

REVIEW OF LEARNING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE VIA PUBLIC INTERNET DISCUSSION FORUMS

Learning Language and Culture via Public Internet Discussion Forums

Barbara E. Hanna and Juliana de Nooy

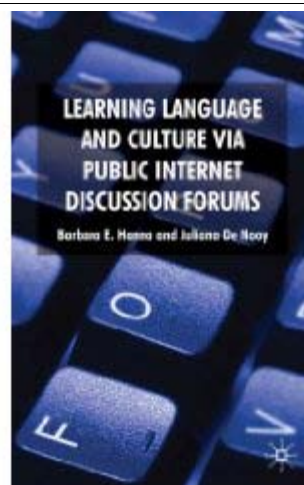
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Review by [Sonja Lind](#), [University of California, Irvine](#)

In *Learning Language and Culture via Public Internet Discussion Forums*, authors Barbara Hanna and Juliana de Nooy ask the reader to reconsider using public Internet forums, a “neglected genre” (p. 1), in language teaching. Forums are, in fact, thriving. According to [Big Boards](#), a forum ranking website, popular discussion forums such as [4chan](#) and [Offtopic.com](#) have attracted 22,000 to 50,000 members and have hosted 127,000,000 to 425,000,000 posts since the sites’ emergence in 2004 and 2001, respectively. And these are just two of thousands of active online forums, many of which are general and cultural discussion forums related to video gaming and role-playing. However, public discussion forums have been excluded from research literature on language learning and technology. As a result, researchers are left with “very little awareness of pedagogical use [of such forums]” (p. 1). Hanna and de Nooy, both lecturers teaching French in Australia, have written this book in response to this research gap. Their purpose is to “look at what happens when culture becomes an issue online” (p. 10). The book is addressed at both teachers and researchers, and it suggests a focus on teaching content, not linguistic accuracy, in the teaching of writing.

The Internet forum originated as a type of electronic bulletin board to which anyone could post information and asynchronously respond to others’ questions or comments on topics as diverse as kite-flying or basket-weaving. Most information on discussion forums is user-generated, but contributors cannot edit others’ entries. This differs from wikis, which allow users to edit entries and act as moderators. In forums, on the other hand, a moderator is often hired to sift through posts and comments. For the most part, these moderators delete inappropriate content such as name-calling and obscenities. Most forums are also text-based, with few visual or auditory elements. Additionally, forums often encourage discussions that, under the wrong circumstances, can become inflammatory: commentators may be personally attacked or “flamed,” and emotions can run high. Knowing how to position oneself in this milieu can be challenging, as Hanna and de Nooy note: “Public Internet discussion is a way of getting to know some of the locals in the global village, but it will mean doing so not only in their language but largely on their terms” (p. 189). In other words, getting to know these locals necessitates learning how to speak in the locals’ own terms. Cultural differences remain, the authors insist, despite the ideal of a borderless, neutral Internet society, and these cultural differences can incite cultural clashes.

As a result, Hanna and de Nooy posit that language teachers should include discussion forums in their curriculum, in order to help language learners develop intercultural communicative competence. They claim that discussion forums can be taught as part of a genre-based approach to writing: “Not only may cultural differences in, for example, letter writing be carried over into a new genre, but a quite different genre altogether (casual conversation, for example) may emerge as the primary model for practice” (p. 37). Appropriate cultural behavior can be learned in forums through “explicit commentary [by moderators] on the appropriateness of contributions,” “implicit commentary [by moderators or other users] on [cultural] appropriateness,” “informal induction of newcomers to the forum by seasoned contributors,” “comparisons made with other genres and situations,” and, of course, “instances of protest or conflict [by posters who use the forum as a way to express their opinions]” (p. 8). However, not all language learners receive such feedback from teachers or other forum users that inform their cultural positioning, and some may even receive negative responses from forum users. As a result, the authors emphasize the need for students to be prepared for negative reactions prior to entering a discourse community in which there are certain cultural expectations.

