

## AN INTRODUCTION TO WIRELESS READY: READY OR NOT?

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### INTRODUCTION

The one-day international symposium, *Wireless Ready: Podcasting Education and Mobile Assisted Language Learning*, was held at the Graduate School of Nagoya University of Commerce & Business Administration (NUCB) in Japan on Saturday, 24th March 2007. Although only a one-day event, it was notable for a number of reasons, not least among which is its status as the first event in Japan to consider the impact of so-called Web 2.0 or 'emergent technologies' on foreign language education (Stockwell and Levy, 2006). Moreover, the opening keynote address by Professor Steve McCarty, President of the World Association of Online Education, was one of the first in Japan, if not the first, to include a simultaneous presentation in real-time and in the 3D virtual world of Second Life <[www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)>. Levy (2007) situates these emergent technologies on his CALL version of Gartner's Hype Cycle, both indicating their current prominence while also contextualising them beside established CALL. The question posed by Levy's schema, as well as the *Wireless Ready* event, is to what extent these new Web 2.0 technologies will continue to exert an influence in two to three years time.

In essence, *Wireless Ready* was about assessing the turn towards digital technologies and digital literacies, the pedagogical risks involved in this process, and the opportunities and resistances presented by institutions that

help or hinder learning technologists. The focus on Web 2.0 and the potential of such applications as Second Life appositely reinforced these challenges and grew from the mood that enabled *Time Magazine* to name 'You' - effectively a new kind of digital everyman - as person of the year 2006.

### DIGITAL DEMOCRACY AND WEB 2.0

Indeed, in its first edition of January 2007, Lev Grossman outlined a compelling if overly idealistic vision of Web 2.0 as a contributor to a new form of what he calls 'digital democracy,' a concept built on the potential of online media to enhance collaboration and participation between as well as within nations:

The 'great man' theory of history is usually attributed to the Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle, who wrote that 'the history of the world is but the biography of great men.' He believed that it is the few, the powerful and the famous who shape our collective destiny as a species. That theory took a serious beating this year [2006]. (Grossman, 2007, p. 22).

As opposed to a narrative history of 2006 that focused on a series of socio-political events that sprang, it could be argued, from a failure to collaborate - the war in Iraq or conflicts in the Middle East to name but two prominent

examples - it is possible, as well as desirable, to view the history of 2006 from a different perspective altogether. The result is a rather postmodernist perspective in which margins are enfranchised against dominant centres of power and influence, this time however with the explicit use of technology:

But look at 2006 through a different lens and you'll see another story, one that isn't about conflict or great men. It's a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It's about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people's network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes. ... The new Web is ... a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter. Silicon Valley consultants call it Web 2.0, as if it were a new version of some old software. But it's really a revolution. (Grossman, 2007, p. 22).

Hardly any politicians talk this way these days - wresting power from the few, making millions of people matter, a revolution in lesser terms - as polls show them that floating voters in western democracies don't appreciate such rhetorical flourishes or unrealizable utopian visions. If Grossman is to be believed, Web 2.0 is synonymous with a new principle of collaboration, based on a foundational commitment to a concept of community, and in its most utopian fashion, supports a new form of 'digital democracy' (p. 23) grounded on participation. It's a compelling vision of course, one which leads all the way to a fully participative democracy in which individual citizens register their views from the comfort of

their own armchair with a wireless remote control. It is a vision that has existed for thirty years or more among its chief advocates, and one that is still immensely relevant today as the technology makes it increasingly realizable, at least in theory.

On the other hand, Grossman also acknowledges what many educators not so easily inebriated by such claims already know, while also urging us to suspend our intolerance of new ideas and disbelief:

Sure, it's a mistake to romanticize all this any more than is strictly necessary. Web 2.0 harnesses the stupidity of crowds as well as its wisdom. Some of the commentators on YouTube make you weep for the future of humanity just for the spelling alone, never mind the obscenity and the naked hatred. But that's what makes all this interesting. Web 2.0 is a massive social experiment, and like any experiment worth trying, it could fail. ... It's a chance for people to look at a computer screen and really genuinely wonder who's out there looking back at them. (Grossman, 2007, p. 23)

Indeed, in opposition to this perspective, a number of critics of web 2.0 have emerged from the pack to rightly highlight its pejorative uses, not least among which is the increasing focus on security issues concered with social networking spaces like MySpace.com.

According to Grossman's vision at least, Web 2.0 is seen in revolutionary terms as a social experiment in increased participation on the socio-political level even it it risks carrying with it the mob element. As Johnson (2007) comments, 'Web 1.0 was organized around pages, Web 2.0 is organized around people' (p. 49). Whether this vision of what seems to be a Web 2.0 manifesto will be realized or not is very much a moot question, which we must also

balance against the increasing reality of cybercrime, cyberbullying and participant apathy. No mention here either of the digital divide - while consultants in Silicon Valley might call it Web 2.0, it is not clear to what extent this applies to participants in the developing and underdeveloped world.

