

Coventry Village School brings 'a glimpse of the wider world' to students

Online curriculum from Middlebury Interactive Languages helps this tiny Vermont school offer instruction in foreign languages and culture to students in grades 2-8

When Coventry Village School in Coventry, Vt., began using an online language curriculum from Middlebury Interactive Languages last fall, Principal Matthew Baughman knew it would enable students to learn a foreign language—even though the tiny K-8 school couldn't afford to have a foreign language teacher on its staff.

But there was an unexpected benefit to using the curriculum as well, Baughman said.



The online program allows students to advance at their own pace, which can be a tremendous advantage—as well as a challenge.

"We told students, 'We don't care how fast you go, just that you learn the material,'" Baughman said.

It was incredible to see what happened at that point: Students became advocates for their own learning, he said.

"They would recognize, 'I need to redo units four, seven, and eight, because I haven't mastered the material yet.' They developed skills we hoped they'd learn for the 21st century," Baughman said. "Not having a teacher is a blessing in some ways, because it makes the students take responsibility for their own learning."

That's not to say the students aren't well supported as they work through the curriculum. Coventry has a

general-education teacher in the room with students as they progress through the lessons on their school-issued laptops delivered via laptop carts, and Middlebury Interactive Languages provides its own licensed and certified language instructors to coach the students online as well.

A 2012 winner of the "Readers' Choice Awards" program from eSchool Media, the interactive language curriculum was developed by academics at Middlebury College's renowned Language Schools. It covers five languages—Spanish, French, German, Chinese, Latin—for elementary through high school.

The curriculum is based on principles that research has shown to be effective in language instruction, such as the use of authentic materials and experiences. For instance, Middlebury Interactive has recorded real interactions between native speakers in different countries to bring cultural authenticity to the classroom.

"We've built language learning activities using these videos, as well as authentic written resources such as newspapers," said Aline Germain-Rutherford, chief learning officer for Middlebury Interactive Languages and director of the French School at Middlebury College's famed Language Schools.

The use of authentic materials helps students not just learn the language, but also understand the culture. When watching videos of people greeting each other in Spain, compared to Argentina, "students can see the cultural differences between the two," she explained. "It's not just about the words and the structures."

At Coventry Village School—a public school with about 100 students in kindergarten through eighth grade—students in grades 2-6 are all learning French, as Coventry is only 15 miles from French-speaking Canada. Students in grades seven and eight are given a choice of learning French, Spanish, or German.

Coventry has a population of about 1,000, and most of its residents are dairy farmers. About 65 percent of the students at Coventry Village School qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

In choosing to adopt the Middlebury Interactive Languages curriculum, "we were hoping to bring a glimpse of the wider world into the lives of these students—and do it in an affordable way," Baughman said.

Learning another language "makes their worldview more complex, and it makes them more competitive when they go off to high school and college."

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