COMMENTARY

What are the digital wilds?

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Introduction

The scope of this special issue of *Language Learning & Technology* is to explore and deepen our understanding of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) practices in the digital wilds, including, but not limited to, their manifestations, processes, and outcomes (linguistic, sociocultural, cognitive, or didactic). While digitally enhanced, instructed language learning and classroom language learning research are well established fields of study, there remain fewer empirical studies of informal or beyond-the-class digital language learning. This special issue bridges this gap by exploring CALL in the digital wilds. Before moving on to the definition of the digital wilds, it may be worth justifying the selection of this term in the conceptual framing of this special issue.

With respect to the term *digital*, one may question the utility of dedicating a special issue to technology enhanced out-of-class learning only. We argue that the technological dimension in this special issue is not meant to overemphasize the role that digital artifacts play in learning. Instead, it points to the possibilities afforded by digital artifacts, as well as to the increasingly natural and fluid digitally-assisted human interaction, which we consider crucial in enabling spontaneous, user-driven, bottom-up practices that support learning. Developments in technology—such as mobile devices that afford connection and social interaction anytime and anywhere, social networking offline and online, horizontal patterns of connectivity that allow users to create natural bonds based on shared interests—all offer possibilities for user-driven, self- and group- initiated practices that redraw models of production, distribution, and reuse of knowledge. This evolution is perceptible, for instance, in recent sociotechnical developments such as crowdsourcing, digital activism and citizenship science, and the creative practices of online user communities (including fan communities), all of which invite us to redefine the nature of out-of-class language learning that occurs in digital spaces.

It could be argued that the term *wild* is an unusual lexical choice due to its emotional intensity and unconventionality in the education sector. But *wild* asks us to look beyond contexts directly embedded within or linked to formal and highly familiar educational institutions and practices. It pushes us, as Sauro and Chapelle (2017) have argued, to update our understanding of "technology-integrated conceptions of language knowledge and skills" (p. 461) stemming from the full range of technology-mediated contexts in which language learners and users presently communicate and learn. Our own research has shown how, in many instances the institutional and curricular constraints of formal education contexts heavily affect the use of artifacts in classrooms. In Zourou's (in press) recent study regarding the use of technologies in formal education contexts, she claims that technologies—especially those not designed for educational purposes, such as social networking tools—are sometimes "tamed" to fit to curriculum-based, institutional frameworks and requirements, occasionally leading to paradoxical and unreal learner practices. This paradox is illustrated in an article by Sauro and Sundmark (2018) critically examining the blog-based collaborative fanfiction written by students for a university level English class. Although modeled after fanfiction genres found in online fan communities, adherence to assignment instructions driven by curriculum requirements guiding course assessment (see Sauro & Sundmark, 2016) resulted in classroom fanfiction that shared some common features with comparable fanfiction in the wild (e.g., prevalence of

certain characters featured in the stories, use of dialogue), but that diverged broadly in other ways (e.g., the highly segmented nature of the resulting stories, character perspectives).

Understanding the wider context (historical, semiotic, cultural) in which language learning and socialization occurs is key in the pedagogical use of any artifact, particularly for unpredictable technologies. By prescribing learner activity or by confining it to pre-existing scenarios or mainstream assessment practices, we limit our view of the richness of wild technologies and their value in second language (L2) learning. Therefore, the choice of the word *wild* emphasizes the dynamic, unpredictable, erratic character of technologies, especially those not designed for learning purposes, and warns against a pedagogical use in a way that overcontrols this wilderness. In response to the extreme taming of unpredictable technologies, Thorne (2015) moves a step further in arguing for the *rewilding* of education. Specifically, he questions the degree to which the highly predictable and routinized environment of the classroom, with proscribed decision-making and agency granted to learners, is indeed the best environment in which to socialize students into the processes leading to transformation and human development (Little & Thorne, 2017).

In this next section, we situate our working definition of the digital wilds with respect to research on out-of-class learning.

Terminological Considerations

Several Definitions of Out-Of-Class Learning

There are several terms, each of them naturally having its nuances, to address situations that may occur outside the language classroom, with some or no connection to a class environment. These terms are *extramural English* (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012), *online informal learning of English* (Sockett, 2014; Toffoli & Perrot, 2017), and *out-of-class English learning* (Lai, Zhu, & Gong, 2015). The degree of connection to classroom settings may vary. Informal learning is a dedicated topic of scholarly interest in CALL and in education in general (Schugurensky, 2000). It also coincides with out-of-class learning, although a more nuanced approach is useful (Eraut, 2004; Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Another concomitant term is *self-regulated learning* (Schraw, Kauffman, & Lehman, 2006), which has found fertile ground in CALL studies (Lai & Gu, 2011). Although a critical analysis of these terms goes beyond the scope of this commentary, the wealth of studies and the definitory attempts reflect a growing interest in investigating the largely under-explored area of processes and practices that learners develop in out-of-class contexts.

