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Duolingo: Online Learning and Collaboration

“The question that motivates my research is, if we can put a man on the Moon with 100,000 [people], what can we do with 100 million?” This question posed by Dr. Luis von Ahn at TEDxCMU in April 2011 is at the core of Duolingo. Duolingo is a project created by Dr. von Ahn, Associate Professor at Carnegie Mellon University aimed at translating the web into every major language, for free, while simultaneously allowing people to learn new languages, also for free, through the use of online collaboration. This project aims to remove language as a barrier to online information, both by providing information in multiple languages (removing English as the dominant language of the web), and also by providing the tools necessary to learn multiple languages. The project empowers populations to access information on the web more readily, while simultaneously enabling users to help others.

This service is free, requiring a computer and internet to access the website. While Duolingo, found at www.duolingo.com, is currently in private beta, users can sign-up via email to be put on a waiting list for an invitation to the site. At present, Duolingo provides language services in both Spanish and German, with French, Italian, and Chinese slated as the next languages to be addressed. The private beta for Duolingo launched at the end of 2011, and thus far, there are over 200,000 users on the waiting list to become translators. Duolingo uses a combination of images, vocabulary, audio, and other engaging educational methodology to appeal to various learning styles.

Duolingo.com is easy to navigate, and it guides the user through language tutorials starting with the very basics. To address concerns that novice language learners do not have the skills to accurately translate sentences, users have the opportunity to rate each other's translations. Finalized sentence translations are not the result of one user's work, but rather the compilation of multiple users. Duolingo also offers the opportunity to dispute translations that a user does not agree with. These elements also help to create an interactive online community. In addition to a Facebook and Twitter presence, there is an additional social media component where Duolingo users can follow similar language learners on the site, which acts as further incentive to log-in for daily practice. Points are earned as a user moves through the levels creating a fun, engaging, and game-like feel to the website. Users can post questions on a forum that are answered by other Duolingo users. A feedback submission form also allows users to send questions or comments directly to the Duolingo team.

Duolingo removes language barriers to online content by allowing users interested in learning languages to translate the web. Thus far, the sentences that have been used on Duolingo's website are from documents protected by Creative Commons licenses, meaning that users are learning through the translations of "real world" content as opposed to artificially constructed sentences designed for educational purposes. This creates higher interest levels for the learners while also benefiting the larger web community. The majority of content on the web is currently in English, which marginalizes non-English speaking web users. The use of automated web translators is typically fairly inaccurate, but the services of a professional translator are quite expensive; Duolingo presents a free and more effective alternative.

As Dr. von Ahn says, "The current business model for language education is the student pays--in particular, the students pays Rosetta Stone \$500. The problem with this business model

is that 95 percent of the world's population doesn't have \$500.” Language learning is skewed to the wealthy creating missed opportunities for other populations that could greatly benefit from learning other languages. Duolingo bridges this gap and removes financial considerations as a large factor. With that said, users still need to have computer and internet access to use the website. This is one of the ways that libraries can make Duolingo part of their services. Because most public libraries have time limit sessions on their computers, having access to a computer at the library may not be sufficient for patrons who want to learn another language. Hosting special “Duolingo” sessions or programming at specific times would allow libraries to introduce patrons to the program and create active language learning communities. Duolingo could be used as the primary material for these sessions, or it could be used as supplemental material for other language lessons. Creating language learning communities is essential when trying to learn a new language because it provides an opportunity to practice the skills learned.

Beyond learning a language, libraries and cultural institutions should encourage use of Duolingo because it promotes large-scale collaboration and demonstrates what is possible when people pull together their collective knowledge, or desire to learn, and focus it on a common good. Language does not have to serve as a barrier between different populations, but too often it does. With the launching of Duolingo, the inequalities of information access on the internet as a result of language barriers could rapidly become a problem of the past. This could also translate to less language barriers in the non-digital world as well. For example, Duolingo has discussed the possibility of receiving submissions of materials for translations in the future. Museums or art galleries could submit exhibit information that is typically only available in English, which the users of Duolingo would translate and suddenly make this information available in other languages. Museums could then have these translations available on their

websites for visitor use, or could also make physical copies for use in the museum itself. The success of the project is to be determined as it is still in the beginning stages, but the concept of collaborative efforts such as this to remedy information barriers is one that is being applied in many cultural institutions and should continue to be advocated for. The possibilities of this project are quite extensive.

References

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