Hilary Fenton
MFA Design & Technology
Thesis Studio 2
Cynthia Lawson & Ethan Silverman
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevator Speech</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept Brief</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impetus Brief</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domains &amp; Precedents</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment Brief</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Personas</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Architecture</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection on Conference Presentation</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“It’s arousing to finally meet you! I’ve heard so much about you.” Paola’s boyfriend says to her mother.

Paola’s mother looks puzzled. “Uhh, thank yo-”

Paola interrupts. “I really hope you mean something else.” She pulls him aside. “Do you know what that word means?”

“I just meant I’m very happy to meet her.”

“Ha, alright we’ll have to work on your Spanish. ‘Excitante’ is sort of like arousing.”

“Oh god, no no no I only meant-”

“Good, well now you know.”

Speaking a foreign language can feel like a constant challenge, particularly if it’s not used on a daily basis. Before Paola’s boyfriend was corrected he was quite pleased to have even remembered how to say excited. Being corrected was embarrassing but it reminded him of the importance of native speakers. Converso is an online chat network for foreign language speakers. It assists foreign language speakers in maintaining their fluency by connecting them to compatible language partners for conversation. Converso’s audience consists primarily of people who have studied a foreign language at the college level but do not currently have access to native speakers. The online setting allows users to connect directly at whichever time is convenience. In Converso chats are broken up in to two sections, one for each language so that both parties can practice. The world of online language communities involves a number of different programs most of which are aimed at teaching. Converso’s goal is to help speakers maintain a long term connection with native speakers so that valuable skills aren’t lost. It promotes quality interactions by consistently prompting users for feedback on their language partners and rewarding positive experiences with a high rating. There are also quizzes, chat assistance widgets and labeling for dialect speakers. Finally all discussions are based on personal interests so that speakers can get past the mechanics of language and focus on the content of their conversations.
Elevator Speech

Have you ever learned a language and then forgotten it years later? Have you studied abroad and then come back to find that no one in your community speaks the language you’ve been immersed in? Converso is an online chat network for foreign language speakers. It assists them in maintaining their fluency by connecting them to compatible language partners around the world. The pairings are set up to be mutually beneficial. For example, Patty recently returned from a year in Siena, Italy. She lives in Connecticut and can’t find any Italians in her city. Once she joins Converso she can connect with Paola who’s in Milan but studied in New York two years earlier. Together they can practice their foreign languages, maintain a connection to the other culture and become part of an international community.
"It's arousing to finally meet you! I've heard so much about you." Paola's boyfriend says to her mother.

Paola's mother looks puzzled. “Uhh, thank yo-”

Paola interrupts. “I really hope you mean something else.” She pulls him aside. “Do you know what that word means?”

“I just meant I’m very happy to meet her.”

“Ha, alright we’ll have to work on your Spanish. ‘Excitante’ is sort of like arousing.”

“Oh god, no no no I only meant-”

“Good, well now you know.”

Speaking a foreign language can feel like a constant challenge, particularly if its not used on a daily basis. Before Paola's boyfriend was corrected he was quite pleased to have even remembered how to say excited. Being corrected was embarrassing but it reminded him of the importance of native speakers. Converso is an online chat network for foreign language speakers. It assists foreign language speakers in maintaining their fluency by connecting them to compatible language partners for conversation. Converso’s audience consists primarily of people who have studied a foreign language at the college level but do not currently have access to native speakers. It’s goal is to help speakers maintain a long term connection with native speakers so that valuable skills aren’t lost. It promotes quality interactions by consistently prompting users for feedback on their language partners and rewarding positive experiences with a high rating. There are also quizzes, chat assistance widgets and location labeling to account for heavy dialects. All discussions are based on personal interests so that speakers can get past the mechanics of language and focus on the content of their conversations.

According to the Modern Language Association (MLA) the number of college students studying a foreign language in the United States increased by 17% from 2002 to 2007. The number of Americans studying abroad has also increased with four times as many U.S. students participating in study abroad in 2007/08 than in 1987/88. Also many people have taken to learning a foreign language online with a number of the different services that are available.

