The length of the study was one semester (one full cycle). Data sources include direct observations, structured and semi-structured interviews, *WebCT* postings, questionnaires, and field notes taken during the data collection process.

The data analysis was an ongoing process during and after the data collection. Data were organized following Strauss and Corbin (1998); they were coded, patterns were identified, and emerging themes were recorded as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). Triangulation of the data was performed within and across data sources as recommended in Patton (1990). Validity issues were addressed by following Maxwell's (2005) validity checklist.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Perspectives of Foreign Language Preservice Teachers about the Use of WebCT

At the beginning of the semester, particularly during the first 2 weeks of class, most of the students were uncertain about the use of courseware tools in the methods course. The sources of these uncertainties varied among students but could all be classified as (a) rejection of anything that could increase the course workload, (b) fear of the unknown, or (c) aversion to what may be beyond their control. The students' first reactions were evidence of these concerns when they observed that below the professor's contact information there was a note about the URL address they needed to log on to *WebCT*. One of the students raised her hand and asked, "Is the use of *WebCT* going to increase our work load? We've been told that when we get to methods the workload doesn't correspond to the three credits that the course is assigned."

This concern about an increase in the course workload of an already demanding class was echoed in the concerns of the other students. In their view, methods was already a course that required a high level of commitment in terms of preparation time vis-à-vis the three credits that were earned. Another set of questions from the students addressed the fact that except for one student, none had used *WebCT* before; they did not know how their lack of experience would affect their grades. Furthermore, other students were concerned with how disruptions in the Internet (e.g., a server that is "down") would affect their ability to post (i.e., turn in) assignments.

The professor, who had over 20 years of experience mentoring teachers-to-be, replied

with an analogy about the first time that he had used a word processor. The underlying message was "it may take some time in the beginning, but it will save time later on." The rest of the students questioned the "hows" and "whys" of the use of *WebCT*.

It was obvious that the students were neither excited about the integration of *WebCT* nor looking forward to posting assignments, maintaining online discussions, and so forth. From their perspective, *WebCT* added to an already heavy burden. After reading the course syllabus, students realized that, on the tentative schedule for the course, there were preassessment questionnaires for the first day of class and a *WebCT* hands-on training session for the second day of class. The students' faces, expressions, and body language largely conveyed their relief to learn that there would be support and guidance available. One student, who was sitting in the back, commented to someone sitting next to her, "Well! At least these guys didn't assume that we know how to use it, and they are aware that we need help!" Her classmate replied, "Hopefully, the training session will get us started."

The students' first reactions to the integration of *WebCT* as a complementary learning environment were not what the instructor had expected. From the professor's perspective, the implementation of a WBIE was an enhancement of the methods course. His rationale was that using a web-based management system would allow the students to be exposed to new technologies within a safe environment.

Table 1 provides a summary from a preassessment questionnaire pertaining to students' degree of familiarity with *WebCT*.

Table 1
Summary from the *WebCT* Preassessment Questionnaire (Results expressed in number of students)

Item no.	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I am proficient as a computer user	0	2	0	3	2
2	I am proficient as a WebCT user	6	0	0	1	0
3	I am able to log on to WebCT via MyWebCT	3	0	1	3	0
4	I am able to understand the student view of my WebCT course	3	1	2	1	0
5	I am able to identify the elements of EDCI 427 Homepage	3	1	0	1	0
6	I am able to post any assignments in the appropriate folder	3	2	1	1	0
7	I am able to use the calendar tool	6	0	1	0	0
8	I am able to post entries in the calendar	6	0	1	0	0
9	I am able to edit entries in the calendar	6	0	1	0	0

Item no.	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
10	I am able to check class events in the calendar	5	1	0	1	0
11	I am able to use internal e-mail	3	1	2	1	0
12	I am able to compose an e-mail message	3	1	2	1	0
13	I am able to attach documents to a message	3	1	2	1	0
14	I am able to check my e-mail in WebCT	3	1	2	1	0
15	I am able to find the necessary directions for course assign-ments, midterm paper, and final exam	2	2	2	1	0

After completing the assessment summarized in Table 1, students were asked to write a brief comment about their answers. Their comments included,

I used WebCT last semester in my EDCI 309 class. I am familiar with WebCT but I have not done some things with it, and some things on WebCT have changed.

I don't have any prior experience with WebCT.

I have never used WebCT.

I have never explored WebCT. This is my first time entering the site.

I have been to the site and I can play around with it, but I still have some questions.

