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G(r)eeeking out over Online Tech Tools

Max J. Lee, *North Park Theological Seminary*

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We live in exciting times. Even just 10 years ago, the technology to teach the kind of online course that I would dream about was simply unavailable. But not anymore. Today the technical tools needed to teach a course can scale the heights of one's imagination. They are not only available, but affordable for instructors. In this post, I want to geek out over tech tools, especially as they relate to the online Beginning Greek class I am teaching this academic year.

Unicode language keyboards

If students are going to learn a language online, they need a no-hassle way of easily typing its alphabet. I am currently teaching on Canvas but what I say here would apply to Sakai, Blackboard, Moodle, or any other learning management system (LMS). The best keyboard available for most languages is Keyman (latest version 10.0; for Greek, pick the Greek Classical keyboard). It uses unicode (or 'universal encoding'), which means that the keyboardist no longer has to worry about what fonts are installed on a given computer. In *any* font, when you type in Greek or another selected language, the output is consistent. The Greek classical keyboard is especially well-designed, complete with a tutorial and keyboard layout visual. It is available for Windows, macOS, the iPhone, iPad, and Android interfaces, and best yet, it is free. There is even a nice selection of ancient Hebrew keyboard options.

Video production and encoding

As I suggested in my previous blog, the language instructor ultimately needs to create personal instructional videos. I produced over 80 of them (7-10 minutes each) to cover the content of Greek 1 and 2 (two semesters). I quickly discovered that a microphone is more important than a video camera. Audio quality is more important than video quality. Since many universities now require captions with videos, the better the sound, the more accurate are the automated subtitle scripts produced by YouTube and other caption services. I find that I did far less editing of the subtitle scripts when my microphone and sound quality improved.

Here's my advice: invest in a high quality microphone, save on cheaper video cameras. I particularly like the Yeti USB Microphone (\$128.73) for my laptop, but if one is recording off a tablet or phone, the Boya 3.5mm Microphone (\$19.95) is excellent for shutting out background noise. But built-in microphones on your computer and phones are the worst. To avoid echoes and the way-off-in-the-distance muffled sound these produce, get a good microphone. Some decent video cam's include: the Logitech 930 series (\$68.00), or simply use your tablet or smartphone camera.

Once the video is produced, the course designer will need a good editor and encoder. I always want something simple and easy-to-use. Screencast-o-matic is excellent for cutting out video I don't like. I can insert slides, text, photos, and even external video if I wish. It is a subscription service (\$36 for 3 years or \$1/month) and well worth it to save much grief for the less technically savvy person (myself included). It also encodes the video for easy upload onto YouTube, Vimeo, or other video channel sites.

Headset for video conferencing and synchronous teaching

It just takes one. Just one computer with bad feedback on its sound system and the entire video conferencing session is a disaster. Whether using Zoom, Big Blue Button, Skype, or other conferencing tools, getting a headset with microphone and asking your students to buy it are crucial to eliminate screeching distractions. Especially if one meets with a small group tutorial session online, or even a large synchronous classroom setting, having everyone log into the session with a headset will allow all to be heard without nasty feedback or echoes. My recommendation (and it's cheap) is the Mpow USB headset/microphone (\$22.99). I would add the headset as part of the textbook order.

Recommended OER's

Lastly, there are many free open educational resources (OERs, pronounced "oars"). I was surprised to find many good Greek tools online. The United Bible Society, for example, has the entire UBS5 Greek New Testament available for public use. Greek professors often post their own videos and other resources to help students (here's a fantastic one called Daily Dose of Greek). The Perseus project has a parsing engine online for New Testament and other Greco-Roman texts. There is an exciting world of free OERs ready to be employed by the innovative course designer. The tough part is choosing which ones to use, but that is a welcome problem to tackle.

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