ANVILL: Making Speech as Easy to Work with as Text

anvill.uoregon.edu

ANVILL stands for A National Virtual Language Lab, and as its name suggests, it’s a modern web-based replacement for the audio and video consoles of old, which used to be such a prominent part of a high school or university foreign language facility.

This "lab", however, like so many aspects of modern web-based software is eminently portable: any teacher or student with web access (in class, at home, or in the office) can use ANVILL to listen to the news, watch video clips, or submit voice or video-based assignments. That Internet connection and three commonly found pieces of hardware and software are the only tools necessary for ANVILL: a microphone and/or webcam, a modern browser (e.g., Firefox 4x, Safari 5x, Internet Explorer 8x), and Adobe’s Flash Player. Like ANVILL itself, these software tools are free.

With them it’s easy for a teacher to create and assess speech-based tasks, either synchronously using ANVILL’s built in audio-video chat tool, or asynchronously, using ANVILL tools for recording voice or video. What used to be difficult—whether it was with cassettes, CDs, or folders of .mp3 files—collecting and keeping track of all the materials that students in 4 different classes create over the course of a term, ANVILL simplifies and organizes. Students and teacher alike can listen to the resulting media files at their convenience.

One of the core ideas behind ANVILL is that teachers should be able to assemble a web-based les-son or quiz in about the same time that it takes to do so on paper. ANVILL doesn’t make the planning or creative aspect of materials creation any simpler, but we think we’ve made the tools simple enough so that a teacher who wants to assign a video-based lesson for homework that has some pre-listening and post-listening tasks and culminates with some kind of spoken language task to signify comprehension can do so fairly quickly.

Every language class has students of many different abilities—ANVILL can’t change that. What it can do, though, is provide different kinds of practice. Voiceboards, for example, quickly morphs from a listen and repeat audio-only recording tool to a large video recording space for dialog practice. Cooperative activities like jigsaws or webquests can be tailored to meet those diverse needs and still provide a way for everyone to come back together. ANVILL’s "low stakes" quiz and survey tools let teachers assemble media-based assessments, tailored for different students if necessary, where students can respond as easily by speaking as by writing.

Most teachers now agree that technology can help in providing interesting and challenging opportunities for students to interact in the target language. The mistake language labs (and teachers) of the past made was that they emphasized the “sanitization” of language—they broke it down into too many small parts, oversimplified the content, and effectively removed the “authenticity” from the tasks assigned. Today we have perhaps the opposite problem—so much authenticity that
"unteaching" can occur. With its lesson templates and easy tools for editing, ANVILL helps teachers put "digestible" amounts of content in front of students.

Many of us are now teaching "hybrid" classes, ones where significant amounts of student work/practice occur outside of class. One obvious benefit of moving parts of a curriculum into a learning management system like ANVILL's is that not only can a teacher structure her lesson material more precisely, but she can easily find what students produce when it comes time to give feedback. For teachers working in language programs where many as many as five or six instructors are all teaching the same class, software like ANVILL lets teachers share lesson and materials development (and even grading).

**Voiceboards**

Voiceboards (VB) is ANVILL's most popular tool—it adds spoken language to discussions, audio journals, pronunciation exercise and other forms of oral language practice. Like text-based forums, VB allows a teacher to easily post an oral/aural assignment. VB encourages multimedia communication; messages can be text, audio or video-based.

Voiceboards has two modes: one for teachers which allow T's to create VBs, add "topics" to existing VBs, and edit messages that have been posted. The other is for students (pictured at right). Students can create and post their messages, and, of course, read and respond to those of others. Voiceboards is easy to set up and administer—in fact, you can create and publish a voiceboard for your students in about 2 minutes. Students will see the voiceboard as soon as they log in to your ANVILL course; they can begin adding their comments (audio, video, or text) right away.

**Forums**

Blog-like discussion tool (which incorporates multimedia in addition to text). Useful for a variety of web-based discussion tasks: continuation of an in-class discussion, a multimedia response to a cultural prompt, small group work in preparation for a presentation, etc. As with Voiceboards, your students' postings are only available to those in class.

A new addition to Forums (and other content spaces in ANVILL) is TCasts. ANVILL's newest tool for recording and embedding audio or video files. As a teacher, if you want to add comments to a lesson, pose discussion questions, read a story or recite a poem, you can now do it without leaving ANVILL.

There's no need to use a separate audio editor for recording, there's no need to compress or re-size the file, and there's no need to keep track of your recordings—they're all stored in ANVILL, always available to you. In short, TCasting helps you personalize lessons, clarify or comment upon lesson material, and (within the Forum tool) lets your students make audio or video contributions to discussions.

**Livechat**

Livechat is ANVILL's conferencing and tutoring tool. It works similarly to other web-based chat software with the important exception that it is advertising free and designed for audio and video chats as well as text. Access is restricted—only registered course participants can access the chat function. Once an instructor creates chat rooms for his/her class, students can use them for text, audio, and/or video chats. Up to four people can chat at once
(network bandwidth is a consideration for video).

Our initial release of Livechat is especially useful for those students and language programs which make use of native speaking tutors, or conversation partners. Only in this case the tutor can be anywhere provided they have an Internet connection.

**Quizzes and Surveys**

Quizzes and Surveys (Q&S) is ANVILL's tool for the quick production and grading of on-line surveys and quizzes. It is optimized for working with audio and video, so assessments can be media-rich and very personalized.

Besides allowing for media-rich prompts, Q&S makes it easy to go spoken language assessments. Items can be simple and straightforward, “What did you do last weekend?” to detailed and involved: “Watch the following video, listen to the questions that accompany it, and respond to them as if you were addressing an audience of fellow teachers.”

**Lesson Planning Templates**

Templates for audio, video, and images make multimedia authoring easy to do in ANVILL, especially if the media itself is already online. ANVILL media templates make adding audio, video, and images a 3-step process. Many teachers want to take advantage of online video resources like YouTube or TED Talks. ANVILL's video template accommodates both external resources (linked) and a teacher's own personal videos (uploaded).

We’ve just recently added a “response” tool to these templates that also makes it easy for teachers to collect feedback on what students understood from assigned viewing tasks like these.

**Course Management**

ANVILL lets teachers create their own courses and manage who is a member of that class. This is especially useful for language teachers doing distance or hybrid courses. It makes it easy to set up co-teachers so that colleagues can learn and collaborate more readily. And lastly, it lets students work in an on-line environment that is safe and monitored—only fellow classmates (designated by the teacher) can see another’s work.

ANVILL has been under development for almost four years, and currently has almost one thousand teachers using it around the world. ANVILL is generously funded by the Center for Second Language Studies and the Yamada Language Center at the University of Oregon. While it’s dangerous to predict the future about anything in Oregon education these days, it is our intention that this software will always be free to qualified educators.

For more information about any of these tools, please refer to the ANVILL Wiki:

[http://ylclab.uoregon.edu/groups/anvillhelp](http://ylclab.uoregon.edu/groups/anvillhelp)

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