I have no idea about some of this because I have not tried to do most of these things.

I logged on once and that is it.

Only one student had used a previous version of *WebCT*. The others had not used it before; however, two of them had been curious enough to log on and to attempt to explore it. The numbers in Table 1 also yield preliminary information about the preservice teachers' willingness to take risks in trying new technologies. The students listed in the "Undecided" column are those who, in spite of not having tried *WebCT* before, are considering that "if I try, I may get it." The methods class professor asked these students about the reason(s) for their response. The students agreed that if they took the time to think about it, they might figure it out. One of them stated, "If this program follows a logical one, we may be able to figure it out easily."

The next day, all the students attended the hands-on training session. The training session, tailored to meet the students' needs, lasted one hour followed by another half hour of extra practice where the students continued to compose discussion and email messages, post documents, and use the calendar and other tools under the guidance of two instructors. After completing the training session, the students completed a postassessment questionnaire.

Table 2 summarizes the students' responses to this questionnaire.

Table 2
Summary from the *WebCT* Postassessment Questionnaire (Results expressed in number of students)

Item no.	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I am proficient as a computer user	0	2	0	3	2
2	I am proficient as a WebCT user	0	0	1	5	1
3	I am able to log on WebCT via MyWebCT	0	0	0	5	1
4	I am able to understand the student view of my WebCT course	0	0	0	2	5
5	I am able to identify the elements of EDCI 427 Homepage	0	0	0	2	5
6	I am able to post any assignments on the appropriate folder	0	0	0	1	6
7	I am able to use the calendar tool	0	0	0	3	4
8	I am able to post entries in the calendar	0	0	0	3	4
9	I am able to edit entries in the calendar	0	0	0	4	3
10	I am able to check class events in the calendar	0	0	0	2	5
11	I am able to use internal e-mail	0	0	0	3	4
12	I am able to compose an e-mail message	0	0	0	3	4
13	I am able to attach documents to a message	0	0	0	3	4
14	I am able to check my e-mail in WebCT	0	0	0	2	5
15	I am able to find the necessary directions for course assignments, midterm paper, and final exam	0	0	0	1	6

As shown in Table 2, the students' skills and comfort level increased after the training session. It was at the end of the session when students' views about having to use *WebCT* in the class subtly began to transform. Some of the students commented,

Well, after all … it wasn't so bad. It's not complicated at all.

I thought that it was going to be more difficult or complex.

I think that it may save us time.

Oh! We won't be cutting more trees if we post assignments there.

I think that it won't take extra time to post stuff here.

It was good that we had the training session. Now I feel much more confident.

He [the professor] was right. It may be useful.

These comments, along with the change in the students' attitudes, provide an illustration of Shelly's (1997, 1998) findings. Before going through the training session, the preservice teachers were hesitant about the learning curve and the time demands that having to use *WebCT* would impose on them. Clearly, the students' perspectives begin to switch at the end of the training session because they started to consider that their professor's analogy, after all, was not so far from being true. The students' perspectives were not stagnant; instead, they appeared to be a dynamic force that evolved as the students advanced in their professional journey. Throughout the training session, verbal and nonverbal language asserted that the more acquainted the students felt with the new system, the more that they tried to follow what they call "the logic of WebCT" to figure things out on their own. This behavior is consistent with previous studies (Shelley, 1998).

The methods students began to use *WebCT* regularly during the second week of classes. Participating in online discussions, posting assignments, and using email and the calendar became part of their daily tasks. The *WebCT* site, organized with the same format as the course syllabus, had folders for each assignment, discussion forums per topic, and postings of all deadlines or important dates on the calendar. Occasionally, the students forgot the steps involved in posting an assignment or editing the calendar. In those cases, although they had handouts with written instructions, they chose to seek help at the university computer labs or to email their instructor. There were a few instances when one student in particular had more difficulties and called her professor's office. Other than this specific case, all of the students caught on quickly to what they called "the WebCT ways." By the end of the third week of classes, the students considered themselves "experts" or "masters" of *WebCT*. This is another landmark in their always evolving perspectives. At this point, the preservice teachers felt comfortable enough to begin transferring the skills they had developed into contexts such as minilesson plans, learning activities, or just their daily life. Students began to describe ideas for integrating technology into their future practice. This is consistent with Morley and LaMaster's (1999) observations of a group of physical education preservice teachers. Morley and LaMaster observed that the use of web-based systems helped students to enhance their computer skills and provided a tool for use in their own classrooms.