### **WEB 2.0 AND PEDAGOGY**

One of the questions posed by wireless ready is the extent to which it is possible to translate the claims behind much of Web 2.0 into pedagogical practices, particularly in the language classroom, an area that has attracted most of the attention thus far in terms of Web 2.0 education. The innovative opening presentation of Wireless Ready grappled with this question and set the tone for the program as a whole. Using the virtual workshop facilities provided by the Consultants-e on EduNation <[www.theconsultants-e.com](http://www.theconsultants-e.com)>, a private island simulator dedicated to online training seminars and conferences, McCarty dexterously showed his presentation slides to two audiences at the same time. Measuring some 65,000 m<sup>2</sup> in size, EduNation provides seminar, Powerpoint, audio and videocast facilities, and McCarty demonstrated the use of voice and text chat interaction, as well as other features that could be useful to students and teachers in the language classroom. The presentation contributed in no small way to achieving the main objective of the event, namely to provide an innovative space to assemble foreign language educators and researchers working with the newly emerging technologies, an area where as yet few substantive in-depth research-based studies have appeared, and to motivate them about some of the possibilities and challenges ahead.

Of course, if there is a danger in holding events about new and emerging learning technologies these days, it is to consider the role of technologies only from the point of view of the teacher, and to be guided, more often than not, by an enthusiastic and uncritical engagement with the potential of the technology at the expense of what students can or would want to achieve. The second concomitant danger is to ignore the consequences for syllabi and curricula. In a Japanese EFL context this is danger that educational technologists must resist. Wireless Ready sought to avoid such pitfalls by adopting a more critical perspective towards the new and emergent technologies, treating them as technologies in search of a pedagogy, and subjecting them to a process of interrogation, contextualization and critique from the perspective of our learners as much as from that of instructors. As a consequence, many of the paper presentations were far from affirmative in their engagement with the issues, and much of the research was presented in the form of actual case studies about student motivation and learning outcomes.

Wireless Ready assembled an international audience of approximately seventy participants with speakers coming from all over the world. The schedule of the one-day program consisted of three keynote presentations - Professor Steve McCarty (Osaka Jogakuin College, Japan), Dr. Christopher Houser (Kinjo Gakuin University, Japan) and Dr. Michael Vallance (Future University, Hokkaido, Japan) - as well as ten further presentations from four panels involving a total of twelve presenters in all. At the conclusion of the event the keynote speakers reassembled for a final panel discussion to consider the future implications of Web 2.0 in terms of its much heralded attempt to offer a transformation of teaching, learning and research in the area of education in general and

foreign language education in particular. At the last moment, Michael Coghlan, our planned keynote speaker from Australia was unable to attend. Nevertheless, a version of his paper is included here, and it provides an interesting non-Japanese perspective on these CALL issues, especially of an emerging critical attitude toward social networking sites. The geographical rootedness of the remaining presenters in Japan provided a fascinating insight into the country's infrastructural support as well as resistance to the new technologies, giving a snapshot of one of the world's most innovative and dynamic educational environments for the exploration of learning technologies in the classroom.

Indeed, as the title of the symposium suggested, the event attempted to reflect on a matrix of contemporary educational technologies, primarily the importance of pervasive wireless networks, the growth of Web 2.0 instructional technologies such as podcasting, as well as that of a new term to enter into recent discussion of CALL-related environments, mobile or m-Learning. All of these emergent technologies are currently riding the wave of popularity (Levy, 2007), though time and increased exposure will determine if they become part of a more established CALL tradition. The growth of wireless networks over the last ten years has been one of the most significant campus-wide technologies. Wireless networks have become a must-have acquisition by administrators, although they do bring attendant risks in the form of security, privacy and health issues. Though new standards promoting greater connectivity, as well as faster and more secure networks have emerged in recent years, wi-fi is still an unproven area, and its implications for pedagogy need to be more carefully examined. Nevertheless, it is fairly safe to say in the short-term that the massive

investment in wi-fi in educational infrastructure around the world will contribute a great deal to the terrain of existing innovations in educational technology for some time to come.

Kukulska-Hulma's (2005) study of mobile learning was one of the first to define the field. Following from this Chinnery (2006), coined the term Mobile Assisted Language Learning to reflect the growing prominence of mobile devices in language education, the unique ubiquity of such devices as mobile phones, and their incorporation into formal learning environments. Similarly, this area of research has emerged over the last couple of years via prominent projects from educational institutions as well as regional organizations such as the European Union. Wireless Ready was concerned with recognizing the increasing interdependence between these areas and the effect they are having on learning environments.

Since O'Reilly first coined the term in 2005, Web 2.0 has grown in widespread use as much as it is been reviled as nothing more than the latest marketing strategy of a new generation of Silicon Valley Internet start-ups. As it has been seen as a term that clarifies and defines a newly emergent terrain, it has also been easily dismissed for its obscurantist tendencies, seen from this perspective as nothing more than a marketing gimmick devoid of real and enduring substance.

