

Accessing Other Worlds of Thought – via digitised portals

Lorraine Thornquist, December 2007

'The most important thing about Technology Enhanced Language Learning is that it is about learning not about technology.' (Andrew Lian, 2006, April)

The way we communicate is changing, at every level of thought and action. Communication now appears in increasingly diverse forms. Marshall McLuhan's observation that the medium is the message has never been so apt.

In this first decade of the twenty-first century we recognise that our student clientele has been born into the digital age. For this generation of learners, technology is not merely a tool but an integral part of their social and communication landscape. Our students are 'native speakers' of digital technology and their learning characteristics and instructional preferences demand more eclectic approaches to the learning process and attendant activities.

It would be therefore both foolish and negligent of language educators to marginalize Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) - which includes social software such as blogs and podcasts - as they can be part of a dynamic pedagogy to offer sources and resources for enriched authentic language experiences for student learning.

The excitement of learning another language is the unlocking of another world of thought and entering into an extended communication realm.

Learning another language also brings us face to face with the reality that language communication is a complex process and an intensely personal, culturally laden and social activity in an ever increasingly complicated environment.

If ICT and CMC are to play a contributing role it is clearly important to develop the right mix in using human and technological resources in a balanced, safe and creative learning paradigm.

Students in the International Studies Faculty come mostly to other language learning in early adolescence, already having in place successful strategies in their first language to create meaning.

To meet these challenges of different or new processes of meaning-making in second language learning, teachers at Brisbane Girls Grammar School understand the need for a variety of resources in the language learning context. Including resources in forms that learners may already be familiar and comfortable with is a valuable strategy.

Past language teaching strategies have often been premised on explaining language constructs to learners and then inviting students to practise these patterns. Teachers can not provide or model every situation and interaction. No single methodology can address the complications of language learning.

A resource-rich learning environment is paramount to permitting learners to explore the challenges of such learning in a more neutral, independent and autonomous zone as well as in a busy context of social interaction. ICT and CMC are able to promote language understanding and use, including the complexities of culture in language, via different and more dynamic ways.

The shift away from purely text-based resources opens up the potential for multimedia technology to have a key seat on the learning platform.

Technology use is neither the purpose nor the outcome of the learning. Rather, its role is to offer diverse forums for making meaning.

Teachers in the faculty are constantly exploring and continually learning this complex and extensive language of technology itself in the process of persistently remodelling the ways to incorporate and implement ICT and CMC into quality second language learning.

No one application of technology predominates. ICT and CMC have widened the horizons and possibilities of access to a more integrated fabric of language modes and as a result the "one size fits all" technology is a thing of the past.

As teachers we are intent on helping the learners immerse themselves in a more authentic language world, a virtual reality that may model and provide learners with strategies and tasks to understand and interpret the linguistic and cultural reality inherent in their target language.

ICT and CMC are effective medium for linking the learner's reality with the language and its everyday reality, in a global way as well as inside global issues.

The nuances of the linguistic and meta-linguistic features of the language and the roles they play in meaning making can therefore be explored from many perspectives.

In this way, the teacher remains a central player in the learning but has also become a manager of the resources, including the technology, choosing and directing how and what to use to provide optimum learning opportunities. Both student and teacher can be involved in the practice and expression of language within these new parameters as learning creators together, exchanging knowledge and ideas on appropriate technology and useful practices.

This teacher–learner collaboration might play out in several ways:

- through selective and intelligent use of the Internet and its array of communication options linking with a global community;
- by devising and expressing more personalised language communication with software such as Windows Movie Maker and Dreamweaver; or
- by drawing on models and content of commercially prepared language learning programs.

The technology then becomes a multifaceted medium for the message.

The expectation is therefore that learners might develop not only effective language skills but also become willing and able intercultural communicators.

What was once considered a mechanical adjunct to learning, technology now sits comfortably inside the philosophical framework of interaction and intercultural language learning.

ICT and CMC are key components in the suite of digitised technology offering supported language learning in a truly contemporary and relevant setting and as such are integral to the practices of the International Studies Faculty.

Ms Lorraine Thornquist is Director of International Studies at Brisbane Girls Grammar School. This article originally appeared in the school's 2007 Annual Report at <http://www.bggs.qld.edu.au/downloads/AnnualReportweb.pdf>