

Article

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Preface to the Special Edition

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With the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies and the widespread availability of laptop computers and mobile phones connected to wireless networks, the integration of digital technologies is increasingly seen as an inevitable factor in education over the next five to ten years. What influence if any will these new technologies have on pedagogy?

In this special edition of the journal, we present four papers and two book reviews linked to the **Third International Wireless Ready Symposium: Digital Technologies in Language Education** <http://wirelessready.nucba.ac.jp> held in Nagoya, Japan, in February 2009. Over the last two decades language education has consistently demonstrated that it is one of the most dynamic interdisciplinary areas for the development of learning technologies. The rise of digital content has confirmed this with language educators often being at the forefront of classroom applications of mobile learning, interactive whiteboards and emerging technologies such as blogs, wikis, social networking sites and podcasting.

In this vein the International Wireless Ready Symposium series began in 2007 and was the first to address the pedagogical implications of Web 2.0 and digital and wireless technologies in relation to computer assisted language learning (CALL) in Japan. All three events to date have featured live audio, video and keynote presentations in tandem with simultaneous meetings in Second Life. The papers in this issue explore and interrogate a number of interrelated concepts often associated with digital technologies in education, including Marc Prensky's terms 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants' and the pedagogical implications and potential of course management systems (CMS) and social networking sites (SNS).

Prensky's two terms have achieved widespread use but they have rarely been explored by empirical studies in great depth. While at an intuitive level the concept of 'digital natives' says something important about changing patterns of use and access among today's learners, it needs to be subject to more national, international and disciplinary-specific research. In **ICT Usage and Student Perceptions in Cambodia and Japan** Elwood and MacLean deconstruct a number of inherent assumptions in this overly used term, showing how the 'generation' of digital natives is far from homogenous. Their detailed analysis of willingness to use technology (WUT) in relation to issues of access and anxiety is one of the first to explore the wider cross-cultural implications of 'digital natives' in an Asian context.

The second article, **Blending Learning in a Web 2.0 World**, provides an overview of the opportunities afforded by Web-based applications and the implications for developing new forms of course delivery. Arguing against Prensky's assumption that 'digital immigrant' teachers do not possess the skills to effectively engage today's students, Motteram and Sharma foreground a number of blended-learning strategies that can be deployed to enhance face-to-face learning environments. While research by language educators into the use of learning technologies has often been innovative, it has also frequently been accused of lacking a rigorous research context. Motteram and Sharma address this issue, outlining how advances in the application of learning technologies have to be situated in the wider context of research on second language acquisition (SLA) and pedagogical theory in general.

One of the most ubiquitous digital technologies to impact the educational sphere over the last five years has been the course management system (CMS) or virtual learning environment (VLE). In **Course Management Systems and Implications for Practice** Daniels focuses on the rationale behind choosing and using these Web-based systems, describing trends and implications for proprietary systems such as Blackboard and open source ones like Moodle. The latest trend focusing on personalised learning is also examined in relation to personal learning environments (PLE), thus opening up a discussion about the underlying strategic use of course management systems for maintaining administrative control of instructors and learners or developing pedagogy.

Since 2005 the growth of global social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn, as well as national ones like Mixi in Japan, have experienced phenomenal growth and popularity. In the final article, **Identity in Online Communities: Social Networking Sites and Language Learning**, Harrison and Thomas explore the background to the use of social networking sites in education, focusing in particular on a brief case study on Livemocha, reputedly the first SNS to be targeted specifically at language learners. Adopting an ethnographic approach, the article examines a number of key concepts that have been used to understand online community formation and development while focusing on a group of international language learners in Japan.

In addition to these four articles, **two book reviews** by Wireless Ready presenters (van Amelsvoort and White) discuss books on digital literacies and digital natives that will be of relevance to teachers and researchers interested in the intersection of digital technologies, foreign language learning and the new forms of pedagogy that are currently being negotiated.

While often viewed as a peripheral area of research, computer assisted language learning is one of the most fascinating zones to examine *vis-à-vis* the development of digital pedagogies. In *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age* Beetham and Sharpe (2007: 4) argue that digital technologies are not merely concerned with incremental changes in the nature of pedagogy, but with “a paradigm shift with specific and multiple impacts on the nature of knowledge in society, and therefore on the nature of learning”. It is hoped that the articles in this special edition and the work of the International Wireless Ready Symposium in Japan will continue to contribute to this conversation about technology and the future of pedagogy in a digital age.

Michael Thomas
Guest Editor