The Role of Technology in Language Teaching: Alternative Delivery or Mainstream?

presentation given at the AMEP annual conference on September 30th, 2005.

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Please contact me via michaelc@chariot.net.au for further information.

Keywords
Pathways, Future, Technology, Alternative, Mainstream

Introduction

I sat here yesterday listening to Shirley Brice-Heath, and watched a wonderful documentary about American teens finding their feet, and a whole lot of language, through the medium of art. I was wondering how any message I may bring about using technology could have enhanced the experience of the young people in that documentary. I then went to Lindee Conway's session on dealing with Sudanese refugees at St Albans AMES Victoria centre. I found myself agreeing with Lindee that what those people need is more handshakes and the warmth of human affection more than they needed to sit front of a computer. I then attended the session given by my South Australian colleagues Amanda McKay, Sue Blythe, and Stuart McIntyre talking about blending an IT certificate with ESL competencies - an uplifting and revelatory story of what can be done with recent arrivals, many of whom are from Africa with little or no prior experience with computers, if they are given supported access to computer technology and are ready to fly.

The message I took from yesterday then is that it's not a matter of one size fits all. The use of technology is not always appropriate, but it should be available to those who are ready. I know many of you are already well down the pathway of using Internet technologies with your students, others of you are yet to begin, while others of you may be downright resistant.

Last week I was on a boat ride with a number of people who all work in elearning in various roles. I wandered into the cabin and was warmly greeted by the skipper. "How are you?" What do you do for a crust?" I proudly announced that I teach teachers how to use the Internet . His blunt reply: "Computers have destroyed a whole generation. "But…" I tried to rejoin. "There's no discussion, no argument, that's a fact. That's what's happened." His tone told me there was no point taking the topic any further, but it threw me I must admit, for the internet has changed my life in so many ways, personally and professionally, and most of them for the better.

We live in times of turbulent and rapid change, and there will be casualties like that boat skipper. (The skipper was upset that his two sons had been distracted by computers and had decided not to follow in his footsteps and be fishermen as he'd hoped. It is up to us as educators to make sense of these times of change, guide our students through it, and do what we can to ensure that they don't become casualties.

TODAY IN HISTORY

Let's take a little sidetrack into this day in history courtesy of the historychannel.com:

September 30:

- 1868: The first volume of Louisa May Alcott's beloved children's book Little Women is published on this day. The novel would become Alcott's first bestseller and a beloved children's classic.
• 1901: Compulsory car registration for all vehicles driving over 18mph took effect throughout France on this day, as more and more countries began regulating automobile traffic
• 1938: British and French prime ministers Neville Chamberlain and Édouard Daladier sign the Munich Pact with Nazi leader Adolf Hitler.
• 1955: James Dean was killed in an automobile accident today when Dean's Porsche crashed head-on into another car.

It is unlikely that any of us gathered in this room will do something today that will enter the annals of history (and be recorded on the history channel website), but I hope that in some small way I may stir you to change your personal history slightly. Nudge you perhaps to try something new; coax you into evaluating some of the technologies available and see whether they might be of benefit for the people you teach. Perhaps you might remember September 30th, 2005 as a day when you made a change in your teaching life....

Virtual Classrooms

I spend a good deal of my professional life these days in online spaces like the one you can see here on screen. This is a virtual classroom. It enables two way text and voice chat, the display of slides and websites, and collaboration via an interactive whiteboard. Tools such as these also allow a blending of live online and face to face events - events that have been tagged Multiple Venue Presentations, or MVPs.

Virtual Classrooms like the one we're using here - Elluminate - (made available free to members of the LearningTimes community) make it possible for anyone to participate in live sessions from anywhere where there is an Internet connection.

TILTING AT WINDMILLS (Attitudes to Technology)

When we contemplate technology we generally think about the future or the recent past. We tend to think of technology as something that was not around when we were born. If it comes into being in our lifetime we consider it technology. The Baby Boomer generation then on that score would consider a VCR or DVD player to be technology, but I doubt that their children would. The term 'technology' too describes things that are new or that we don't quite understand. Hence our resistance to it.

RESISTANCE

Using new technologies is a risky and unproven pathway. It may be a pathway to the future (as indeed everything is!), but is it a pathway worth taking? And what is the cost?

These are legitimate questions, but they may in time also become irrelevant questions.

These children in an Internet café in rural Vietnam, and thousands more like them around the globe, have already made their decision about how they want to experience their world.

