

Taking Class Online

I have been fascinated by the explosion of web-based computer programs that have potential for use in schools. It seems to me that a new website, program, or tool is developed on a weekly (perhaps daily?) basis and that the possibilities are endless for teaching all subject areas — especially languages. As someone who considers herself fairly technologically savvy, I embrace these new opportunities, and yet I often feel overwhelmed by the sheer quantities of new sites and programs for education. Teachers with whom I have spoken on this topic report feeling that their students are miles ahead of them — and that the gap gets wider each day. Most teachers are uncomfortable with this lack of understanding of web-based technologies and want to do something about it. The good news is that getting into these technologies can be easy — and fun!

Just as the song goes, “Let’s start from the very beginning.” Here are some of the most popular Web 2.0 technologies currently available on the Internet plus suggested websites for you to explore:

Web 2.0

This term refers to the “second version” of web applications. It is similar to the labeling of software when it gets an update (i.e., “Version 3.1 of Microsoft Word”). Web 2.0 technologies include blogs, wikis, and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. These Internet-based services allow users to collaborate, share, and co-construct multimedia documents and websites.

■ Try Classroom 2.0 (www.Classroom20.com) for a community of teachers using Web 2.0 technologies in their classrooms

Blogs

Blogs can be used as online portfolios or journals. They allow users to build a website with chronological postings of text (often the blogger’s feelings on a given topic), photos, and even to insert audio or video files. Visitors to a blog can comment on the user’s postings, thus creating a dialog between blogger and visitor.

■ Try Blogger (www.Blogger.com) or ClassChatter (www.ClassChatter.com)

Social Networking Sites

Websites that offer users a network on which to post personal profiles, videos, music and other files, and to share the site with invited friends. Users tend to share hobbies, musical tastes, or just connect to old friends via these sites.

■ Try Facebook (www.Facebook.com) or MySpace (www.MySpace.com)

Podcasts

Despite the name, you do not need an iPod to hear a podcast! A podcast consists of a collection of digital sound files that you can access over the Internet. You can subscribe to podcasts, or listen to single episodes.

■ Try iTunes (www.apple.com/education/itunesu/)

Virtual Worlds

Three-dimensional virtual reality worlds like Second Life are online spaces in which users create an “avatar” that allows them to interact with other virtual residents. Universities such as MIT and Harvard are even represented in Second Life, as well as cities like Paris!

■ Try Second Life (www.secondlife.com, note: you must first download free software to your computer to start using Second Life)

Avatar Creation Sites

An avatar is a digital representation of you. You can design your own avatar to look just like you, or you can take on the persona of a famous celebrity, an animal, or a historical figure! Avatar sites often allow users to record their own voice and to send messages to others using the avatar persona.

■ Try Voki (www.voki.com)

Lori Langer de Ramirez
explores new Internet technologies
revolutionizing the language classroom

VoiceThread

This site allows users to upload images, documents, and videos to an online album. Comments in the form of audio files or text can be made and shared with other users. This site allows for group conversations to take place using the materials stores in the user's album.

■ Try VoiceThread (www.VoiceThread.com)

Wikis

A wiki is a website that allows users to edit, delete, or change content on the web. It allows users to collaborate, co-author, or edit information. It can also be used as an easy-to-edit webpage.

■ Try WikiSpaces (www.WikiSpaces.com) or PBWiki (www.PBWiki.com)

Video Sharing Sites

Sites like YouTube and TeacherTube house collections of videos on a seemingly endless array of topics. Registered users can upload videos to their own "channel" and elicit comments from other users of the sites.

■ Try YouTube (www.YouTube.com) or TeacherTube (www.TeacherTube.com)

What these technologies can do for language learning

Web 2.0 technologies allow students to become creators and not merely recipients of knowledge. Whereas in the past, students were sent to the internet to find out information or do research; now they can use the web as an arena in which to share their writing and speaking skills with a worldwide audience. While students can certainly listen to podcasts or read a blog and comment on them, they can also produce their own and receive feedback from native speakers from around the world. Web 2.0 technologies offer an authentic audience for student work and expand the community of learners past the school walls — and across time zones!

According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills students need to come away from their educational experience with the ability to not just consume information, but also to create it.

21st Century Skills (www.21stcenturyskills.org) include:

- 1 Core Subjects & 21st Century Themes
- 2 Learning & Innovation Skills
 - Creativity & Innovation Skills
 - Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills
 - Communication & Collaboration Skills
- 3 Information, Media & Technology Skills
 - Information Literacy
 - Media Literacy
 - ICT Literacy
- 4 Life and Career Skills
 - Flexibility & Adaptability
 - Initiative & Self-Direction
 - Social & Cross-Cultural Skills
 - Productivity & Accountability
 - Leadership & Responsibility

Web 2.0 technologies help educators teach these 21st century skills, while at the same time connecting to the national standards for world languages (ACTFL) and ESL (TESOL). These web-based technologies help students in the language classroom to learn to be flexible and to take initiative. And since students in the language classroom must communicate with people from many different cultures and from all parts of the world, they develop social and cross-cultural skills via the world wide web and the co-construction of knowledge in the target language.

Using web 2.0 technologies in the classroom forces students to expand their problem solving skills as they are required not just to find information, but to judge its worth and accuracy. With the inception of