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Teaching Online: Tools and techniques, options and opportunities

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Recent developments in the worlds of technology and the internet have opened up a whole host of opportunities for teaching and learning online. Readily available hardware, high speed connections and an explosion of interactive online tools, dubbed 'Web 2.0', mean online courses are no longer restricted to the correspondence model of emailed articles and self-study materials. And yet, many teachers may find themselves in the position of being asked to create and deliver courses, either fully online or with online components, with little or no support in how best to use and exploit the resources available.

It is this situation that *Teaching Online* seeks to address (a situation in which one of the authors, Lindsay Clandfield, found himself when asked to develop an online programme for the first time (p.3)). With this in mind, *Teaching Online* assumes no previous experience of this mode of teaching on the part of the reader. In support of this, a series of Web 2.0 tools are introduced, along with ideas about how to use them. However, the authors do not merely list resources and focus on the technology; they also consider how to promote group interaction, organise collaborative work and encourage learner autonomy, even when the students are unable to meet face to face.

As with other titles in the *DELTA Teacher Development* series, the book is divided into three parts, A, B and C. Part A focuses first on the factors that need to be considered when designing a course, looking at different contexts in which teachers may be operating, such as working freelance or teaching young learners. The authors also present overviews across the spectrum of online teaching options, from supplementing a face-to-face course, to a blended learning programme, to a fully online course. This overview includes a useful series of sample plans for the first two weeks of teaching in each of the various modes discussed, which give a good impression of how a course may be organised.

Part A continues with a presentation of software in the shape of Web 2.0 tools that may be used for an online course, incorporating options for the main course site, as well as resources for learning activities. There is a potential issue here as the ever-changing, rapidly expanding world of the modern internet means new tools are appearing all the time and ones existing at the time of publication may be discontinued, as has already happened with

the shared whiteboard tool Etherpad, for example. The authors address this issue in a simple but effective way, offering recommended search terms for each category so the reader can find alternative options when necessary.

Part A concludes with a discussion of how to establish and manage a good group dynamic between the course participants. The suggestions are simple but effective and easy to implement. Furthermore, coming directly after the software section, this focus on the frequently overlooked human factor, which the authors refer to as 'liveware', serves as a good reminder that it is the people involved in a course who matter more than the technology.

Part B contains a rich collection of seventy different activities that can be used or adapted for online courses. These are presented in five different chapters covering introductory lessons ('The Starting Line'), the four skills ('Reading and Writing Online', and 'Listening and Speaking Online'), language, feedback and assessment ('Language and Evaluation Online'), and concluding the course ('The Finishing Line'). The activities are varied, including both synchronous and asynchronous lessons and individual and collaborative work. A high level of student involvement and personalisation is encouraged, together with an emphasis on interaction between all course participants. All of the activities are presented clearly with a list of necessary web tools, things that need to be prepared in advance, a detailed lesson procedure and follow-up suggestions. The sheer volume of activities together with the variations suggested mean this section is a valuable resource for all online teachers, whether experienced or not.

Part C focuses on the teacher by exploring online opportunities 'to create and sustain your own personalised development' (p.91). Once again, a clear and concise presentation of the methods of online development is given, covering long-established modes such as discussion groups and personal blogs, as well as relatively recent trends like micro-blogging. The authors offer valuable advice on how to get started and then take your involvement further before recommending some of their own favourites. This section, and indeed the book itself, draws to a conclusion with two useful reminders: first of all, that despite the extensive online opportunities available, established face-to-face professional development still has an important role to play; and secondly, the ever-changing face of the internet means online Personal Learning Networks and online learning itself will always be in a state of development.

If there is one criticism to be made of *Teaching Online*, it is that it lacks references and suggestions for further reading. That is not to say that the discussion of the issues is in any way lacking as the authors cover the main points with great clarity ensuring the book remains practical and accessible. However, references could have been useful for anyone wishing to pursue certain aspects of the topics covered in more detail.

For anyone who is new to online teaching, this book is essential both as a pedagogical and a practical guide. The issues and factors to be considered when implementing an online course are discussed in an easily accessible manner. Moreover, the wealth of resources and ideas presented is comprehensive, meaning even experienced online practitioners will benefit from reading it. With internet-based delivery playing an increasing role in language learning and education in general, *Teaching Online* is a must for teachers looking to get started in or already involved in this rapidly-expanding field.

Biodata

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