In the world of online language learning there are a number of services available both commercial and public. There are a few different language learning applications focused around peer to peer instruction with social networking. Busuu.com, Livemocha.com, LingQ and Hello Hello are all based around a social network with live chatting capabilities. In my experience with these sites I found that because there is no academic requirement to become a member, neither user has any idea what quality level will be upheld. In Converso I countered
this by assessing the user’s skill level in a number of ways. Initially when joining the user is given a quiz to assess their current level. Then every month they receive a new quiz to track their progress. These scores contribute to the user’s Converso status, which is apparent to other users and increases the incidence of new users adding them as a buddy. The Converso status can be increased in a number of ways. When a user is rated highly by their buddy after a chat, when a user received a positive review on their wall by another user, and when a user recommends another user. The system puts emphasis not only on an increase in personal skill but also giving a receiving feedback through the system.

Another issue with these applications is the lack of consistency between members. The origin of the language partners isn’t apparent which makes it difficult to predict whether they speak with a heavy accent or dialect. When users join Converso they are asked in depth questions about their language abilities, slang use and preferred origin for native speakers. This can be a particular problem with Spanish when regional variances are common and dramatic. When a user is joining Converso they are asked where their foreign language instructor was from and which accent they are most accustomed to. Their location and place of birth are also taken in to account when pairing with other members. Another problem with any public community is the potential for inappropriate content. It can effect the network’s reputation and drive users away if not handled properly. The commercial sites are often able to avoid this problem simply because a small investment deters those uninterested in real learning. This is another function of Converso’s rating system, to filter out negative experiences and promote positive ones. Peers are able to rate each other negatively or flag users for inappropriate conduct which alerts the administrator.

Most of the commercial sites that are available work off of a similar framework. Italki.com, EduFire.com and mangolanguages.com all have an eBay like market place of language instructors that will instruct a user online for an hourly fee. You can pick and choose different instructors based on price, user reviews or specialty. The instructors are usually native speakers so these work well for guided conversations and tutoring. The rating systems for instructors are reliable and entirely user generated. They are an effective method of self-governance and certainly inspired me to develop the rating system for Converso.

Other commercial-based online language learning applications are Fluenz and Rosetta Stone. Fluenz uses instructor videos to teach adults the mechanics of the language while Rosetta Stone works with repetition and images. These two brands of software are marketed to professionals, and viewed as a replacement for the traditional class. Rosetta Stone in particular has received great critical acclaim and commercial success. I view Converso as a great tool for Rosetta Stone users that enables them to situate their new skills in real world interaction.
There is an array of language learning tools available for all learners and levels. After researching these different applications and tools, it became clear that the core of Converso, live conversation with native speakers, is the key to maintaining proficiency over time. The applications and networks I described leave fluency maintenance up to the user. Converso is the only tool specifically aimed at building relationships for long-term engagement in the target language.

A Converso user’s homepage encapsulates much of the functionality. On the top menu bar there are links to user’s inbox, calendar, and account. Converso has an internal messaging system so that users can send personal messages to one another, as well as be notified of new quizzes and administrative information. Every user also has a calendar that allows them to make chatting appointments. If a buddy requests an appointment with them they will be notified through their calendar. The account link is there so that users can edit their information as they develop new interests.

The video on the left is a featured video put up for that particular language by the administrator as a sample for users to get ideas from. Below the featured video is the discussion board which is open to all the speakers of that particular language. It is a way to ask questions, start discussions, and find new friends. The tabs sort it by language so that users are consciously stepping out of the immersive experience when they want to speak one of their other languages. The top right box is the main focus of Converso, the buddy list. Buddies are ranked according to who’s online and rated highly. You’ll notice the small code coded faces in the top right corner of a few of the buddy boxes. Every username links to their profile page and the icons below it allow the user to begin a chat, send a message or request an appointment. Those that are offline are not available for chatting. Below the buddy list is a small widget that constantly looks for compatible friends so that once you’ve joined you’ll continue to expand your network.

If the user were to check their inbox they might discover that a new quiz is available. The link in the message will take them to the new quiz which they may take to increase their converso status. After taking the quiz the user might decide to make an appointment with a buddy that is offline. Perhaps the user then decides to start a chat with a different buddy. The chat window has a few features to make chatting more rewarding for the user. The two widgets attached to the live video are a quick translator for difficult words and a selection of sample conversation to reference. These tools are convenient but a bit cumbersome so that speakers don’t end up relying on them. The chat can also be altered according to what the users feel more comfortable with. Audio and video can be turned off for audio, video or text only chats. Once the chat is closed the user is prompted with a survey about the chat. It asks the user whether they liked the chat, whether they would
chat with them again, if they were helpful, etc. The last question is if they would like to write a recommendation on the buddy’s wall. If they clicked yes they would then be taken to that user’s profile page (image7) to write the recommendation which would increase that user’s converso status.

