

Chapter 4.13

Communicative Networking and Linguistic Mashups on Web 2.0

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the application of a range of Web 2.0 technologies to language education. It argues that Web 2.0 is fundamentally about networking, community building, and identity negotiation. Given the textual nature of the Web, all of this is made possible primarily through the medium of language. Consequently, Web 2.0 is ideally suited to the teaching of language and literacy. To be most effective, this requires a broadly social constructivist pedagogical approach as well as a willingness to work with the messy reality of linguistic “mashups,” the hybrid uses of languages, codes, and media which inform Web 2.0.

INTRODUCTION

There continues to be widespread confusion and apprehension about the effects of the Internet and new technologies on education. Recent discussions of the web in versions ranging from 1.0 to 3.0 have done little to alleviate this situation, with at least one spurious reference to Web 6.0 (Motteram & Ioannou-Georgiou, 2007) making the point that labels and numbers are not the important thing. However, a

glance at Web 1.0 and Web 3.0 can be helpful in an understanding of Web 2.0, the term popularized by Tim O'Reilly through the first Web 2.0 Conference in 2004 (O'Reilly, 2005) and now commonly used to describe the current state of the web.

The retrospective term Web 1.0 refers to the initial *information-oriented web*, authored by a small number of people for a very large number of users. Consisting mainly of static webpages, it offered little room for interactivity. Educational uses largely fell into two categories: information retrieval (as in webquests) or rote training (drill exercises). While there were some clear benefits in terms of student autonomy, use of authentic materials and exposure to multiliteracies, and while problem-based learning and guided discovery approaches to Web 1.0 were not unknown, it was most often used in ways corresponding to traditional transmission or behaviourist models of pedagogy.

Web 3.0, a speculative term describing a possible future version of the web, refers most commonly to the *semantic web*, where software agents will collate and integrate information to give intelligent responses to human operators, and/or the *geospatial web*, where location will be used to index information. These are, however, long-term projections, whose educational implications are impossible to assess at present.

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In between is the presently dominant Web 2.0, also known as the *social web*, which comprises a loose grouping of newer generation social technologies whose users are actively involved in communicating and collaborating with each other as they build connections and communities across the world, negotiating their online identities in the process. What happened, as Davies puts it, was that “society got more technical while software got more social” (2003, p. 5). The 2007 Horizon Report describes Web 2.0’s social networking sites as being “fundamentally about community” (New Media Consortium, 2007, p. 12), while Jimmy Wales (2007), founder of Wikipedia, has linked Web 2.0 to the new digital literacies concerned with “inclusion, collaboration and participation”. In brief, Web 2.0 technologies, from blogs and wikis through social networking sites and folksonomies to podcasting and virtual worlds, are all about communicative networking. Such networking is likely to become increasingly important as a digital native ethos takes over from a digital immigrant one (Prensky, 2001), as more technologies become available to those with little specialist expertise in IT, and as today’s technologies converge to form ever more versatile hybrids.

Web 2.0 has many applications in education, both current and potential, but its greatest impact may well be in subjects which foreground language and communication. After all, given the textual nature of the web, all the connections made online and all the communities established there are enabled primarily through the medium of language. As a result, for language and literacy educators, the advent of Web 2.0 presents great opportunities: to decentralize the role of the classroom (Coleman, 2007), escape the language lab, and engage with the younger generation of digital natives on their own territory. It is a territory whose geography is forged through language and whose key navigation tools are literacies. Teachers can help their students develop greater language competence and additional linguistic tools to navigate Web 2.0, as the students engage in the process of making

connections, building communities and shaping their own self-representations online. In this way, language and literacy educators can play a key role in the collaborative enterprise that is Web 2.0. It is important to acknowledge, however, that effective use of Web 2.0 requires a rethinking of approaches to literacy and pedagogy which may have traditionally seemed unproblematic, but which are less than ideally suited to the new on-line environment — or the wider world in which it is embedded.

This chapter begins by examining recent changes in conceptions of literacy and pedagogy which may enable educators to better frame their use of Web 2.0. It then goes on to discuss common Web 2.0 tools and their applications to language education, focusing firstly on collaborative technologies such as discussion boards, blogs and wikis; secondly on social networking technologies; thirdly on information linking technologies like folksonomies and RSS; and fourthly on cutting-edge technologies such as podcasting, m-learning and virtual worlds. Finally, the chapter explores some of the main limitations of Web 2.0 in education, in a discussion which ranges across pedagogical, social, sociopolitical and philosophical issues. Drawing these threads together, the conclusion offers recommendations for language and literacy educators who wish to use Web 2.0 more extensively in their teaching.

CHANGING LITERACIES AND PEDAGOGIES

It has been clear for some time that traditional print literacy alone is no longer sufficient to allow people to operate effectively in society. Web 2.0 greatly exacerbates the problematical aspects of this situation. As a result, there is an urgent need to pluralize the concept of literacy, as has been claimed in recent work on *literacies* and *multiliteracies* (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kist, 2004; Street, 1994;

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