Book review

Second Language Teaching and Learning in the Net Generation, Raquel Oxford, Jeffrey Oxford (Eds.), University of Hawaii, NFLRC, Honolulu (2009), 240 pp.

This book is for teachers like me: practising language teachers sufficiently interested in the integration of CALL to go to the trouble of booking and then taking students to a computer room but rather uncertain about what we should all do when we get there. Communicative Web 2.0 tools are all very well but they have not been designed with teaching in mind and what we are interested in is practical advice on how to tailor podcasts, wikis, Second Life etc. for educational purposes as well as a readily comprehensible, theoretical justification for doing so.

In the Introduction, Oxford and Oxford make the case that special care must be taken in the quest for pedagogically sound use of technology because of the unique qualities of this eponymous "net generation" of young learners. As support, they wheel out Prensky's (2001) widely panned distinction between "digital immigrant" teachers and this younger set of "digital natives" who have grown up at ease with new technology and who are predisposed to new experiential, multitasking ways of learning. It is important to get your head around this and a few other core concepts introduced in Chapter 1 by van Compernolle and Williams because as you proceed, sailing through a total of 14 chapters with a seemingly interminable succession of empirical studies, these ideas keep bobbing up and being grappled with by their respective authors.

In Chapter 2, Niño offers brief evaluations of an assortment of web tools that she considers useful for language teachers. She casts her net wide and the result is a rather crudely classified jumble of websites some of which (e.g. Second Life; podcasts and e-portfolios) are welcome tasters for more in-depth treatment in subsequent chapters. They all fall under the overarching banner of "emerging technologies" which is a rather unfortunate choice of words given that so many of them (Google Groups, GOOG-411, Google Page Creator, BBC Mundo) have already sunk. I found the YouTube tutorial on the pronunciation of the Spanish alphabet uninspiring; an interactive Flash site along the lines of AdrianUnderhill's phonemic chart http://bit.ly/14McxM would have given the user control and been a much better idea. Some of the Online Dictionary sites were of interest and have been given even further functionality since publication. For instance, the new beta Flashcards at http://www.dictionary.com is a clear step forward but it will not get the full thumbs up from me until it incorporates the Leitner system of timing. Finally, a minor irritant is Niño's use of some absurdly long URLs when a shortener such as Bit.ly would have saved the interested reader's time, concentration and maybe eyesight too.

Chapter 3 describes a survey of e-literacy at five German secondary schools. While both students and teachers ranked electronic literacy skills highly and important in future professional success, there was a low amount of corresponding training provided. The EFL teachers in this study came out of it particularly badly with none registering any Computer Mediated Communication at all. However, I am dubious about a questionnaire that asks 10–13 year olds to self-rate their use of a list of 21 different computer applications including such jargon terms as MOO/MUD environments. I suppose a possible counter might be, "Yes, but you are not a member of the net generation." Chapter 4 assesses students' readiness for hybrid or blended learning and one can sense the author's disappointment in the finding that student hybrid opponents were more than double the hybrid supporters. In this case, the results may simply be an artefact of the rather blunt instrument used to collect data. I was more taken by Chapter 5 which stays with the topic of hybrid learning and describes the model used at the University of Wisconsin. Its ambitious Collaborative Language Program brings students on different campuses together through the use of a number of modern technologies including classroom-based video conferencing and Wimba Voice Tools. The two-way video technology allows a single instructor to teach at a number of locations at the same time with students at distant locations having additional support from facilitators. The slight time lag that prevents choral drill practice sounds rather ominous but I can see that

the greater diversity of students brings added value to the class as does the intentional selection of facilitators from a different background and generation to the instructor. Some critical attention is given to the three most useful Wimba Voice Tools. A drawback of Voice Direct, Wimba's synchronous voice chat tool, is indeed the need to click on the hand icon in order to take your turn at speaking as this takes some getting used to and can make the exchange unnatural. It is a bit like the "Over and Out" days of walkie-talkies. Yes, participants are stopped from talking on top of each other but if they could see each other, this problem would be greatly alleviated; hence, the eventual importance of adding video streams — when bandwidths permit this. Wimba's Oral Assessment Builder is no longer to be found among its current suite of voice tools but the advantages attributed to this tool also apply to others such as the Voice Board for asynchronous discussions. Students love the ability to listen to their own utterances and start all over again, if necessary, before posting and this makes it ideally suited not only for pronunciation practice but presentation practice as well. On page 74, Rosen mentions a lack of time limits which is not quite accurate as there is a 5-minute cap on contributions, but this has its plusses too such as keeping presentations in check. Now that Wimba and Elluminate are one, more radical innovations can be expected. This said, it is a shame to stick to proprietary software. Vocaroo (http://www.vocaroo.com/), for instance, has all sorts of potential in this arena and gets very high marks for ease of use.

