

Chapter 5.23

The Use of Weblogs in Language Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores in how far Web 2.0, Weblogs in particular, has changed foreign language learning. It argues that Weblogs, along with Web 2.0, have created new genres for which users need new forms of literacy. A qualitative study on the relationship between the online audience of Web 2.0 and learners' writing processes is presented and the findings are discussed. The study supports the assumption that learners are aware of the social interaction taking place through weblogs and that this awareness of audience influences the writing process. The author's intention is to point out that Web 2.0 has created new communities of language practice and that foreign language learning is happening in these discourse communities through social interaction. The challenge in foreign language education is to integrate these communities of practice into the foreign language classroom.

INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning, the Internet was a community that offered many possibilities for networking, linking people worldwide and for publishing information for the online community. In recent years the term "social software" has come to describe a new phenomenon within the online world. The social software application that has gained the most attention in recent years are weblogs. Originally, weblogs were mainly created to link together pages on the Web that the weblog author considered interesting or noteworthy. These lists of links included the weblog author's comments on the content of the linked websites. A community of weblog-owners networked around a certain topic, linking and exchanging information. One famous example was the weblog of Stanford college students Filo and Yang, who created a link-catalogue in 1994 that eventually developed into the Internet portal Yahoo! (Möller, 2005).

In the early days of weblogs, the users needed knowledge in programming and had to host blogs on their own servers. Since the introduction of

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blog-hosters in 1999, weblogs have become more accessible and easier to start for every user on the net: publishing a post on a weblog nowadays is as easy as writing an e-mail. As a result, since 1999 the number of weblogs on the Internet has increased dramatically. In April 2007, Technorati tracked 70 Million weblogs worldwide and estimated that 120,000 new blogs were being created each day ("The State of the Live Web", 2007). Although the numbers only show 15,5 Million active weblogs, the blogosphere is constantly growing. Blogs have challenged traditional journalism through fast and multi-perspective coverage of news which was not possible before. Already by the end of 2004, weblogs were so popular that the Merriam-Webster dictionary chose it as its "Word of the Year for 2004" (Richardson, 2006). Weblogs are only one tool in the growing Web 2.0 family which has changed the way people communicate and network. In how far do these changes affect education and foreign language learning? This chapter discusses this topic in relation to weblogs as Web 2.0 tools. The basic question will be whether weblogs transform learning in the foreign language writing classroom.

WEB 2.0 AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

O'Reilly (2005) sees, among others, two key features that distinguish Web 2.0 from Web 1.0: the platform-based usage of the Internet and harnessing collective intelligence of Internet users. The Web is the platform on which users work collaboratively and on which they store and exchange data. Rather than installing and using software on the PC, services are used online to create blogs, documents and wikis. These features can be seen as the basic principle of all social software devices which link users for collaboration and social interaction. However, the phenomenon of collaborative projects, like Wikipedia, and the

rapid growth of the blogosphere, to name only two, is not only a consequence of new Web 2.0 technology. As Alby (2007) points out, these phenomena go hand in hand with faster Internet connections via broadband and flat rates that are affordable for the masses.

How far, then, has Web 2.0 transformed language learning? Warschauer (2004) describes three stages of CALL which have emerged since the 1970s and have represented the development of technology, on the one hand, and the formation of language acquisition approaches, on the other hand. The first stage, structural CALL, uses drill and practice activities focussing on correct language use. Structural CALL followed an audio-lingual approach to language learning, and the technology was mainframe computers. The 1980s and 1990s were marked by the upcoming communicative approach to language learning. At the same time, the introduction of PCs offered the technology for computer-assisted communicative exercises. The third stage, which Warschauer (2004) calls integrative CALL, has a socio-cognitive approach to language teaching and uses computers for authentic discourse. In this last stage, the computer functions as a tool that connects learners for interaction. In earlier stages of CALL, computers were seen as a tool to support the language learning process. Integrative CALL is different, because it doesn't only use technology to create space for isolated language learning activities, but it uses technology that is made for communication. With Web 2.0 this shift in CALL becomes even more obvious. Communication in the virtual world has become more than simply using a different tool to transfer the same information as with more traditional tools. Web 2.0 has created new genres, new identities, and users need new forms of literacy to interpret information. Therefore, as Warschauer (2004) points out, new teaching methods are required. Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) define electronic literacy as a threefold competence of communication, construction and research. These three aspects

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