

Chapter 4.15

A Context-Based Approach to Web 2.0 and Language Education

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ABSTRACT

Web 2.0 offers potentially powerful tools for the field of language education. As language teacher tutors exploring Web 2.0 with participants on an MA in Educational Technology and TESOL at the University of Manchester, UK, we see that the potential of Web 2.0 is intimately linked with teachers' perceptions of their teaching contexts. This chapter will describe a "context-based" approach to the exploration of Web 2.0 on a module focusing on the potential role of distributed courseware in language education. It will begin by giving an overall picture of where and how the exploration of Web 2.0 tools fits into the MA program. It will then describe the main aims and aspects of the module and discuss in some detail our context-based approach in relation to participants as well as Web 2.0 in existing literature. The chapter will conclude with two case studies concerning how teachers incorporate Web 2.0 technologies in courseware for their contexts.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-190-2.ch007

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the way that participants on a module run as part of an MA in Educational Technology and TESOL learn about, make use of and evaluate Web 2.0 technologies. This module is a new departure for the course and represents the ongoing need for the MA to refresh itself and to bring new and developing technologies into its domain.

Web 2.0 has its advocates and its detractors; however, it has become a *de facto* part of today's Internet landscape. The very nature of Web 2.0, its emphasis on such features as collaboration, interactivity and user-generated content, seems to make it an obvious choice for a focus of discussion when it comes to looking at current trends in the use of technology in language education. These trends, as shall be later discussed, reflect a focus on learner centered, collaborative tasks which, in Second Language Acquisition terms, allow channels for authentic language input and output (Chapelle, 1998).

However, it is important to realize that for many language teachers Web 2.0 may simply appear to be another technological innovation that will pass them by along with the many others that they have seen during their career, despite the slowly increasing range of references to the uses and benefits of key Web 2.0 technologies (e.g. blogs, podcasts and wikis) in language education.

As people and communities in various parts of the world increasingly embrace Web 2.0, some educational institutions are inevitably responding to those societal trends and trying to harness Web 2.0 in their learning programs. Others, although they are in societies where technology is more normalized (Bax, 2003a) have, for various reasons, not taken those technologies on board. Perhaps now, more than at any other time, language teachers may need to negotiate these changes as they impact, or not, on their institutions, and consider the implications of ever greater technology use for their language teaching. They may be inspired or effectively obliged to engage with the nature of Web 2.0 and analyze its affordances for language education. Other teachers, even if they are aware that it is being used in the wider world may currently see no application for it in language education.

Web 2.0 is described as relatively easy to use and therefore accessible to anybody with access to the Internet. This is in contrast to its Web 1.0 predecessor which is seen to require at least some familiarity with HTML as a minimum. Setting up and contributing to a blog for example may seem comparatively uncomplicated. However, once a blog has been set up the user may be confronted with concepts and technicalities that may be more difficult to get to grips with, RSS, by way of example. Teachers struggling to understand the concept behind RSS, and the different technologies that support it, are unlikely to be able to stand back and evaluate its uses in language learning terms.

Such issues notwithstanding Web 2.0 tools do appear to offer a lot of what language teachers

would want in order to support learners language development: they can potentially distribute the learning and enable students to be in regular touch with a world-wide community of learners; they appear to enable an easier connection to be made between the classroom and the “real” world; they might enable learners to take some control over their learning making use of tools that excite them and which they are using in their everyday lives; they seem to offer engagement in active rather than passive learning, in process as well as product; learners can also potentially engage in discourses that take them beyond the classroom.

On the MA program in Educational Technology and TESOL at the School of Education, University of Manchester, it is important to explore Web 2.0 technologies in language education and help teachers understand generic functions of Web 2.0 in order to facilitate their evaluation of its potential uses. An evaluation of this potential should not, and cannot, be divorced from considerations pertaining to the “ecology” of the teaching environment in which teachers work, or have worked in the past and how that pertains to the wider changes in society. The use of the term “ecology” here signifies all of the rich, interacting elements that create the dynamic of teachers’ teaching contexts including top down societal, curricula and institutional influences and the bottom up influences which may stem from teachers’ knowledge of and enthusiasm for Web 2.0.

In this regard the MA tutors continue to observe that the way teachers “make sense” of Web 2.0 genres, i.e. understand how their various intrinsic operations — a process which is intimately bound up with teachers’ “evaluation” of the potential affordances of such software for their contexts — is mediated by the teachers’ perceptions of the context in which they work, or have worked in the past.

Considerations of context are bound up on the MA program with those of pedagogy, and the “fit” of Web 2.0 genres to pedagogical approaches. We have always worked as teacher-educators on

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