Additional functionality will be added as the project moves through different phases of user testing.
Impetus Brief

The initial concept for Converso grew out of my own experience of learning Italian. I didn’t excel at Italian until I was immersed. Once Italian became my only way to interact with the people around me, I was inspired to hone my skills. When someone is immersed in their target language it becomes a tool essential to their daily life, without it they have no way to communicate with the outside world. For me social interaction was the incentive and the language was the tool. It started with communicating basic needs then progressed to choosing the most appropriate way to convey an idea or opinion. When I was finally able to have meaningful discussion with Italians it was incredible rewarding. I felt a strong connection to the culture and finally understood so much of what I had been observing. Once I reached that level of fluency it was time to return home. I realized very quickly how difficult it would be to find any Italian speakers let alone those that could meet with me frequently enough to maintain my fluency. Many of my classmates also traveled abroad and felt the experience was a formative one. They too had difficulty finding language partners and with every forgotten word felt their cultural connection slip further and further away.

Years later I started a graduate program in New York City. I was amazed at the large number of international students in my program. I would often hear several different languages as I walked down the hall. The more I talked with them about their language abilities the more I realized that the most successful speakers have had ongoing engagement in the target language. It may come through family members, international schools, or clubs but it always involved constant practice. I then began reading about fluency maintenance and posed the question to myself “How can I help foreign language speakers maintain their fluency once they’ve lost access to native speakers?”
Domains and Precedents

Native speakers draw attention to sociocultural dimensions such as the appropriate contexts for formal and informal language. In individual interactions, they can assist with pronunciation and grammatical errors. Most importantly native-speaking peers assist the foreign speaker with a psychological connection to the target culture. This is the biggest factor in fluency maintenance. Frequent positive and constructive feedback, discussions around personal interests, and a comfortable setting also contribute to fluency maintenance. Native speakers are an essential part to mastering any language. In fact people usually lose their fluency when they are not exposed to them. In the academic world teachers utilized email, text chatting and videoconferencing to connect students with native speakers. These tools focus on a few different aspects of language acquisition primarily the use of formal and informal language, and cultural appropriateness.

Belz and Kinginger’s study on address form use in tele-collaborative language learning utilized email correspondence and text based online chatting. It aimed to teach students the proper context for formal and informal distinction in pronouns in both French and German. This is known as the tu/vous distinction in French and the du/Sie distinction in German. All email correspondence was forwarded to the professor for archiving and used to track students’ progress. The study focused on informal vs formal language use because of its social complexity. Formality and informality are determined by social constructs and culture, the language is merely an expression of the context. When learning out of context i.e. outside of the country, the rules can be challenging for a foreigner. Belz (2002, 189) explains that because the rules are so cultural they must be experienced by the students as they explore different contexts. She explains below how the ‘rules’ depend on the situation.

“because of their social complexity, the ‘rules’ for their use cannot be codified: the choice of address form can index, at the same time, either aspects of the local interaction (e.g. friendly chat vs. formal interview)...”

The rules of formality and thus T/V distinction are better learned from a native speaker. Another study that utilized email exchange, Kern(1996, 105), this time for the exploration of personal histories, revealed that valuable language rules were learned through social interaction.

“In light of the complexity of address form use, it is assumed that participation in relevant social interaction where issues of personal identity are at stake, plays an important role in learners’ discovery of the significance of address form choice.”
Drawing upon personal experience I found that the desire to create a personal identity while studying in Italy drove me to not only ask for feedback but to constantly build a richer vocabulary. Once I understood the culturally appropriate uses for formal and informal language I was able to make more of my own choices. I knew what was expected but also what I could alter to fit my personality. The mistakes I did make were usually corrected in one on one interactions. This was also the case for Jennifer, an American college student in Belz’s study (2002, 191). She made mistakes in her correspondence with Victor, a French graduate student. The mistakes were not overtly incorrect in the grammatical sense but were inappropriate for a native speaker, something the professor may not have been able to catch. Luckily, with the individual attention given to her by Victor, Jennifer’s mistakes reduced in number. Here is Victor’s response to the first email:

“As an addendum, he commented about Jennifer’s use of the pronouns of address. PS: take care, if you use ‘tu’ in your mail, use ‘ta’ or ‘ton’ or ‘tes’ instead of ‘votre’ or ‘vos’... It’s not a big mistake, but any French person may see it.”