At this time, the preservice teachers had to organize themselves for the forthcoming 9-week field experience. As part of the field experience, they had to conduct microteaching sessions. Topics for these microteachings varied according to the class level, mentor teacher, and the student's skills. The decisions about the microteachings depended exclusively on the best judgment of the mentor teachers. By the third and fourth week of classes, there was a plethora of teaching resources ready to be used such as minilessons, 5- to 10-minute learning activities, tips for classroom management, some picture files in progress, and lists of Internet resources posted in *WebCT* folders that each had a corresponding name. During the last class before the field experience began, one student, whose opinion was strongly echoed by the

other six, expressed great concern about not having the structure and support that on-campus classes had provided up to that moment. The professor reassured all of them about the great experience that they would gain and their readiness to face this new set of challenges. Students continued to be anxious and discussed strategies about how to communicate with their professor and fellow classmates. Although all of the students were placed in a single school, their schedules and the size of the school did not guarantee the proximity they wanted and felt they needed with both their professor and classmates. Until then, none of the students had been required or encouraged to use the chat tool in *WebCT*. It was at this point that the preservice teachers made the decision to begin using this tool. As they discussed all of these issues, the professor observed them and asked, "Have you noticed what you have built into the assignment folders?" One of them, with a picaresque laugh, said, "Aha, we have seen it and in fact … we have been 'sharing' and doing some 'collaborative' work." Another student said, "Well, Professor Jones, we have been naughty students." Their laughter and playful reactions, originating from what they thought was a form of 'benign cheating,' attracted the attention of their professor. After these exchanges, the professor told them to explain what they meant. The students explained that they had been downloading all of the minilessons and other resources from each other for the purpose of saving time during their field experience. In a later interview, the students made the following statements:

> Really, the first day of class … was stressful. I thought that this WebCT affair was going to complicate my life in ways I did not want to happen.

> Now it makes sense! It is so cool to have all this stuff to share with our class! I didn't think that we could save so much time while building such a resource bank!

> I really learn a lot by reading my classmates' projects. Each of us has different ideas and comes up with different ways of teaching Spanish. If we continue to post our projects, we can walk out of methods with a solid portfolio.

> This is awesome!! First, if we lose the assignments, we know that we have copies on WebCT. Second, we can pick up on our classmates' stuff and download samples for future use. And, last, but not least important, [laughs and smiles] we join efforts and we save time and energy!

By now, all of the students considered the integration of the WBIE as an asset. Their perspectives continued to evolve as they began to view the use of *WebCT* "with good eyes" (as one of them put it) and to be pleased with having a web-based complementary learning environment. The reflective journals they wrote before leaving campus show their changing perspectives. Below are some representative entries.

> I like that [WebCT] made things organized and easily accessible.

> I started to use the discussion folder. I liked that I could read other people's comments.

> It's easy to use [WebCT] but there is too much stuff posted to read.

> I like the discussion because it made it possible to share ideas and read about other students' experiences.

During the 9-week field experience, the preservice teachers used the chat tool on a regular basis. They set up their own "counseling hours" to chat about the peculiarities of each student's classroom experiences. This proved to be an asset from the perspective of peer

coaching. The chat room afforded preservice teachers with the opportunity to share a wide spectrum of experiences and emotions. Although the following quote brings forward issues in the current literature that are not the focus of this article, it serves to illustrate the students' views about the usefulness of the chat tool during their field experience.

> *Es bueno saber que nos podemos comunicar con el chat. La verdad es que a veces estamos tan nerviosas por todas las experiencias. Las mentor teachers son muy diferentes entre ellas y los estudiantes también! No todas las profesoras enseñan de la manera que aprendimos en la universidad y con el chat nos contamos las cosas que pasan.* (Interview with Susan)

> 'It is good to know that we can communicate with the chat [tool]. The truth is that sometimes we are nervous because of all the experiences. The mentor teachers are very different and the students too! Not all the mentor teachers teach as we learned at the university, and with the chat we can tell each other what is going on.'

Indeed, the use of the chat tool provided preservice teachers with a safe space in which to share their tribulations and anxieties with their fellow classmates.

For the duration of the 9-week field experience, students referred to *WebCT* on numerous occasions. Professor Jones reported what he considered to be a "heavy volume of calls to WebCT" during these weeks. His statement drew from observing the number of hits that the *WebCT* tracking tool provides. Content pages as well as communication tools were the most frequently used and had the highest increase in the number of student hits.

