

Chapter XXVI

Social Software and Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how the social software tools that characterize Web 2.0, such as wikis and blogs, can be used as a valid substitute for more traditional Learning Management Systems in the context of e-learning and blended learning language courses. First, we will give a brief overview of how the educational arena is changing and the role social software can play in promoting these changes. Then we will describe two experimental courses carried out at the University of Padova using social software. The chapter ends with a discussion of the role of these tools in formal education. The aim of the chapter is to show how these tools allow language educators to take network-based language teaching beyond the limits of planned classroom activities, offering students new opportunities to access and produce real language in real situations.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of e-learning and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is inherently connected to the evolution of technology and theories on language learning pedagogy intertwined with ways in which society changes. The advent of

the Internet in the 1990s led to a shift toward a focus on authentic communication, task-based learning, and network-based language teaching (NBLT) using sociocognitive approaches. NBLT involves a shift from learners' interaction *with* computers to interaction with other humans *via* the computer (Kern & Warschauer, 2000).

Whereas the Internet was initially a place where information and knowledge were delivered by “experts” and information was simply retrieved, toward the end of the 1990s, the Web started to become a place where users, everyday people, *produced* and *shared* content in ever-growing global communities. Contrary to the dominant epistemology of Western culture according to which knowledge is created and transmitted by experts, the new way of using the Internet was based on the concept of the “wisdom of the crowds” (Surowiecki, 2005). In 2003, Tim O’Reilly and Dale Dougherty dubbed this new revolution “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly, 2005).

Web 2.0 is characterized by what can generically be called “social software”: different types of software that enable people to collaborate and create and join online communities. What is particularly interesting is the widespread use these tools have achieved in a very short time, especially among young people, the so-called Digital Natives (Prensky, 2001) or Net Generation (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Whether people are using these tools to express their creativity (YouTube, Flickr), to share their thoughts (MySpace, blogs), or to share their knowledge (Wikipedia), they are creating and participating in online social networks in a way that was not imaginable just a few years ago.

The aim of this chapter is to argue that not only can language educators not ignore this revolution, but they should embrace it. The benefits of using social software for language learning go beyond simply providing new tools students can use to communicate. They promote social networking on a global scale and knowledge sharing and creation beyond the classroom, thereby giving students opportunities to access, use, and produce authentic language in real-world contexts. In this chapter, we will first provide a brief overview of the implications of Web 2.0 and social software for education in a general context. This information served as the foundation for an action research project that was started at the University of Pa-

dova in the spring semester, 2006. We will then describe the second stage of the project, which involved the use of wikis, Skype, blogs, and other Web 2.0 tools in an advanced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course. Though the research is not yet complete, the initial results are positive and confirm results from other studies. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion of the future of these tools in education.

WEB 2.0 AND SOCIAL SOFTWARE FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES

The educational arena today is finding it necessary to react and adapt to the shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy. We are now living in an information society where the way knowledge is created and organized and the very nature of knowledge have changed. The ways knowledge is represented have always been strongly influenced by the tools used to express it. Today it is impossible to think of knowledge without associating it with tools such as search engines, Web sites, repositories of learning objects, and more recently, social software tools such as blogs and wikis. Today’s students need to learn how to operate effectively in today’s information overload and, at the same time, how to become creators of knowledge. Upon graduation, they will find themselves looking for work in a global knowledge-based, networked economy where they will need to be skilled in collaborative and creative project-based work and critical thinking (Bruns & Humphreys, 2005). At the same time, we must also help students develop “the resources and skills necessary to engage with social and technical change, and to continue learning throughout the rest of their lives” (Owen et al., 2006, p. 3). Language acquisition especially is a lifelong process that cannot end with traditional education, but rather must be cultivated throughout life.

The advent and success of Web 2.0 technologies have led many to speak of e-learning 2.0.

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