But is it all too hard?
A dear friend and colleague of mine was one of the first ESL teachers in Australia to use Internet technology with her students. She designed online courses, created materials for classroom use, gave workshops for other staff. She was an early adopter, and a leader in the field. I knew she cared, and I knew she was good at what she did, so it was with some sadness that I heard her explain to a public gathering some years ago why she was not going to bother with this 'Internet stuff' anymore. Among her list of issues were:

- Network problems
- Lack of effective IT support
- Lack of keyboard skills on the part of her students
- The site you want is down
- Firewalls
- People forget passwords
- Format of passwords is changed without warning from IT
- No home access to the Internet
- Hard to get computer rooms (ESL low priority)
- Sub-standard computers - several don't work and it takes ages to get them fixed
- Different versions of Word at home and work
- Sites you want are blocked by network administrators, etc

I know there'll be people here in this room that will identify with this list. My colleague had decided that for her the cost was too great. The time spent on troubleshooting all these difficulties was time lost preparing and teaching lessons that she was in control of, and where you were not held hostage by arrogant and time poor IT staff who saw you as low priority, and never really understood what it was you were trying to do anyway.

But I persevered. For me the cost was worth it. I still hold that we have a responsibility to expose our students to the Internet. (And it should be clear now that in this current presentation when I refer to technology, I am primarily referring to use of the Internet.)

THE INTERNET AS A LIFE SKILL

Using the Internet can now fairly be regarded as a life skill (Internet banking is cheaper; holidays and flights booked online are cheaper; registering your car online can save time in queues; and sometimes tickets to popular sport and entertainment events are only available on the Internet - those without access to the Net, and without the skills to use it are already disadvantaged in this society, and this will become more so. And one thing is certain - there will be more of this technology; not less. And it is a part of the AMEP charter to impart life skills is it not?

Now I don't think I'm going to get much argument on this - that students exiting AMEP programs should ideally leave those programs with the fundamental computer and Internet skills to take their place in this world. But again we come back to the issue of what is the cost? And what is the gain for students? Can it help students learn English better and more efficiently?

As I said, I persevered - I enjoyed the challenge and the obvious levels of student satisfaction for me justified the personal cost. This personal cost (ie the time spent becoming familiar with this new world of teaching) does reduce over time as one becomes more skilled and confident in the use of these technologies. There is what is now a reasonably famous diagram that attempts to illustrate where we all are in relation to the adoption of technology.

Rogers' Diffusion and Adoption chart
Take a look at this chart for a moment and decide where you fit in. And maybe also consider why you are in that group? And why some are in the early adopters group? I often ask myself this question - why did I take this path? What about this medium intrigued me? I am willing to concede that there may be some quirks about my personality that result in my fascination with the Internet, and my desire to pass that fascination on to others.

Prof Denise Murray, in her paper *Before Pedagogy: Issues for Language Educators in an Era of Technological Change*, said that she was worried that she doesn't "see educators and language specialists taking the lead." I have a slightly different view. I have been amazed from my earliest exposure to the Internet (around 1997) at how quickly language educators, and English language educators in particular, had adopted the Internet as a resource for language learning. There was, and is, a good deal of material on the Internet that is of dubious quality, but there is also some superb stuff out there; and much of it has not been specifically designed for language learning, nor even education. (*eg Google Earth, Blogging*)

**TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNITY**

(More importantly,) what is out there on the Internet is people, communities of practice where colleagues learn to effectively employ these technologies together.

**COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

One such community is the Webheads, and you will meet a couple of them shortly. When I asked colleagues what they would like to hear in an address like this I think this one from Webheads founder, Vance Stevens, stands out as the most telling. Vance sees it as important that we "see the connection between trying out the tools and gaining familiarity with them by joining in learning communities of practice, at which point they can THEN consider using them with students, once they've become second nature through experience and experimentation with colleagues who themselves are trying to learn more about the tools they think are useful in education."

It is unrealistic to expect practitioners used to standard classroom delivery to forthwith become CALL teachers. It is a significant leap to lead your students on a new journey of inquiry in a computer lab. The very notion of computer labs, or computer suites, doesn't help.