A term which seems to be largely used is *language learning and teaching beyond the classroom* (LBC), adopted by Benson (2011) and Reinders and Benson (2017). Benson's (2011) preliminary model of LBC identifies four main dimensions based on four of the more cited oppositions in the literature: location (out-of-class vs. in-class), formality (informal vs. formal), pedagogy (non-instructed vs. instructed), and locus of control (self-directed vs. other-directed). This model provides a basic framework for analyzing participation in LBC activity and has been further elaborated by Lai et al. (2015) and Reinders and Benson (2017), among others.

CALL in the Digital Wilds: A Working Definition

The call for this special issue applied the following as its working definition of CALL in the digital wilds: "informal language learning that takes place in digital spaces, communities, and networks that are independent of formal instructional contexts" (Sauro & Zourou, 2017). Embedded within this definition are the following assumptions:

- that learning takes place out-of-class within a digital context or community that is not governed or developed by a formally recognized school, university, or education provider;
- that learning does not take place within a digital context or community with a primary goal of language teaching and learning;
- that the impetus to learn in the out-of-class, digital context or community originates in the learner and not from curriculum guidelines, educational policy, or teacher direction; and

- that learning is not directly mediated by curriculum guidelines, educational policy, teacher practice, or norms of evaluation.

This working definition draws upon the description of the digital wilds as "non-instructionally oriented contexts" (Thorne, Sauro, & Smith, 2015, p. 225). In other words, digital wilds are contexts that support social activity, are less controllable or organized than a classroom, "but which present interesting, and perhaps even compelling, opportunities for intercultural exchange, agentive action, and meaning making" (Thorne, 2010, p. 144). Key in understanding this concept is the desire to include student experience and agency and supporting and amplifying opportunities for language learners to participate in and learn from fandom, online gaming, online interest communities, and so forth (Thorne, 2015).

In This Special Issue

In this special issue, we prioritize studies that help explore the nature of self-directed learning, agency, and autonomy as well as the tools and frameworks for understanding and analyzing the complexity of learning in the digital wilds. Finally, in line with the journal's scholarly standards, to be considered for this special issue, proposals had to present in-depth empirical data. Proposals which conceptually explored digital spaces, tools, or communities without placing language learning practices as the focus of the study fell outside the scope of this special issue.

The response to our call for papers exceeded our expectations with 49 initial abstract proposals. Eleven were invited to submit a full paper, of which five were accepted for publication. We would like to note that it was a struggle to select from many excellent submissions and we had to make our decisions with an eye on achieving a broad topic coverage.

There is, however, one additional goal embedded in our call which we did not fully realize. Although we set out to feature research that explored less commonly taught languages, all of the articles contained in this issue address the learning of English (sometimes exclusively or as one of multiple target languages), but among contexts and populations not always foregrounded in CALL research literature. Thus, the articles in this special issue include L2 learners and users in primary schools (ages 7–11), secondary schools (ages 15–16), and universities as well as adults not affiliated in any way with educational institutions. The contributions to this issue reveal the wealth of processes and practices that emerge from users engaged in bottom-up, learner-initiated activity: learners "spread out across Sweden in rural areas, small towns, and cities of various sizes" (Sundqvist, 2019, pp. 90–91), members of Russian- and Spanish-speaking fandom communities (Shafirova & Cassany, 2019), plurilingual fan translators in Catalonia (Vazquez-Calvo, Zhang, Pascual, & Cassany, 2019), university students in Korea (Lee, 2019), and young Danish children between the ages of 7 and 11 (Hannibal Jensen, 2019).

In the first article of this special issue, *Fan translation of games, anime, and fanfiction*, Vazquez-Calvo et al. merge perspectives from participatory culture and new literacy studies to report upon three case studies of fans in Catalonia engaged in different types of fan translation practices. They explore how these intermediate-level users of English and Japanese capitalize upon their fan practices to develop language and cultural knowledge. Among the data analyzed are screencast videos of the fans' translation processes, from the inception of a translation project until its publication. Such detailed data reveal, for example, the resources and procedures the three participants used to resolve the meaning of unfamiliar words, idioms, and culturally bound terms. This includes not only which translation applications the fans used but also how they elicited and responded to feedback and input from fellow fans in online affinity groups. The findings reveal three very different ways in which informal language learning manifests among media fans who engage in highly language-focused fan practices in the digital wilds.

In *Language learning in the wild: A young user perspective*, Hannibal Jensen explores the in-the-wild engagement with L2 English of 15 primary-school children (7–11 years old) in Denmark. Drawing upon activity theory and research on L2 motivation, she examines which social and cognitive motives drove children's use of L2 English in the wild and how they engaged with English as a result of their motives.