In business as in education, Web 2.0 technologies need to reflect on their potential and clarify whether what is associated with them can be realizable in a learning environment. Clearly the apparent emphasis on increased collaboration, convergence, individualization, and portability helps to explain their instant appeal. In blogging, podcasting, wikis, social networking spaces, social bookmarking, on-demand video, and virtual worlds such as Second Life, there are a plethora of new

networks and activities that appeal to language educators working in a broadly constructivist or communicative context.

At Wireless Ready it was possible to see the influence of Web 2.0 themes in a number of presentations: text-based blogs (*Carney*); video blogging (*Gromik*); podcasting (*Gatton*; *Chartrand & Pellowe*; *Diem & Rabbinni*; *Lu*); mobile learning (*Chen*; *Houser*); and ipods (*McCarty*; *Kikuchi*; *Vallance*). These areas - podcasting, on-demand video, blogs - have been most conducive to language learning, if popularity is anything to go by.

As chair of the organizing committee, the impetus behind the event developed somewhat from my personal circumstances, and my university's evident commitment to learning environments for second language education that were greatly supported by a substantial investment in learning technologies. As I began work at NUCB in September 2002, one of the first signs to greet my eyes on entering the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Asian Studies, was a sticker attached to the window beside the main entrance. It read simply, 'wireless ready'. For five years previously I had been teaching at a large state university in Germany, one vastly different to those found in the Japanese higher education system, boasting a history stretching back over seven hundred years, approximately 30,000 students, nearly 800 professors, and twenty-two faculties, from medicine to architecture. Only very recently, however, had it begun to consider the role of e-Learning technologies to supplement traditional presence-based teaching. A new project allowing students to borrow laptop computers with integrated wireless LAN cards from the university's computing centre was just being floated as I was in the process of leaving, and it seemed as if it would take a few years before the funding would filter down to the foreign

languages departments from the more prominent and well-funded institutes in medicine and the natural sciences. At that point my department had only four Windows desktop computers, albeit newly connected to the university's cable network, all tucked into a small corner of its ground floor Self Access Centre. On arriving at my new university in Japan, considerably smaller in scale and size, I was surprised to see each new first year student carrying a brand new Apple iBook computer on their first day at university, and later to see all students from years 2, 3 and 4 with wireless iBooks. Within one year all staff, students and administrators were using the Blackboard Course Management System, and an Internet-based enrollment management system, to track student grades, attendance and credits. As Apple's iPods became popular, all freshmen students were given iPod Shuffles and faculty were requested to consider the pedagogical applications of this new technology especially for listening courses.

On entering other buildings on campus, from those in the administration block and beyond to social spaces such as the library and cafeteria, I was met with a similar 'wireless ready' signs. While the buildings and the students' new Apple iBook computers were able to support wireless internet connections, in the succeeding weeks and months I was frequently led to ask myself if it was only the computers that were wireless ready? What about the teaching faculty? Were they aware of the changing dynamics that a wireless network can bring to learning environments? Had any of them given anything more than a passing glance to the signs of a wireless environment that without official announcement was being constructed on campus? The same applied of course to the primary focus of all our pedagogical activity, the undergraduate students

themselves. They all had what looked on paper to be a tremendously powerful piece of equipment to aid their foreign language learning in the shape of their wireless iBooks, but most of them used them for downloading (typically illegal) music or playing computer games. Students rarely carried their iBooks to classes as they were too heavy.

When later I regularly taught at the university's Graduate School, feedback on the use of wireless laptops changed considerably. While for undergraduate students, their iBooks were a cumbersome piece of equipment for students already overloaded with books, dictionaries, folders and lunchboxes, the postgraduate students were rarely to be seen without them, either in class or walking around campus. Wireless ready in this respect clearly depended on the target group (Thomas, 2005, 2006). The same reticence to use iBooks was evident in the faculty members too, some of whom would rather be seen carrying a rather large and unfashionable audio cassette recorder or CD player to class than a much more portable and slim notebook computer. When one day all of the audio cassette and CD players were in use and a teacher required a CD player for her lesson, she was amazed when I suggested using her iBook computer and attaching it to the room speakers. Everyone knew the speakers were there, but few faculty members took the few seconds necessary to plug the audio cable into their iBooks. While the buildings were wireless ready, the faculty and students had been little prepared to explore the learning environments that they worked in each day, and to consider the way technology had been used to enhance them. Over the next couple of years the university continued to invest in digital technology that could support its wireless network environment, each time making improvements but not always taking

faculty and students with them in terms of an exploration of the pedagogical implications.

## CONCLUSION

Based on this context, the papers collected here then, engage with a number of emergent trends in Information and Communication Technologies in general and CALL in particular. They are some of the first to map the terrain of wireless learning environments and the digital literacy skills that are required by a new generation of digital natives, whether instructors or students. We hope that these papers will contribute to the ongoing conversation about the most effective strategies to deploy in teaching and learning in an age of digital literacy.

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