By the end of the semester, the students strongly agreed that the wealth of resources that they had been able to generate, share, and exchange among themselves would not have been possible without a WBIE as a complementary component of the traditional format of their methods course.

Preservice Teachers' Views of Strengths and Weaknesses

Upon completion of their fifteenth week of the semester, the students reflected on their experiences with *WebCT*, specifically about what they considered its strengths and weaknesses. From the beginning, the students' views about the strengths and weaknesses of using *WebCT* in the methods course changed and were dynamic in nature, as was the case with their overall perspectives. By the end of the semester, the students' opinions had settled, and their experiences were crystallized. Once this happened, they reflected upon all the experiences that they had had and articulated their thoughts on what they decided to label as the "Pros and Cons" of *WebCT*. Now, although excited about finishing the semester, the preservice teachers conveyed an easiness, certainty, and tranquility through their verbal and nonverbal language.

The Pros

Based on the students' insights, academic enhancement was the major advantage of using *WebCT*. The impact of this academic enhancement, manifested and provided by the interactivity and connectivity between the instructor and the students and among the students themselves, is observed in different levels and circumstances. Increased confidence, collaboration, communication, and flexibility were some of the highlights.

All students reported developing higher levels of confidence as a consequence of having the opportunity to use this type of WBIE. The fact that students can try different tools within *WebCT* without compromising the site grants them a safe and friendly environment in which to have first-hand experiences. For instance, during their first exposure to *WebCT* at the computer lab, they were concerned about doing some irrevocable damage to the course website. Professor Jones assured them that in order to do that they needed a level of access that the students did not have. Once they knew that they could not cause any harm, the students began to work with a more relaxed and positive attitude. They became increasingly confident as the semester progressed. They took responsibility for posting materials and updating the class calendar, among other initiatives.

In addition, all of them reported that the use of *WebCT* had a great impact on them because the skills that they developed were transferable to other WBIEs that not only affect them as students but also impact the way that they will teach their own students. This is consistent with the findings of Johnson (2002), Teng and Allen (2005), and Williams and Quinsee (2003).

Collaboration was another frequently quoted benefit of *WebCT*. Students soon discovered the potential for online collaboration and took advantage of it. This collaboration went beyond just copying. In their words,

> *WebCT nos ayuda a ayudarnos. Como tenemos todos los materiales de clase allí podemos ayudarnos pasándonos las cosas que preparamos. Esto nos ayuda mucho porque nos enriquecemos y estimulamos nuestra creatividad.*
>
> 'WebCT helps us to help each other. Since we have all the materials there, we can help each other by passing along what we have prepared. This is very helpful because we enrich ourselves and stimulate our creativity.'

This collaboration reached its peak at the end of the semester. During the last day of class, students downloaded all of the sample materials onto a compact disc for future use. Each of them then had their own materials plus each classmate's set of materials. They built a resource bank by sharing all that they had posted on *WebCT*.

Communication was another major concern for students. Using the chat tool allowed them to be in touch with the rest of the class. In addition, the bulletin board was frequently used to post last-minute announcements. The calendar, to which Professor Jones had given full access to the entire class, also served as a resource for communication purposes. This was a tool that students highly appreciated.

The flexibility offered by the WBIE was another highlight that students viewed as something positive. This flexibility allowed them to post and access course materials without having to come to campus. This was particularly useful during the 9-week field experience. The instructor and students continued to exchange materials, course assignments, and feedback without interruptions or delays. As one student put it, "I have saved some money on gas! I don't need to make an extra trip to campus to turn in my assignments!"

The Cons

The students' comments consistently singled out three challenges for using *WebCT*: (a) lack of technical support and its association with classroom management, (b) equity issues for lower income level students, and (c) shortage of feedback and reduced presence of the teacher.

Technical support was a major concern to the students. The preservice teachers could not imagine having to use any web-based courseware system without the support that their high-tech institution had available. As they were working in a lab session, one of the students expressed some concern that if she had needed a similar amount of technical support in her PDS, she would have had to forgo using the program. Indeed, she was right. The foreign language section did not have the most modern computer lab, and the budget for technical support had been cut twice in the last 3 years. The student sitting next to her replied, "If your school does not provide technical support, there is not much you can do on your own—unless you have a minor in computer science, but in that case you would not be teaching." Another student advanced the conversation by presenting a hypothetical situation in which the computer lab starts having technical problems, the teacher does not have the skills to solve these technical problems, and students become distracted and switch to English instead of staying focused on using L2. After describing this chaotic scenario, she asked her classmates, "First, how do you avoid a situation like this one? What do you do now? How do you have your students working again?" Her concerns were legitimate and have been documented in the current literature. Burnett (1998), in her ethnographic study of a computer-equipped French class, documented how technology pitfalls can affect the classroom environment as well as the use of the target language. She reports that in spite of the eagerness and commitment of the teachers, the technical problems that arose were detrimental to the use of L2.