At this point, it is helpful to draw a parallel between Hanna and de Nooy’s genre theory and Jim Gee’s model of “primary” and “secondary” discourses (Gee, 2001, p. 54). Primary discourses are native social and linguistic habits of any person; in contrast, secondary discourses are acquired later, learned as part of socialization into other social and cultural discourses beyond those of one’s family; for example, secondary discourses are learned through socialization in outside groups or institutions, such as schools, churches, and businesses. As more layers of secondary discourses are added throughout a person’s life, the person’s background knowledge becomes more culturally complex. Gee (2001) states that “[t]hese secondary discourses all build on, and extend, the uses of language we acquired as part of our primary discourse” (p. 541). Similarly, Hanna and de Nooy liken the process through which language learners are gradually exposed to an unfamiliar genre to foreign language discussion forums: with the teachers’ help, learners can step further in and become confident and even culturally fluent in the secondary discourse practices of a forum.

However, as Gee (2001) notes, the primary discourse often impacts the learning of a secondary discourse, and teachers need to be aware of the cultural influences of the first language. According to Hanna and de Nooy, just because a forum contributor uses colloquial language and writes in brief sentences in one language does not mean that this is an appropriate way to contribute to a forum in another language. No learner can assume that “the Internet removes cultural differences” (p. 20). The authors continue, “Online behaviour, then, is linked to other culturally determined modes of behaviour, but not in predictable ways” (p. 64). Furthermore, “What happens in one online context may not happen in another” (p. 39). In other words, language learners need to be shown by their teachers how one genre, such as discussion forums, can be read and written differently.

Learning Language and Culture via Public Internet Discussion Forums contains ten chapters and is divided into two parts, the first part focusing on cultural differences between British and French online newspapers, and the second part focusing on individual language learners and intercultural communication styles. Both parts interweave research studies with theory and pedagogical implications. All research methods are qualitative, and include ethnography, cultural studies, and discourse analysis of online text. The most interesting chapters are those in which the authors describe their research of French language forums. In Chapter 3, for instance, the authors analyze the similarities and differences between two French newspaper forums (*Le Monde*; *Le Nouvel Observateur*) and two British newspaper forums (*The Guardian*; *BBC*). The data was gathered between 2000 and 2002. Hanna and de Nooy found that, on the British sites, comments often dispersed into tangents; contributors typically did not debate with each other, language was more conversational, contributors used an informal register, and comments were brief. However, on the French sites (see [Figure 1](#) for screenshot of *Le Monde* discussion board), contributors remained strictly on topic even after pages of discussion, debating was robust, language was

more formal, contributors used a formal register, and comments were lengthy, up to 500 words each.

Another chapter, Chapter 6, focuses on four French students and their participation strategies in the online newspaper forum *Forums Le Monde* in 1999 and 2000. Two of the students were British and two were American, but all four were studying French. The two British students posted introductions in French (“Hello! My name is...”) and asked for penpals, but their introductions were considered trite by other users, and although they were mostly positively received, they also received a few negative responses. As a result, the British students became discouraged and did not continue to participate in the discussions. However, the two American students prefaced their comments by apologizing for their French language skills. These two students also introduced themselves as foreigners. In sharp contrast to the two British students, both Americans were welcomed by forum participants. Interestingly, one of the American students, David, wrote mostly in English, and he too was welcomed as much as Laura, the other American student, who wrote mostly in French. This study indicates that neither friendliness, an approach the British students used, nor linguistic accuracy, a skill David lacked, indicated intercultural competence. Cultural positioning was more important than either fluency or friendliness, and the authors imply that teachers should emphasize content over accuracy in teaching writing.

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LE DOUR
mader, plein
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Figure 1. Forums Le Monde, the forum for French newspaper Le Monde.

Forums are categorized. For example, in the screenshot above, there are two categories: “l'actualité” (“In the news”) and “International.” Under “In the news,” there are two subcategories, which alternate according to the latest news: In this screenshot, “Politique française: les régionales” (“French politics: Regional”) and “Musique, cinéma: la mort de Jean Ferrat” (Music, movies: The death of [French singer-songwriter] Jean Ferrat.”)

Another chapter, Chapter 9, discusses the authors’ experience in using public Internet forums to develop French written argumentation skills. The action research project involved 32 students enrolled in the same

third-year university French class. Students were asked to post at least five contributions to a French newspaper forum over a four-month semester. However, before posting to the forums, the instruction was scaffolded, and students familiarized themselves with the communicative conventions in the forums. Hanna and de Nooy note, “It seems advisable therefore to preface any student involvement with an investigation of what successful participation would mean for a particular forum” (p. 117). In this context, “successful participation” meant that responses to student postings would be mostly positive, contrary to the students’ initial doubts. This finding implies that communicating in the target language may be viewed positively even if the communication is not free of linguistic errors, as was the case with David, the American student who mostly wrote in English. Again, the emphasis is not on fluency or errors, but on how the students positioned themselves culturally.