**COMPUTER LABS V CLASSROOMS**

Computer labs were born in the days when people studied computing. That's why you went to the computer room - to study computing. It was a separate subject. Nowadays people study CALL, or computer assisted accounting, or computer assisted aged care. The predominant use of computers in schools and colleges these days is to use the computer as an aid in studying your area of focus. Your area of focus is not computing. But still we build computer suites as separate entities. What is far more logical, and manageable for the average
teacher, is to have a few Internet enabled PCs in every classroom. In much the same way as well resourced schools and colleges have a TV and VCR in every room, there need to be Internet enabled PCs in every room to allow the easy flow from teacher input to computer based investigation and collaboration. Computers should not be located in a separate physical space away from the classroom. They are an essential tool - as essential as pens, paper and whiteboards - and should be available for use by students who have the skills and curiosity to use as part of standard lesson activity. In this model it is not the teachers' responsibility to have to implement CALL or IALL approaches per se, but computers and Internet are there for those who wish to use them. As long as we have computer rooms as separate physical spaces we're passing on an implicit message that this activity is not mainstream. And if 12 hours tuition a week is in a classroom, and 3 in a computer room we are marginalising the computer activity. Computers need to be in all classrooms in all lessons. This would go a long way to mainstreaming teaching with technology.

Anne Bartlett-Bragg from the University of Technology here in Sydney marvels at the fact that we are still asking whether computers make a difference, or improve learning. This she says is the wrong question. No one asks if pens make a difference or improve learning. However, in the pursuit of data that may justify the enormous amounts of time and money dedicated to the implementation of computer hardware, it's hard not to ask this question. Does the use of computers and the Internet improve language learning? Do students who are exposed to CALL or IALL methodologies learn more effectively, more quickly, more thoroughly? Positive answers to these questions are hard to find. What CALL/IALL educators do anecdotally agree about though is the fact that using computers invariably increases the motivation of students to learn. And this is huge. We all know that levels of motivation have great impact on rates of attendance, levels of engagement, how often and how well out of class activities (ie homework) are done. Increased motivation means increased participation which means more effective learning - doesn't it?

Many in the Webheads community are engaged in using CALL or IALL approaches with their students. I would like to ask two of them now to speak to us about their experiences of using the Internet in teaching English to their students. They like any teacher who has attempted to blend Internet activity into regular classroom practice, have experienced obstacles in their workplace. We will hear in turn from Aiden Yeh from Wen Zao Ursuline College of Foreign Languages in Taiwan, and then Chris Jones from Arizona Western College in Yuma, Arizona. Aiden, to you first - can you give us a quick snapshot of some the Internet activities you have tried with your students, comment on the value of these experiences for your students, and finally, say whether, given the trials and tribulations you have been through, whether it has been worth it? What, if anything, have your students gained from it?

(input from Aiden Yeh)

(input from Chris Jones)

Comment from Miriam (one of Chris' students)

THURSDAY, MAY 05, 2005
Yahoo messenger chat
“I like when I was talk with my partner ,with microphones. This very good because I thing he stay in front of me . The technology is incredible, you can talk with people of the other side of the world in seconds. I connected immediately. Everyone asked questions.”
POSTED BY MIRIAM AT 12:20 PM

Thank you Aiden and Chris for that input. I would now like to explore some of the specific recent trends in Internet education, and their usefulness for language teaching. But first, some context. Most people see the Internet as a source of content - a vast repository of data that provides information on just about everything. And it is an astounding resource. However two other less utilised aspects of the Internet are what make it more valuable for language teachers. The first of these is the availability of authentic contexts.

“It is precisely “the real thing” that students must engage in on the computer; real problem solving, real writing, real collaborating, real communicating, real group work, real interpretation and criticism and analysis of complex problems. This can be accomplished by helping students develop active mastery of computers for their own production of knowledge, rather than passive use.”
(Mark Warschauer, ETAI, 1998)

The Internet, as well as being a repository of content on every subject imaginable, is a network of people wanting to connect and communicate.
MAN - THE COMPULSIVE COMMUNICATOR

(David Attenborough in the TV serial documentary, Life on Earth, tagged the section on humans "Man - the Compulsive Communicator.) Opportunities for authentic communication abound on the Internet. We have already heard how Aiden and Chris have exploited the opportunity for authentic communication activities beyond the walls of their classrooms. The other aspect of the Internet that can be better exploited by language teachers is the fact that the Internet is a publishing medium that anyone with access to the Internet and a username and password can contribute to. For good or ill, it has given the common person a voice; a place to display their views.

BLOGGING

The blogging phenomenon is not new. Blogs have existed as a mass phenomenon since around 1999, and show no sign of abating. "All the world's a blog" I'm afraid, or at least 'bloggable'. A blog (short for weblog) is in essence an online journal or diary. The majority of them are written, and access to basic blogging software is free. This means that you can post your thoughts to the Internet as often as you want for no more than the cost of a username and password. Before we look at how blogs may be useful in the language learning classroom I'd like to show you some blogging basics.

