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Book review

Language Learning Online: Towards Best Practice, Uschi Felix (ed.) Swets & Zeitlinger Publisher, Language Learning and Language Technology Technology series, The Netherlands, 2003. ISBN 90 265 1948 6. 214 pp.

This is a collection of articles from different experts across Europe, Australia and Northern America. They all work in the area of language teaching and learning and are prominent experts in the subject domain. The book has been structured in three parts: Design, Tools, and Pedagogy. The idea is to draw together the crucial elements of building a successful learning environment for language teaching and learning. This book can be said to be the first of its kind in Europe: a book that is not just about one side of CALL or WELL, but actually looks at the entire scenario and takes the reader through the various aspects giving him/her practical pointers, pedagogic ideas and food for thought along the way.

The Design section deals with the set-up of an online language learning course or setting. The first of the two authors in this section, Dominique Hémard, writes about designing towards user acceptability. By this he means the kind of designs where the focus is on usability and user-centeredness. The supporting content for this kind of design comes from the field of Human Computer Interaction (HCI). In his design thinking he is not talking about instructional design per se, but software or application design. The article touches upon some of the pedagogical considerations as well, but only in passing. This is probably a planned editorial policy, since this section of the book deals mainly with the technological aspects of CALL. One may question, however, how these two can be kept apart and what purpose would that serve. Nevertheless, this article is a very helpful introduction to the world of design concepts and does build nicely into the design themes discussed later in the volume (e.g. in Bangs, Felix and Davies's articles).

Robert Godwin-Jones in turn examines the creation of a web course site from the perspective of adapting general-use software specifically for language learning use. The emphasis is not on "what" is being used, but on "how" it is being used. He walks us through a multitude of different web-based applications (including some Learning Management Systems, LMS) and very informatively explains their suitability and shortcomings in respect to various language teaching purposes. The article is very concrete and instructive; it certainly gives the reader good pointers as to how and where/how to start setting up web-based learning sites. It would have been interesting to read a few lines on the "why" this or that software is being used along with the "how": that is, what the teacher is aiming at achieving with the use of a certain course structure or integrated electronic feature, or how that addition/feature is a part of the desired chain of events in a given course.

The Tools section consists of four articles covering various aspects of technological applications and their adaptability to language learning. Stewart Arneil and Martin Holmes write about "Servers, clients, testing and teaching". Even if the title is quite far-

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reaching, the article is mainly concerned with the technical aspects and details, giving the reader essential guidelines and specifications in the area. It is an intense information package on metadata, LMS's, student tracking mechanisms, standardisation, and the very current idea of learning objects. Despite the "techie" content, the writers share their expertise and pedagogical ideas about implementation and use of the various technological possibilities in a way that it is easy for even a non-technical reader to follow.

Paul Bangs's article could easily be placed in the Pedagogy section of the book. It emphasises the fact that without solid pedagogy any given tool is as good as the next one. He writes about feedback as one of the cornerstones in learning and about how that feedback can be planned, structured and individualised. He also, to my great delight, raises the issue of instructional design being the bridge between pedagogy, academic design, and the interactivity of an application. He spends a considerable amount of time substantiating his point about the importance of designing feedback mechanisms both from the point of view of the learner, but also from the medium used. His partial answer to the issue is the MALTED authoring tool that uses a flexible template approach for easy creation of various types of exercises using different media elements.

Lesley Shield's introduction to MOO's in language teaching and learning is a comprehensive account of the ideology, educational use and language learning advantages of these environments. The writer is right in saying that language teachers' use of these environments is not very wide-spread due to different misconceptions and lack of knowledge of how these could be meaningfully utilised as a part of a language course. She offers ample advice for the non-technical user and presents different learning situations and contexts with actual examples of learning activities. This thorough description of MOO's and MUD's in a language learning setting will unquestionably help teachers understand the idea of these environments and their contribution to more novel ways of teaching and learning languages.

Patrik Svensson expands the range of available tools towards virtual realities and even mobile technologies. In his article he examines the constructivist learning theories in the context of a three-year Virtual Wedding project. In this project the writer and his colleagues have attempted at creating a language learning environment where language learning meets the ideas of social worlds, where non-physical and physical spaces and virtual realities are bundled up into a visual, hypertextual learning arena. The objectives of the project, the realisation of the pedagogical ideas and the students' appreciation of the learning setting all sound very encouraging. The only "surprising" element is the attempted use of Bloom's taxonomy as the basis for skills development. For there are several language professionals who question the taxonomy's worth and accuracy for today's language learning.

In the first article of the Pedagogy section the editor of the volume, Uschi Felix takes on the challenge of identifying and closing the missing links in online language learning. The challenge is by no means minute. The three missing links the author identifies in her article are the lack of proper feedback mechanisms, the challenge of creating online learner communities and the need for (better) systems for teaching and learning oral skills. She closes these links by offering ways in which these shortcomings can be met at least half way. She first presents different pedagogical perspectives and goes on to describe various online facilities that offer advanced features for language learning. The article is mostly about language courses that are offered completely online. One

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may ask if this really is how we language professionals want to face the future of language learning. Distance learning is a branch on its own, but as far as at least partial campus-based language learning is concerned, wouldn't it be best to treat online and offline teaching as different entities and make suitable combinations of these two?

Regine Hampel and Eric Baber examine the use of Internet-based audio-graphic and video conferencing tools for language learning. They first look at the available tools and then place these in different learning settings within different course designs. They highlight ways in which meaningful learning activities can be built around these tools and how these affect the way in which the teacher and learner roles are defined in these learning situations. The reader will get a good grasp of the potential of the medium and is given lots of points to consider when setting up courses where these tools are used.

Graham Davies offers in his article perspectives on offline and online training initiatives. He emphasises the need for proper training for language teachers as an ongoing process and not just on a one-off basis. He outlines the type of content suitable for this kind of training and draws examples from the ICT for Language Teachers (ICT4LT) online training course. He goes on to present some solutions for the training issues in form of the New Opportunities Fund training initiative and the CILT-NOF, ICT4LT and Tallent projects. Despite the fact that the situation and solutions are a bit UK-based, the reader gets a very good idea of the current situation. The author's many years of experience in the field is clearly visible in his approach to the topic.

One area that has been left almost to its own devices for one reason or another is the assessment and evaluation mechanisms and forms that would support and promote the ideas of the autonomous learner and life-long learning in technology supported learning environments. This certainly is a theme that deserves a book of its own, but it is becoming more and more difficult to design language learning environments without paying extra attention to the ways in which evaluation and assessment would accommodate the various learning processes, learner styles and course objectives. Evaluation as a process tool is not just about feedback, tests and quizzes, it is an integral element of the pedagogical implementation of a course or any other learning setting. This point does come across in some of the articles, but still not as an area of focus on its own.

Somewhere in the book, it would have been interesting to hear commentaries and perhaps even critical voices on the things said. As we all know, development and advancement of ideas is most likely to occur in an environment of diversified opinions. Also, it is becoming more and more evident that CALL/WELL will eventually need to evolve towards more multi-disciplinary outlook involving ideas from educational scientists, sociologists, educational psychologists, applied linguists and so on. Inviting contributions from people from these areas in books like this would be one step in that direction.

All in all, this book is definitely recommended reading for anybody interested in developing technology-enhanced language learning environments. It offers an up-to-date view into the world of CALL/WELL. Uschi Felix has succeeded in finding suitable and qualified authors for the different aspects of the area to create an optimal mix for the reader. The book definitely maintains a good balance between the technological and pedagogical aspects and approaches, and is clearly written by people who know their business.

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