The article begins by contextualizing the influential status of English in Denmark, evidenced by its presences at all levels of formal schooling and its visibility in popular and online media to which young children in Denmark are exposed. Descriptive ethnographic interviews elicited primarily social and higher-order cognitive motives behind the children's engagement with English. These included, for instance, the influence of the wider online community of English expertise around digital games that children could choose to play in either English or Danish. Findings from this study also highlight a difference in motives among some of these children regarding their use of English in school compared to English in the wild.

In the third article in this special issue, *Commercial-off-the-shelf games in the digital wild and L2 learner vocabulary*, Sundqvist investigates the relationship between L2 English vocabulary development and the amount of time spent playing commercial digital games in English among Swedish secondary school students in Year 9 (15–16 years old). To examine this relationship, Sundqvist used the following to collect data from more than 1000 Year 9 students at nine different secondary schools: tests of productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge, national test scoring profiles, school leaving certificates, questionnaires regarding students learning and use of L2 English in the wild, and semi-structured interviews with focal participants ($n = 6$). Frequent gamers outperformed all other groups (non-gamers, low-frequent gamers, moderate gamers) on measures of both productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge. Further analysis revealed that the type of game played (single-player, multi-player, massively multiplayer online) was related to frequency of play, and that the frequency of play best predicted L2 vocabulary. Sundqvist's study, while acknowledging that other English-mediated activities in the digital wilds have been shown to contribute to language learning, also provides large-scale evidence of the kind of L2 English vocabulary learning frequent gamers can achieve.

In *Quantity and diversity of informal digital learning of English*, Lee asks whether the quantity and diversity of informal digital learning of English (IDLE) is related to L2 English learning outcomes among Korean university students of English as a foreign language. The study reports on data collected from questionnaires and interviews with 71 L2 English learners enrolled in three universities in Korea. Lee's findings for this population reveal that the quantity of IDLE shares a significant association with confidence and enjoyment of the language, but not with productive language outcomes, standardized English test scores, or anxiety. However, the diversity of IDLE activities learners engaged in was significantly predictive of productive language outcomes, standardized English test scores, and anxiety. As Lee notes, the results of this study stand in contrast to findings of other studies on IDLE carried out among populations of English L2 learners in Nordic contexts, suggesting that culturally situated practices around IDLE may mediate L2 learning outcomes, laying the groundwork for cross-cultural comparative research on learning in the digital wilds.

Returning once again to language learning and use among online media fans, the fifth paper in this special issue, *Bronies learning English in the digital wild* by Shafirova and Cassany, explores how *bronies*, adult fans of the animated television show My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic in Russia and Spain develop and use L2 English to carry out their fan practices within their respective online Russian- or Spanish-speaking fan communities. This study employed interviews and both active and passive observations to elicit examples of L2 English learning and development in both independent and collaborative fan practices. These fan practices included the viewing of episodes, the posting of and commenting on fanart, the collaborative translation of fanfiction from Russian into English, or the fandubbing (i.e., translating, performing, and recording dubbed versions) of episodes from English into Russian. Integral to these fans' learning and development of L2 English is their desire to both interpret and localize media developed in English, as is their desire to communicate and share their locally-made fan works globally through the use of English.

In all five articles, the autonomous and informal online language learning of the L2 learners or users was foregrounded and investigated—whether they were enrolled in formal educational practice in some part of their life or not.

Conclusion and the Way Ahead

Looking ahead, scholars of L2 learning raise their voices in favor of a reconsideration of the classroom research agenda. Among them, Dubreil and Thorne (2017) call for the cultivation of social pedagogies as a means to "bridge between pedagogical amplification in classroom spaces and social action in the world, ultimately giving students the translingual and transcultural tools to participate effectively in complex and diverse communities in the future" (p. 6). They argue that framing L2 pedagogical practices as social pedagogies is an incentive for language educators to seriously envision what it would mean to manage the interface between formal and informal learning contexts and to relate this interface directly to instructed L2 course design.

In a related vein, attention should be brought to the fact that L2 learners increasingly craft learning trajectories through multiple platforms and sites. As Zhao, Lampe, and Ellison (2016) argue, "people make decisions based on their consideration of multiple parameters *across* social media platforms, including audience and norms" (p. 98, emphasis added). The agentive, self-driven character of learning in the digital wilds relates to the concept of autonomy (cf. Chik, 2014; Reinhardt, 2016). This also means that users enact various roles and identities, illustrating the dynamic, user-driven flow of networked activity. It is more and more common that users or language learners act as content producers and engage in collective initiatives online (two examples are crowdsourcing and citizen science). One cannot neglect that this practice is an example among many reflecting new, multi-layered roles and attitudes that L2 learners intentionally adopt in their lives. This aligns with participatory culture (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016) and represents a rich area in which evidence-based research is still scarce (Kessler, 2013), meriting further investigation.

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