1) The most common way of posting to a blog is to compose your text inside the blogging tool.

2) post using Word

If you download the Word for Blogger toolbar you are able to post directly from within a Word document like this. (see example

3) post using email

Blogger's most recent addition to its range of blogging tools is the blog via email feature. Using this method you send an email to a specified address and it automatically posts it to your blog.

Why Blog? (audio from Barbara Dieu aka Bee - 6 minutes)

Some References:

http://dekita.org ("a community of people dedicated to promoting peer-to-peer communication in language learning"

http://beeonline2.blogspot.com/ (Bee blogging about the Dekita project)

http://www.britishcouncil.org.br/elt/novidades.asp?meses=09&index=1 (interview with Barbara Dieu)

ADVANTAGES OF BLOGGING

- Instant publishing to the Net
- Empowering – gives students a voice
- Comment features allows interaction/peer review
- Promotes ownership of work
- Promotes reflection on teaching and learning
- Houses all student work in one place
- Can be used for roleplay
- Builds community

(courtesy of Rita Zeinstein, Argentina)

4) audioblogging - phone, instantaudio

Before we leave the blogosphere, we need to look at the latest incarnation of blogs - the audio variety. They come in two different forms - the computer based version where you record your post on a computer, or the more exciting method where you can use your phone to post directly to your blog. (example)

(see Graham Stanley: http://blog-efl.blogspot.com/ Why use Technology in Class?)

DIGITAL STORYTELLING (DST)
And now to perhaps the most exciting new publishing phenomenon around - DST…..Although not strictly a Web-based approach, DST is another deceptively simple way of creating high class content that is easily published to the Web if you wish, but can be viewed on any computer that has Windows Media Player - a standard plug in on all recent Windows PCs. Digital Storytelling is a process that in its simplest form involves overlaying a simple narrative on a series of photos. Basic digital stories can be created and published in a matter of minutes. Let me show you.


PODCASTING

Perhaps the most recent of the new web-publishing tools is podcasting. Podcasting is a process of producing audio content in mp3 format for listening on a mobile device. Eg an ipod (hence PODcasting.) Podcasting as the name suggests, is designed as a broadcast medium. That is, an individual or group creates an audio file that is intended for a large audience. They are not interactive in nature, and require a level of technical skill to manipulate the audio into a coherent whole. Let's have a look at a few:

- [http://e-poche.net/conversations/](http://e-poche.net/conversations/) - some reasonable examples
- [http://mylcpodcasts.blogspot.com/2005/09/king-is-dead.html](http://mylcpodcasts.blogspot.com/2005/09/king-is-dead.html) - shows the potential of podcasting
- [http://teflpodcasts.blogspot.com/](http://teflpodcasts.blogspot.com/) - Graham Stanley blogging about podcasting
- [http://englishpodsong.blogspot.com/](http://englishpodsong.blogspot.com/) - nice idea but beware long downloads

I like the idea that teachers and/or students can create multimedia materials, but I'm yet to be convinced about podcasts. The way podcasts have been used in language learning to date is mainly to provide other sources of authentic listening materials on the web. Their true value may be realized if:

- They are of quality and at the appropriate level
- Students have the technology and skills to download them and listen to them on mobile devices (3G mobiles, mp3 players - iPods, pocket pcs, etc)
- Students themselves can create them

True podcasting also involves the capacity to subscribe to them. If you are a subscriber to a particular podcast, then you are automatically notified that there is a new 'program' to listen to. (see [Bloglines](http://www.bloglines.com), a site that provides the means of subscribing to podcasts and other syndicated content, for an example of how this can work) The [Australian Broadcasting Service](http://www.abc.net.au) (ABC) is making good use of this technology and has been recently rated in the top 10 of international podcasters. See:

- [http://www.abc.net.au/news/services/default.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/news/services/default.htm)
- [http://www.abc.net.au/services/podcasting.htm#fm](http://www.abc.net.au/services/podcasting.htm#fm)

But how is this of use to language teachers? In time much good quality content for various levels may become available for listening exercises. If you thought it worthwhile, it is not terribly difficult to use free software to record something in mp3 format, and make it available for students to listen to on a mobile device. A colleague of mine in Adelaide listens to articles that he does not get time to read on his iPod as he journeys to and from work on public transport. Where are the moments of peace I hear you asking?? When do I get downtime?? (A legitimate question in a world where new technologies have blurred the boundaries between work and play, and appear to be spawning a new generation that is always 'on'. On the mobile, on the Net - reachable everywhere and at all times.)

