Chisinau Outreach

Online effort boosts English teachers' skills

By Hannah Alberts, former intern, Office of Eastern European Affairs/EUR

The public diplomacy team at the U.S. Embassy in Chisinau has, in the past year, expanded engagement with Moldovan communities through efforts to improve the effectiveness of Moldova's English-language instructors and reach out to educators and students in the nation's breakaway region of Transnistria.

Post's efforts were supercharged by using online programming.

The initiatives to improve the quality of English-language instruction include encouraging Moldovan teachers to incorporate English-language blogging as an instructional tool. The project promotes students' blogging both as a vehicle for English learning and as a key to unlock the wealth of free online teaching aids. The effort also addresses the dearth of technology training in Moldovan schools, where there is no formal training on using such Web tools as blogs, wikis and social networks.

Students and faculty from T.G. Shevchenko Transnistria State University gather at the Tiraspol American Corner to connect virtually with an American scholar, who spoke in a monthly lecture series organized by Embassy Chisinau. *Embassy Chisinau photo*

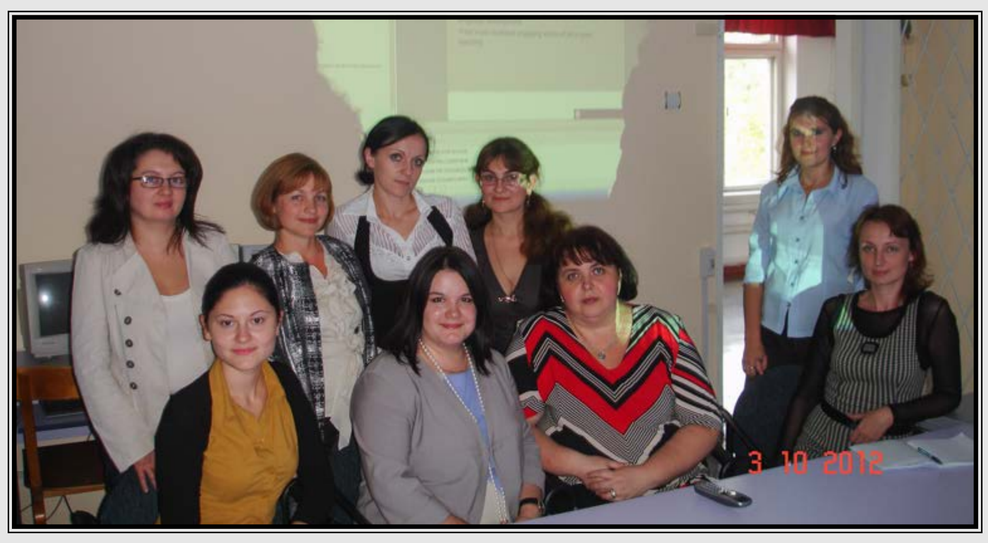
Post's English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Blogging School began with just 24 participants and required only $7,000 in funding. It now involves hundreds of English-language instructors throughout Moldova. During the school's initial six-month session, its local implementer, the American Councils Moldova, used funding from an Innovation Fund for English Language Programs grant to bring together English instructors from 15 Moldovan regions.

Trainers from American Councils, Peace Corps and the Fulbright program used face-to-face and online instruction to instruct Moldovan teachers in how to use blogs and other online tools to enhance learning. The project's hands-on learning environment required participants to put their new skills into practice, and students and instructors interacted primarily through the central project blog and weekly Google Hangouts sessions.

Participants submitted all of their work as blog posts and were encouraged to interact with one another by posting comments and questions on peers' submissions. The assignments often involved interactive activities that brought the teachers' new skills back into their home classrooms. In one assignment, for instance, each teacher organized a video chat between his or her own students and an American mentor. Teachers then shared the results as photo and video slideshows on their classroom blogs and encouraged students to post their personal reflections in the blogs' comments section.

The Blogging School garnered positive reviews from participants. Oxana Cazacu, an EFL teacher in Cimislia, Moldova, spoke of having "learned how to turn from a traditional, boring, old-fashioned teacher into a modern, active and flexible one. I learned about new methods of teaching, new ways to communicate, assess, evaluate, involve and motivate students to learn English interactively." Each teacher took his or her new skills back home, launching a classroom or school blog as the final component of the project.

After completing the EFL Blogging School, the teachers who participated shared their knowledge with other teachers of English from various regions of Moldova at a daylong conference in Chisinau. More than 150 high school and university English-language instructors gained new skills and perspectives on using technology in the classroom. The 24 participating teachers are now sharing their skills with peers back home by launching their own training sessions on blogging as a foreign language teaching tool. Through these hands-on workshops, Blogging School graduates have taught their colleagues how to leverage online platforms to improve students' speaking, reading and writing abilities. In all, more than 200 additional regional teachers throughout Moldova gained experience using online tools to enhance teaching through this initiative. Embassy Chisinau, with American Councils Moldova, will fund a second round of the EFL Blogging School for regional teachers this fall.



Teachers from the Ribnita branch of T.G. Shevchenko Transnistria State University pose before participating in the "Shaping the Way We Teach English" webinar series. *Embassy Chisinau photo*

The embassy's public diplomacy team has also used technology in other successful outreach initiatives, one of which forged connections with teachers and youth in the separatist region of Transnistria, where American engagement is limited. To overcome the difficulties, the post reaches Transnistrian audiences through online programming, such as "Shaping the Way We Teach English," a webinar series.

Begun in 2010, the webinar series, funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, seeks teachers' participation—especially in Transnistria—to improve EFL skills and allow teachers to share experiences and work together across cultural and ethnic boundaries. English-language instructors from T.G. Shevchenko University branches in the Transnistrian cities of Tiraspol and Ribnita have participated in 16 webinars, along with participants from other areas of Moldova and the world.

Also in collaboration with T.G. Shevchenko University, the embassy in March launched a monthly series of in-person and online lectures at the Tiraspol American Corner. The effort was a relationship breakthrough, given the previous bureaucratic red tape and local authorities' unwillingness to engage.

Covering an academic topic of interest to students or professional development for English instructors, the lectures involved American speakers traveling to Tiraspol or speaking via an online connection. The university played a large role in deciding the topics, and the embassy connected with a key audience to discuss American ideas and values. The lectures drew impressive attendance and positive feedback, and will continue in the new academic year, beginning this fall.

Whether seeking to improve English-language instruction in Moldova or establishing relationships with remote audiences, Embassy Chisinau has used technology well. Its online programming has extended public diplomacy's reach via fairly low-cost initiatives and built ties between Americans and Moldovans, and among diverse Moldovan communities. ▫

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