Text-based exchanges provide many opportunities for miscommunication. Video can counteract this by giving a face and personality to interactions making them more natural. To many people questions and answers demonstrate a mutual give and take. Each participant in the process is fulfilled because they are able to give and receive feedback.

Another part of understanding formal vs. informal settings is with non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and hand gestures. Yamada’s (2009, 830) study on social presence in online language learning used video conferencing as a tool for ESL students exchanging with native English speakers. The study found that the video element assisted students with comprehension.

“Non-verbal cues promote comprehensive communication between learners in a second language...Image and voice raises learners’ consciousness of natural communication as it brings about a situation that is similar to a face-to-face one.”

The role of native speakers in teaching a language is equally important if not more to maintaining fluency. At a workshop for French teachers at the University of Denver Prof. Susan Colville-Hall (1995, 994) narrowed down what in particular can aid speaker comfort and memory recall. She quickly discovered that focusing sessions around the personal interests of the speakers helped reduce speaking anxiety. This is another reason for Converso’s focus on personal interests in chat sessions. Buddies are matched based on language proficiency and
personal interests so that users focus on conversation content rather then getting hung up on exact phrasing. The subject pushes the user forward by giving them an end goal. The individual attention that is granted with video chatting also reduces anxiety about public speaking. Converso is for dialogs not performances.
Converso is an online chat network for foreign language speakers. It assists foreign language speakers in maintaining their fluency by connecting them to compatible language partners for conversation. The project was initially inspired by my own experience studying abroad in Italy but grew through my meetings with language professors, educational technology specialists and foreign language speakers.

Concept Validation:

Developing a tool for foreign language speakers involves a long research process. I initially proposed the project as a classroom tool but found through research that the platform was better suited to the general public. I interview three language instructors about how to design the network to effectively assist speakers.

The questions that were asked:

What do your students typically learn from video?
Is there a particular learner level that is better suited for this technology?
What learning goals could be used with this technology?
Why are language students often shy about speaking?
How often do you use technology in your classroom and what do you use?
Are you a part of any social networks?
-which ones and why

Results of the interviews:

Armanda Lewis
Armanda received her BA in French and Spanish from Rice University and her doctorate from Columbia's Department of Spanish and Portuguese (PhD, 2007). She has taught Spanish language and Latin American literature at Columbia University, Rice University and the Spence School. Armanda recently completed New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program (MPS, 2009). She currently focuses on projects in the digital humanities, specifically researching and developing technological tools and applications which facilitate the teaching and learning of foreign languages and literatures.
I was lucky enough to interview Armanda about Converso and what it could bring to the language classroom. Armanda has always enjoyed using technology in the classroom as a way to teach more effectively and efficiently. She has used iTunes U, interactive white boards, music and dvds in her classroom. Video has always been well received in her classroom and she was curious about how else it could be used. When asked her about the typical learning goals associated with video she said that it helps with many things but especially real time comprehension. The multi-sensory nature of it forces students to pay close attention. Also because Converso can be accessed online it would engage them outside of class.

Armanda’s main concern when teaching is that students avoid practicing outside of class. For her, the connection to native speakers is secondary to the community within the class. Her ideal activity would be for students in her class to chat with native speakers together. For beginner students she thought it would be important to have scaffolded activities such as mad libs or formulated dialogues. Beginners don’t have the vocabulary that more advanced students and it can be difficult for them to create from scratch. She was very interested in beginners creating their own content to keep them motivated when their abilities are limited. Native speakers that are directing their discussions to beginners should be given suggestions about how to converse with them, i.e. what slang or tense or avoid. In terms of navigation through postings she would like to see check boxes in instead of drop downs so multiple categories can be selected.

_Arianna Choi_

Arianna is currently pursuing a masters in Sociology & Education at Columbia University. She taught Adult ESL for a number of years in South Korea. She used social networks to stay in touch with friends but never found one appropriate for her class. Her use of technology in the classroom was rather limited although there was adequate access. Her classes consisted of mainly formal grammar exercises with some recorded audio for pronunciation. Her classroom would use Converso more as a way to engage with native speakers than create a community within the class. Many of her students asked about idiomatic expressions which are a perfect discussion topic for Converso.

