I teach the Irish language online for the CUNY Institute for Irish-American Studies. At present, I have almost thirty students in my Elementary Irish I class, over half of whom are taking it for credit. These students hail from diverse backgrounds and countries and are of different ages. The class learns Irish with ease because of the straightforwardness of the technology. The chief benefit of teaching online is that I can be an instructor at home, at work, and even from my parent’s home in Ireland. All I need is a laptop and an internet connection. This is also a great benefit for students. In my opinion, Irish is regaining great strength and respect as demonstrated by the numbers of students who are enrolling in such classes and who are very eager to study it.

Distance education is now part of the planning agenda of most organizations concerned with education and training. Its quality has greatly improved in the past few years, as both students and educators have become more comfortable with the technology, and best practices have been shared and duplicated. Distance learning offers a number of advantages. Students from all over the world can participate in online classes and obtain foreign language credits towards a U.S. degree without the hassle and cost of applying for student visas or large student loans. Online credits can be obtained quickly, easily, and cheaply, particularly in comparison to tuition at some private schools. They can also remain in the comfort of their own homes for the duration of the course. They are given the flexibility to study at their own leisure in any location convenient to them. This lends itself to a very enjoyable learning experience. Now is the perfect time to offer online courses as technology is playing a big role in everyone’s life and most are somewhat computer literate.

I ask my students what made them take an online course and the answer I always get is “convenience.”

Irish has come a long way from Ogham (the Old Irish/Celtic writing system) and the margins of Latin manuscripts to the world wide web! The ancient tongue of the Gaels has also entered the computer age. In my opinion, Conrádhu na Gaeilge played a major role in keeping Irish alive, but technology is a vital part of the substantial increase in Irish literacy today. The language is thriving. Irish language books, newspapers, magazines, and radio channels such as Raidió na Gaeltachta, Raidió na Life, the television station Teilifís na Gaeilge (TG4), and a vast number of websites and CD ROMs are available to aid in the learning of the language. Microsoft even launched an Irish language version of their software. All of this material is available on the internet and are priceless tools for a student of Irish. An online language course is most effective at the early stages. A basic tenet of education is multiplying the senses, and I think that visual and audio files, and getting the students to

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1 The Institute for Irish-American Studies is part of Lehman College, City University of New York. See Irish @ Lehman, CUNY for online Irish language course descriptions, http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/lehman/irishamericansudies/Irishindex.html

The Proceedings of the Barra Ó Donnabháin Symposium, 2007
submit comments and questions alongside every lecture, motivates them while they learn their new language. They can see, hear, read, and write Irish in a new, fun, and exciting way.

New lectures are posted each week and are straightforward and user-friendly; the courses I teach provide technical help every step of the way. Each lecture is a complete lesson with attached photos, videos, sound files, homework, interactive quizzes, assignments, and discussion board topics. Students can join the live chat rooms, forums, and discussion boards at any time, day or night, in addition reading the posted questions and responses. It is also a very useful way of relaying important information to students both quickly and easily; this works especially well for last minute events that might be of interest to them, problems the server may be having, and reminders about quiz deadlines. This process of Just-In-Time learning offers students access to current material and to a wide range of courses, a boon for people with demanding work schedules and family commitments, or for those who have limited mobility. Since course material is continuously available, the time allocated to a course can be managed easily. Students can download course documents at their convenience 24/7, and spend as much or as little time as suits them at any sitting, as long as they complete the required minimum of three hours per week. Other than certain due dates, they make their own schedule for completing the requirements of the course. They can obtain a degree while working full time and, as some students find it difficult to commit to weekly classes at a college campus because of work/family obligations, online learning allows them to change their schedule from week to week depending on what suits them. It is perfect for today’s busy lifestyle.

You do not need to put your life on hold while taking my online Irish class since teaching is asynchronous. Lectures are posted once a week and I man the site every day, but the students do not need to be online at the same time as me. The software allows me to view up-to-the minute statistics about who is logging on, when, and what they are viewing. This is a vital part of any course as the instructor can obtain feedback as to the type of students who are in the class, what they are working on, and in what way the class needs to be steered. All I require of a student is that he or she log-on for at least three hours per week, participate in all discussions, submit assignments electronically, call me for their oral quiz, and e-mail, text, or phone me if they have any problems. Students can take more time answering questions, and do quizzes and finals when they feel they are ready. Some students like to get their quizzes over and done with as soon as I post them, whereas others wait until the last few days of term to submit quizzes. People have to be extremely self-disciplined, self-directed, independent, and determined to succeed if they want to get the most out of my Elementary Irish I class.