There are also a couple of captivating chapters on the use of podcasting. I would make a couple of criticisms, though: firstly, more prominence within the explanations of what podcasts are should be attached to their episodic nature. Otherwise, a podcast is essentially no different from an mp3 file. It is the RSS feed that enables automatic delivery of the podcast to your reader (e.g. iTunes or Google Reader) similar to a magazine you subscribe to being delivered to your house. Secondly, in the study in Chapter 8, it is found that students overwhelmingly chose to listen to podcasts on their computers rather than download them to their iPods. Ducate and Lomicka use this as evidence for questioning their net generation credentials but it makes you wonder whether in addition to not knowing how to download them, they ever really wanted to do so. The prevalence of mobile learning by, for example, listening to last week's lecture while cycling to university may just be a little overhyped. After all, those students who are able to concentrate fully in such situations are likely to get knocked down by a bus. Nevertheless, the information the authors give on the content of the podcast tasks is pure gold and essential reading for teachers who are venturing into this territory for the first time.

For me it was Chapters 11 and 12 on Second Life that really stole the show. Imagine flying up to the roof of the Sistine Chapel together with your students' avatars, to whom you can incidentally communicate by text or voice chat, and you begin to see the educational potential. As Clark puts it in Chapter 11, current pedagogy stresses the need for teaching language in context and Second Life is able to do so in an immersive way that classrooms cannot match. Her example of teaching the topic of health by taking students' avatars around an *inworld* hospital where appropriate dress can be donned is a good one, as is the virtual nuclear reactor upon which students' avatars can perform virtual experiments, though I was rather amused that the advantages cited by the research professor in charge appear to be restricted to students not having to wear expensive radiation badges or obtain entry clearance. In Chapter 12, Cooke-Plagwitz suggests that Second Life is particularly attuned to the learning needs of the net generation. Learning here involves doing; information is instantly accessible and it suits those comfortable working in groups. You read her tips on dealing with the drawbacks of Second Life and you feel all the trepidation of preparing for a school trip to an exotic, foreign country. These authors are fervent believers and after being initially swept up by the sheer exuberant force of their conviction, I did a bit of poking around and came back down to earth — the real one — with a thud. Clark writes that, "Today, 15,829,146 avatars live, work and play on some 26,539 islands." This figure is absurdly high and, of course, describes the total number of avatars ever created. At any one time in 2008, there was a maximum of just over 60,000 users (Charming, 2008), which is still impressive enough but since mid-2008 membership has fallen and much to the chagrin of educational institutions that have invested time, effort and money in creating Second Life presences, the 50% educational discount is to be removed at the end of 2010 (SLanguages, 2010). Today, any newcomer will be struck by just how sparsely populated the educational environments are. Nonetheless, 3-D worlds do seem to have a future. Just read Clark's account (p. 157) of a student identifying with their avatar to the extent of including it within the first person singular pronoun as in, "I am going to take a picture of myself on this turtle." Then you realise that the computer can be an extension of ourselves and that we are at a very early stage of our involvement in these worlds which can only grow as the technology gets better and better.

Chapter 14, the final chapter, describes how the implementation of video-based web conferencing transformed the lives and learning experiences of military officers from Eastern and Central Europe who were on a 5-month English language programme in Canada. It is an uplifting account of how technology empowered students and enabled them to

reshape their social identities. The opening analysis is cerebral but crystal clear. However, Charbonneau-Gowdy's description of the practicalities of the programme is rather odd and unsettling. When one subject of a case study, following the use of video conferencing, makes a comment like, "Now we have a chance to speak, before we didn't," you begin to wonder how well trained their language teachers are. I was also surprised that bandwidth was sufficient to tolerate up to 13 participant video windows being open at the same time within ICI Wave.

To conclude, the existence of a net generation may well be disputed, but whatever the case, the content of this book is not invalidated. There is a good mix and range of Web 2.0 tools on offer and many sensible, practical tips on how to make them sing in both classroom and hybrid environments. There are also research studies aplenty. This book offers something for everyone: the technophiles; the technophobes and the academically minded. It would make a welcome addition to the IT shelf of university language support units and language schools alike.

References

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Peter Saunders
Language Centre,
University of Oxford,
12 Woodstock Road, Oxford OX2 6HT,
United Kingdom
E-mail address: peter.saunders@lang.ox.ac.uk