_Skye MacLeod_

Skye MacLeod is currently a producer at Aftered.tv a division of the EdLab at Columbia University. Before becoming a filmmaker Skye taught adult ESL in Cape Verde and New York
City. He has worked with students from a variety of backgrounds and is still active in the ESL instructors community.

When teaching Skye used a variety of technologies especially when creating class projects. His advanced students spent the end of their semester creating a web magazine entirely in their target language complete with articles, videos and even podcasts. Skye made some of the same suggestions as Armanda. He suggested creating scaffolded activities for beginners especially for live chatting. He also mentioned that when dealing with adult learners there might be a problems with 'affect' meaning the self-consciousness adults feel when seeing or hearing themselves in their target language. Skye emphasized the importance of fostering a warm community that offers constructive feedback not harsh criticism. When learning a language adults need lots of feedback which is where video can be incredible helpful as long as it doesn’t make them feel vulnerable. Skye suggested a function where students could request constructive feedback instead of always receive it. He thought that once the prototype is well developed it would be helpful if Converso tracked your interests.

The suggestions I received from these interviews directly effected Converso’s feature set. These instructors inspired me to design the rating system, the widgets available during chat sessions. and the survey system. I especially became interested in Skye’s description of ‘affect’ which is the main reason that I decided to exclude the view of oneself so common in chat applications. Converso users need to be entirely focused on their conversation buddy, and the video of oneself only adds to the insecurity users feel when speaking a foreign language.

To narrow down more specifics of Converso’s feature set I surveyed about 50 people representative of the target audience. 82% of those surveyed were between 20 and 30 years old, and 59% were female. 57% of users said they would use the service between 1-3 times a week which is part of what inspired me to create a calendar system for chats. If users wanted to chat at a regular time each week it would be helpful to see if a specific partner is always available at that time. This helps foster relationships with specific partners strengthening the user’s connect to the target culture, a element essential to long term fluency. The users were also asked to rank their preferred method of communication, i.e. video chatting, text chatting, video posts, or text posts. Video and text chatting tied for the most preferred method of communication with video and text posts trailing behind. Because video and text chatting were equal in popularity I thought it was important to allow for flexibility which is why users are able to turn video and audio on or off. The last question users were asked was their platform preference. 65% percent preferred a stand alone site trumping the 40% interested in a
facebook application. This maybe developed at a later date once the stand alone site has reached a certain level of popularity.

**Look and Feel**

There have been a number of iterations already starting from March of 2009. The project was originally titled Videomail and the layouts have changed as the functionality was refined. (image8)

Students found the colors too overwhelming with video and the background texture distracting. The title was changed to communicate language learning and conversation. The next iteration was entitled Converso and involved some of the elements of a network. The dots on the logo were meant to emphasize the question and answer format of the videos. This iteration was created in April of 2009. (image9)

The following iteration was created in July of 2009 when the prototype was being developed at EdLab, a educational technology lab at Teachers College at Columbia University. This design did not involve a network but was instead a video browsing tool that better fit EdLab’s need to sync with Moodle courseware. The three drop downs were created as the main tools for users to browse through videos making it important for the graphics to emphasize them. (image10)

The graphic design team at EdLab suggested a more vibrant color palette with a modern font. Together we played with contrasting colors to make the design more inviting. This iteration ended up competing too much with the colors of the video and deterred users from staying on page for long periods.

This layout was presented at the fall midterm and distracted users from the core functionality. It still didn’t represent the concept or community well. It seemed unrelated to Converso’s goal. After this I decided to map out the interaction without any graphics then work separately on the logo. If the logo was successful then the other graphic elements would need only to support it. I began by trying out other color palettes and adding two faces that could emphasize the dialogue that occurs in Converso. The feedback I received from my studio class was to forget about color for a while and simply focus on making the logo compelling in black and white. I then got assistance from Jessica Klein, a fellow student and illustrator, with making the face look more like o’s (image11).

I started with a plain color palette and as I continued to work on the layout I brought in little bits of color until I felt ready to pick the color palette. The form of the logo was difficult to narrow down because it had to exude a human element without looking too playful and while still conveying the site’s function. (images12, 13, 14)

**Layout**
When I first began to sketch out what I wanted the Converso site to look like I wanted the buddy list to be the main feature so that members are always focused on chatting. I decided to go with the buddylist because it was so recognizable as a chat format. Once I had the buddylist as a permanent fixture I had to figure out what network elements to feature on the homepage. The examples on the left play around with a few different ideas, a general wall and news feed. In the next iteration I tried a news feed of buddy recommendations but users found it to be kind of arbitrary and uninteresting (images15, 16, 17).

