Social Computing and CALL

Gary Motteram
University of Manchester, UK

Abstract

The term social computing was introduced into the world of CALL by Debski and colleagues in 1997. In 2006, the terms social software, social computing and Web2 are ideas that are exercising the minds of many in the general computing world and tools that enable us to work socially across networks like blogs and wikis are much in vogue. As CALL practitioners have already been thinking about ways that computing can be social for what is much longer than many, should these new tools hold any fascination for teachers and learners?

Recently in the Weekly Guardian there were four articles on the “learner of the future” which considered the notion of the learner and CALL from a variety of perspectives. Mark Warschauer looks at three divides that are being broken down: between EFL and ESL; digital haves and have nots; between language and technology in the classroom. He argues that the growth of technology is making us rethink our ideas about English itself, for example between EFL and ESL, so that people in so-called-EFL contexts like China are now not only able to access English through the teacher and the textbook, but also via the internet. He points out that the digital divide is a continuum and while many people in the developing world may never own a computer (despite the promise of the $100 windup version), they are still able to access the information that the internet provides either through shared computing access, or other devices like mobile phones, for example. The final view he expresses is that both English and technology can work in tandem to support communication between diverse groups and access to global information sources and the role of language classrooms is to both teach English in tandem with technology in order to enable our learners to have a broader range of skills.

In my own article, I argue that in many cases we are missing opportunities to make use of 21st century tools to enhance the link between the classroom and the real world. I propose that we should be using the tools that our learners use to motivate them and show them that there are good reasons why they should learn other languages and that this process can also be fun. I advocate, like Debski and colleagues, the use of project work and other forms of “social computing” to encourage the students to take an active role in their learning and to go beyond the classroom.

Graddol in his article takes a rather more jaundiced view of the whole process and focuses on what Bax (who provides the fourth article in this series) would describe as restricted CALL. He emphasises the limited vision that he believes many CALL practitioners have had and the way that many people are still looking to CALL to provide the ‘killer application’, that will enable us to be able to learn language effortlessly using one of Skinner’s teaching machines. This might be what technologists describe as a Web 1 view of CALL.

What Bax in his article points out is that although many of us carry digital technologies around with us and these are normalised, we do not make the associations between what
we do on an everyday basis and what we do in the classroom. Many teachers take off (or turn off) our wearable technologies as we enter the classroom and persist in only trying to make use of boxes we find in schools, colleges and universities as a kind of teaching machine. In the same way that we are increasingly emphasising the blends between technology and f2f learning, we should be trying to look at ways that Web1 and Web2 technologies can work in tandem to provide a range of access to useful language work and activity. Bax argues in a similar way in an earlier article on the same theme (Bax, 2003).

What underpins many of these discussions is sociocultural theory that has its origins in Vygotsky and although we see these ideas mentioned by a variety of advocates of good practice in CALL, sociocultural theory has often played second fiddle to SLA because it is not principally a theory of language learning, but more one of general educational processes. Working as I do in a School of Education rather than a School of Languages, I am very interested in taking the particular contexts of learning into account, rather than emphasising specific language development and prefer to think of activities as sociocultural.

This talk will show via four different projects currently being undertaken by students how different tools can be used in a variety of combinations to help support the learning of languages and language teacher education and how underlying learning theories help these students to rationalise what they are doing and justify their choices of technologies as well as tasks.

References