Equity and access were other issues that the students referred to as "somehow problematic" (Molly). The social consciousness of this group and their awareness of the level of access among students of lower income levels were the underpinnings for these concerns. Although researchers have identified principles and difficulties in web-based design, it seems that the digital divide is common to disadvantaged student populations in both developing and developed countries (Penzhorn & Fourie, 2004). Often, while working in the computer lab or writing their reflective journals, preservice teachers were advocates for those students who did not have the resources at home or could not go to the library. As part of their learning, they were requested to think about different strategies that they would use to empower children from low-income settings.

Feedback and teacher presence in a WBIE is a crucial factor according to the methods class students. Teacher feedback becomes even more critical when students do not have face-to-face interactions. Young and Shaw (2004), in their study of effective online teaching, identified teacher visibility in the teaching process as one of the most important characteristics of effective online teaching. Preservice teachers commented, "If you don't have your professor monitoring and coaching you via WebCT … things can be really difficult. We need that kind of moral support during our stay at our field school." Another student seconded this comment, saying, "Having these communication tools has been awesome! Although I missed coming to campus, I didn't feel isolated during the field experience. Really, all these tools have been great in keeping us connected."

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article presents the perspectives of foreign language preservice teachers on the use of a WBIE as they completed their methods course. Throughout the semester, the students voiced their views about the use of *WebCT* in methods. The students' perspectives continued to evolve from a state of concern, hesitation, and denial to a state of easiness, certainty, and acceptance that was close to keenness. Their early opinions can be attributed to a natural reaction of apprehension of the unknown. Because of the students' steady change as training opportunities were presented and as the class progressed, it is possible to assert that train-

ing and support are vital to a healthy and comprehensive integration of new technologies by preservice teachers.

It was clear that the preservice teachers' first reactions were caused by rejection of what they perceived as ambiguous—an ambiguity that derived from the use of software they had not used before. This rejection, rooted in the assumption that "we are on our own" began to fade away as soon as they found out that (a) there was both pedagogical and technical support, (b) they were not being expected to master *WebCT* right away, and (c) there was a purpose and this purpose would serve their academic development. When the preservice teachers became aware of the potential of the WBIE, there was a turning point in their views about web-based systems and about technology in general. Lam (2000) found that teachers' personal beliefs about technology play a major role in their decisions on integrating technology in their classes. In other words, the behaviors that the preservice teachers displayed and are documented in this study concur with Lam's results. This increased acceptance did not, however, prevent the preservice teachers from being objective and from pointing out critical issues such as accessibility, digital divide, and technical support among others.

The collaboration and sharing that the use of *WebCT* initiated went beyond enhancing academic achievement. This collaboration gave them the opportunity to learn about collegiality, teamwork, and, most of all, to find a support system that helped them to succeed during one of the most demanding times in their lives as undergraduate students. Rushubirwa (2002), in a qualitative study that looked into the experiences of faculty and students when integrating technology into the foreign language classroom, found that participants believe that the use of new technologies certainly adds to enhancing students' communicative skills. According to Rushubirwa, the integration of a WBIE, combined with pedagogical approaches that favor student-centered environments, promotes collaborations in which students share knowledge with each other and develop a sense of confidence and independence as they learn their subject matter.

The overall results of this study coincide with Auyeung's (2004) findings that 90% of the students participating in online collaborative experiences indicated that their experiences were beneficial when they participated in such experiences as having online discussions and reading the postings or products of their peers.

These findings lead to implications at different levels. In the pedagogical realm, WBIEs should be designed and implemented in ways that (a) favor student-centered activities, (b) facilitate student learning to promote academic achievement, and (c) enhance student-instructor and student-student interactions and collaborations, even though these interactions may no longer be occurring face to face. In addition, these new technologies should be presented to preservice teachers maintaining a strong teacher presence, providing time for discussion of technological pitfalls and strategies to overcome these shortcomings, and introducing the technology within the context of a strong support system.

WBIEs that favor student-centered activities constitute good pedagogical models to be emulated by preservice teachers.

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