I wanted users to be inspired to engage in the community so in my next version I put the discussion board front and center with modules for each topic. (images18, 19) Although this was a step in the write direction and the feedback I received was positive about the content, the layout was too busy. This iteration didn’t focus the user’s attention on anything in particular but instead sort of bombarded them with a lot at once. Another comment I got on this iteration is that the flags to the right of each buddy were not helpful. Only a handful of people could identify the flags while most just found them visually distracting.

I decided to consult a professional graphic designer before proceeding to the next iteration so that I could get advice on hierarchical structures. I wanted the homepage to have a clear focus point and intuitive navigation through the ever growing feature set. I now had to fit in sample discussion videos along with the discussion boards and sort them all by topic. Also the language of a user’s homepage could now be switched at the drop with a drop-down menu. This allowed me to continue dividing the discussions by topic rather than language. In order to bring hierarchy we placed the feature video at the top and pushed down the buddy list and recent discussion thread. A top navigation bar was also added that gave the user access to their inbox, calendar and account settings. Each buddy was given a chat, message and request appointment link in their box along with a star icon if they were rated highly. (images20, 21).

This iteration really established the building blocks for the final (image1). It involved mainly branding and iconographic changes as well as another change to make the buddy list more prominent. The buddies are still categorized by language but are also ranged by their Converso status and availability. The featured video is now determined by the administrator to make sure a high level of quality is maintained so there is no need to browse through featured videos. This means that the featured video doesn’t have to take up the width of screen and the buddy list can move up again to a more prominent position. A clearer hierarchy was also established within the discussion board with color coding and indenting. The movement of the main page elements allowed for the last edition of suggested buddies box below the buddy list.
User Personas

Michelle
Michelle is a 28 year old medical student in her residency living in Boston. She loves to travel and has studied in both Costa Rica and India. She also spent a year as a Fulbright Scholar in Madrid. She is fluent in Spanish and speaks conversational Nepali. She is one of the few Spanish speaking residents at her hospital and ends up diagnosing most of the hospital’s hispanic patients. To her the structure of a language is important but not as important as the content of the conversation so she speaks very directly. Unfortunately this directness does not always serve her well when giving difficult news to patients. She wants to improve her use of conditionals and learn more specific medical vocabulary. She heard about Converso from a college friend in the tech industry and thought it might help. As a slight techno-phobic she had to be assured by her friend that it was easier than Facebook. She feels a little uncomfortable about video chatting with a stranger so her first chat is text only. She is suspicious of male strangers and prefers talking with women so her buddy list consists mainly of women. She doesn’t really like broadcasting her information so she rarely records and posts her conversations. She looks at the information on the message boards but doesn’t comment. She uses Converso solely for chatting, although if there were a system that tracked user progress she might enjoy it. She has a competitive personality and enjoys receiving positive feedback. She starts by using Converso every few weeks, then once she has a few favorite members she uses it twice a week. Her conversations were initially around 20 minutes long but now they are around 40 minutes.

Lowry
Lowry is a 50 year old Finance Director at a software company outside of San Francisco, CA. He studied German in college but hasn’t spoken it in well over twenty years. The company he works for was just bought by a corporation headquartered in Germany. He is now the liaison to the Munich office and wants to brush up on basic conversation to demonstrate support for the new partnership. He’s been listening to German tapes during his commute but would like to get some practice with real Germans before his trip to Munich. He considers himself tech savvy but has little experience with video chatting. He feels comfortable with social networks having used Linked In for recruiting. He found out about Converso through a friend that did some financial consulting for them. He looks at the message boards before he starts chatting with someone to get some ideas on what to talk about. He is used to introducing himself to strangers for
networking so he feels little anxiety about the process. He looks at the whole experience as an experiment. He enjoys meeting new people and hearing about their experiences but is very goal driven. His conversations are very to the point. He uses Converso once every few weeks, usually before his conference calls with the Munich office. He conversations last about 20 minutes.