So. There we have a glimpse of some of the more recent Internet trends in language education. I'm sure some of you are sitting there thinking "I'm going to try that", while others of you are thinking "what on earth has this got to do with me and my students?" "where am I going to find the time to do that?"

"How can my students create podcasts when they can barely speak English?" I bet there's some music they like and might want to share. And what's wrong with using translation - English and Amharic side by side for example. It might make for a very valuable resource actually.
"Where are my students going to get photos to make a digital story?" Scan normal photos; use the Internet; get them to draw images and scan them into the story.

"Who's going to pay for the phone calls to do audioblogging?" Give students phone cards, or have them use phones on campus.

Are you a student or a teacher?

Remember though, rather than offer obstacles as to why your students can't do this or that, think more about what you can do to increase your own familiarity and confidence in using Internet technologies, as it is through your own dabbling that you will learn what the technology is capable of, and discover what you could do with your students. So a wise course of action may be to join a community of practice - join the webheads, or start your own with interested colleagues - and start your own learning journey with technology.

WHAT CAN YOU DO NOW?

What else can you do now to ensure that you and your students have access to these technologies and approaches in the not to distant future?

- Join the Webheads community and observe, listen, and ask questions
- Know who your IT support staff are and get friendly with them
- Know who they report to
- Insist on an Internet point in your classroom or at least a telephone line
- Get your organization to establish a dial up account with an ISP for classroom access if necessary (avoids firewalls and numerous IT hassles)
- Check if your library provides laptops and projectors, and see if they will set them up for you
- Angle now for 2 or 3 Internet abled computers in your room for next semester
- But also - book a computer room for your class one or two sessions a week for next semester - do it Monday or the next day you're back at work!!!!
- Start a community of practice in your workplace about CALL/IALL

WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH YOUR STUDENTS?

With your students

- Ensure all your students have an email address and start communicating with them (send a weekly newsletter)
- Get your own online teaching space (for resources, photos and other personal info about students and teachers, communication tools)
- have students make digital stories about their hometowns, families, friends, hobbies
- Schedule a regular online chat out of hours
- Record occasional lessons in a virtual classroom and archive them
- Invite an online guest lecturer into your class (as Aiden and Chris did for this presentation)

Conclusion

ALTERNATIVE OR MAINSTREAM?

In conclusion then, to return to the question posed in the title of this presentation - should the Role of Technology in Language Teaching be Alternative Delivery or Mainstream? I realized as I prepared this presentation that this question is flawed. I don't think anyone could argue with any credibility any more that using computers should be not part of mainstream activity in any educational setting. Networked computers have infiltrated most aspects of modern life - they are ubiquitous. But what is actually happening in educational practice?

According to a recent report from Education Network Australia, teachers agree that "Computer technology has changed teaching 'a great deal', and they increasingly cite computers as effective teaching tools, but just over half integrate computers into daily curriculum." (http://newsroom.cdwg.com/features/feature-08-29-05.htm) This echoes my own inquiry into this question in my own workplace in TAFE SA where 87% of teaching staff are using the Internet in their teaching, but the majority are using the Internet as an add-on, rather than a core component of their teaching methodology.
COMPLIMENTARY, NOT ALTERNATIVE DELIVERY

In my heart of hearts I don't think this matters. What does matter is that our students have access while they are with us to the tools and strategies that will equip them with the skills to cope with the world outside the classroom walls; that we equip them to successfully navigate the pathways to the future. Technology is clearly part of that future, and rather than alternative delivery, it may be more useful to think of it as complementary delivery. Exploit your skills and experience as a classroom teacher by all means, and complement it with technology that provides motivation for your students, an abundance of authentic communication contexts, the tools for you and your students to easily create and publish content, and that presents you with a challenge that, if you accept it, presents its own rewards.

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."
Arthur C. Clarke (1961)

I hope I have tempted some of you to take up this challenge. I'm not saying it's easy; I'm not saying it's going to happen overnight. But I am saying that it is enthralling, that it is worth the time, that there is support out there for those who turn down this pathway to the future, and that we owe it to our students to walk with them down that path.

We don't know where that path will end, but I'll leave you with this thought: could it be that there'll come a time when boards and pens will be a rarity, and when a new generation may not know what to do in such a classroom?

(see cartoon in final slide)

More References to follow:

http://home.plex.nl/~jgraus/thesis/content/ch8.htm

Michael Coghlan (2/10/05)