Online courses offer more individual attention, linking student and teacher in a very strong, positive connection. There is no limit to the amount of questions a student can ask and these can be answered quickly and directly. The students’ opportunity to learn is enhanced by interacting with their fellow classmates via forums, bulletin boards, chat rooms, and mailing lists. When classes are taken on-campus, limited time may prevent such interaction but online students and the instructor can be up-to-date, especially with group projects. Students can post a question and get different view from students in the class. They can also browse material in which they have acquired competency without having to wait for weaker students to catch up; and they can concentrate on areas in which they are particularly weak or find challenging without feeling they are holding the class back.

This world is constantly changing and continuously creating new possibilities, particularly with regard to the Irish language and virtual teaching. Convenience and credit are an exceptional breakthrough and leveler in education. The scope and reach of education broadens the horizons for Irish perhaps more than ever imagined, especially if the student is proficient on computers. Students can check their papers for Irish grammatical errors either on the website An Gramadóir or by using Irish language spelling and grammar software such as Gaelspell. Irish Gaelic Translator is a great site that I always tell my students to visit.

While learning online can be very enjoyable and successful, some students become nervous and fall behind in class because they are not confident enough in their ability to learn online, or perhaps are not diligent enough to put in the required three hours per week. If

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7 Irish Gaelic Translator, http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com
a student never actually gets around to logging on, it can be easy to fall behind as he or she does not have to meet with the instructor. It is important to have an introductory class on what will be expected from both the students and the instructor, and a step-by-step lesson on every aspect of the online course. Students need to realize that online learning is as serious as face to face campus classes. But online classes are very straightforward and students who sometimes might feel intimidated by a professor or by a fellow student are often more confident with e-mail and online learning. One can post an assignment, which can be graded quickly, and the student can get feedback from the professor as well as reading other students’ work with the professor's permission.

Irish is often considered an old-fashioned language so to bring a class online and offer it worldwide brings modernity to it. Students can read and study lectures and listen to audio files as often as they need to, and wherever they go, with laptops, wireless internet, iPods, etc. If they are weak in any particular area, they can easily locate those specific lessons. Repetition is vital when teaching a new language and this technology enables sound bites to be listened to again and again, videos can be paused, and CDs can be brought almost anywhere. People from all corners of the world can come together with the same objective, to learn and study this interesting language. Discussion boards can become very active and all types of students can participate online because they will not feel embarrassed, intimidated or pressured as they might feel if asked to stand up in front of a class to give their opinion or to read aloud.

I think one of the most important things to teach a student of any language is how and where it can be used. There are many websites that promote the use of Irish, building relationships over the internet among students who are interested in the language. There are many sites which have excellent forums relating to all aspects of the Irish language. Daltaí na Gaeilge is an outstanding website for a learner of Irish at any level. It is the main Irish-American site for Irish language learners. They can post questions, inquire about grammar (one of the main concerns when it comes to An Ghaeilge), or browse games, articles, and information about events.

Of course there are some disadvantages to teaching online.

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8 Daltaí na Gaeilge, http://www.daltai.com

Students need to be computer literate and self-disciplined. Some students will use the excuse of their computer being “down”, but it needs to be made clear at the beginning of the course that this will not be tolerated as a repeated excuse for missing assignments. It is vital that students learn from an early stage that everything needs to be backed up in case anything happens to their personal computer. Students often think that they can get away with more because they never have to meet the professor face-to-face, but fail to realize that when they log-on and where they go on the website is monitored; the professor can follow every click the student makes.

Lastly, as Marshall McLuhan wrote, “the medium is the message.” I think this is a good reminder when teaching a new language. Some of the technology I use on the internet involves live discussions forums, videos, online translators, CDs, online grammar correctors, audio files, digital images, PowerPoint presentations, scanners, fax, text messaging, instant messaging, conference calls, printers, and so on. All this technology aids in the teaching of Irish.