John
John is a 21 year old senior at the University of Chicago. He just spent a year on an exchange in Osaka and was very sad to leave. Raised in Iowa, John loves how complex and utterly foreign the Japanese culture is to him. While studying there he was in touch with a private English school that offered him a teaching position following his graduation. He is ecstatic about returning and joins Converso to maintain his fluency level. He doesn’t want to loose any of his newly attained skills. He is meticulous about his word choice and relishes the new etiquette challenges that come with interacting with strangers. He also asks all of his Japanese friends to join Converso. He is familiar with social media and video chatting though he wouldn’t consider himself a ‘tech enthusiast’. He’s a member of facebook and used video gChat to speak with his family while in Japan. He is however an avid Converso user and frequently posts his conversations on the message board along with commenting on others. For John the subject matter is the driving force. He wants to constantly engage in the Japanese language. He uses Converso everyday. When he first began his conversations often lasted an hour but after midterms his conversations went down to about 30 minutes.

Josefina Valdez
Josefina is a 30 year old graduate student in Mexico City. She is studying economic development with a focus on Central America. She has a particular attachment to Nicaragua having spend her summers there as a child while her father volunteered as a doctor for a collection of clinics. She is a bit formal and academic when first introduced to people but becomes much engaging when talking about her work. She is applying for several Ph.D programs in the U.S.and getting nervous about the upcoming interviews. Though she has professors to talk with at university, she wants reassurance that she sounds articulate to an American. She joins Converso in the hope that she’ll find a highly educated American that can help her. She logs in to Converso once a week and usually posts her conversations to a message board hoping for feedback. She adds Michelle as a buddy when she joins after she sees that she is a medical student.
Aksel Zettler
Aksel is a 27 year old web developer in Berlin. He loves facebook, twitter and other social media so he heard about Converso when it showed up on digg.com. He has recently started dating an American woman and wants to surprise her with the occasional idiom. He tries out Converso on his lunch break and finds a post made by Lowry. He is appalled at the pronunciation but enjoys his personality, so he adds Lowry as a friend and makes a comment on the posting. They chat later week and when Aksel offers his girlfriend a mimosa that Sunday at brunch he says “a little ‘hair of the dog’?”.

Mariko Nakamura
Mariko is a 19-year-old college student in Nara. She is studying International Relations and though she excels in her English class she has little experience with speaking. She finds American pop culture fascinating and wants to talk to someone her age about it. She is nervous about talking to a stranger so she selects mainly buddies that speak Japanese. She hears about Converso from her friend who studied in New York. He uses it to stay in touch with his American friends and keep up with his English. When she first joins she chats only with text but after she becomes comfortable with John she begins chatting with audio and eventually video. She uses Converso once a week usually for about an hour. She makes comments on the Japanese postings and watches everything made about American culture.
Reflection on Conferences and Workshops

Presenting at the Adobe Partners by Design Annual Meeting was a fantastic learning experience. I felt very flattered to have been chosen to present to such an esteemed group of educators. The other presentations were focused on design curriculum and showcased a very polished collection of student work. I enjoyed comparing the presentation tactics used by the professors. Some chose to integrate video in to their presentation as well as interactive flash demos. Most presenters stuck to a standard power point format but tried to liven it up with the the slick, creative student work. I was surprised that there was so much focus on the technological and visual aspects of the projects. Although the project presented were impressive they didn’t necessarily discuss the concept behind them and their need. I walked away from the conference appreciative of the conceptual development I was able to do for Converso.

The feedback was interesting and not completely unlike the feedback I received from students in my class. It was hard for the professors to critique details about the interaction because it hadn’t full evolved yet but the concept really sparked their interest. I got a lot of suggestions about where the project could be used. One professor suggested using it as a means to preserve language, particularly those of native american populations. Another professor stressed the importance of usability and its integration in to existing platforms. A few different professors commented on the need to refine the interface.

Receiving the grant from EdLab at Columbia this summer made me have a lot more confidence in the ideas and concepts behind Converso. I’ve had difficulty with discussing a project in its development stages because the options are still so open. When its an individual project there is no team directing it one way or another so the decisions ultimately rest on you. This has felt like a mixed blessing because on the one hand you have all this freedom but on the other you have all this advice from people that can send you a thousand different directions. For me Converso has been a process of figuring out how to rationalize every decision every decision I make according to the information I have received. It's difficult to stand firm in your ideas when you can only make educated guesses about what will happen.
Sources


Taumoeifoalau, Melenaite; Starks, Donna; Davis, Karen; Bell, Alan. “Linguists and Language Maintenance: Pasifika Languages in Manukau, New Zealand” Oceanic Linguists, (2002) v41 no.1 p15-27