However, Hanna and de Nooy also caution that while the teachers enjoyed teaching learners how to contribute to the forums, students were not always enthusiastic about the forum assignments. One class evaluation revealed that most students preferred oral discussions to online postings, and only five of the 32 students felt that “forum participation [was] the most valuable aspect of the course” (p. 177). Perhaps this may have been due to the fact that the students were required to write at least five 300-word posts on the forums and received grades for their work even though they were not rewarded for accuracy, just for participation. Unfortunately, the authors do not explore the effect of this evaluation on the value students placed on the activity.

Nevertheless, Hanna and de Nooy insist, that learning through forums takes students beyond classroom cultures and learner-to-learner communication. Such forums provide opportunities to join in an authentic cultural practice in the foreign language on its own terms, for neither teachers nor students determine the rules and conventions of the online community (p. 186). In other words, the authors maintain that authentic communication in a foreign language helped students become part of the discourse community in a real way, not in a way that resembled role-play. Language teachers have long emphasized the need for authentic communication, and this book certainly helps outline what communication may look like in practice.

However, Hanna and de Nooy could have addressed the following potentially negative aspects of online forum participation for language learners. First, while forums do give students, particularly shyer ones, a chance to communicate with native speakers, most students preferred oral discussions with classmates and native speakers to forum participation. Implications include a greater emphasis on oral discussions rather than written assignments in language classes. Second, the text-focused approach of forums can be alienating for learners with different learning preferences, such as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic styles. Furthermore, the most popular discussion forums online are gamer or “picture rating” forums, where the emphasis is on kinesthetic (gaming) or visual (photos) information. If the authors’ goal was for their students to interact with native speakers in an authentic context, they might have focused on a less text-based genre as well.

Certainly the newspaper forums will provide language learners with “insider” cultural knowledge, as the authors contend, but did not state whose culture would be learned. Not all French speakers read or participate in newspaper forums. However, the authors seem to imply that only formal French is “authentic.” In contrast, the authors might have focused on more colloquial French in other forums, such as a French video gaming forum. Supplemental research on other forums, such as gaming or hobby forums, would provide a wider perspective on learning and teaching with this technology.

Additionally, a comparison between blogs, traditional course management software, and forums could also have benefited this book. Blogs and wikis are popular with many language teachers, probably more so than discussion forums. A recent Alexa review of the top 500 sites on the web indicated that search engines (e.g., [Google](#)), social networking sites (e.g., [Facebook](#)), media sites (e.g., [YouTube](#)), and blogs and microblogs (e.g., [Blogger](#), [Twitter](#)) represent the most visited sites internationally

(<http://www.alex.com/topsites>). There are no discussion forums, newspaper or otherwise, in the top 20 sites, but two blogging sites and one microblogging site (Blogger, [Wordpress](#), and Twitter) are. Blogs have long been used in language classrooms (Black, 2006; Bloch, 2007; Lam, 2000), possibly for their easy accessibility. For instance, while most discussion forums often require members to sign up for accounts and generally do not allow users to design their own pages, add photos, videos, or a blogroll (a list of the user's favorite websites), Blogger and Wordpress blogs are free and customizable, and users can post photos, audio, and videos immediately. In many cases, students do not need to set up accounts to make comments on other blog posts.

In general, discussion forums appear to be conducive to a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. One of the more interesting findings from Hanna and de Nooy's research is that native speaker feedback in these newspaper forums focuses more on the content rather than the accuracy of the contributions. Clearly, discussion forums could have potential for language teachers who teach writing to advanced learners and who want to take a more relaxed approach to grammatical accuracy and focus on content and academic writing conventions. Internet discussion forums can be one effective way of introducing language learners to cultural and academic functions in writing: "A public discussion forum is not a neutral space ... but a cultural practice, with specific conventions and patterns of behaviour" (pp. 184–185). Apprenticing language learners into a language community is, after all, the pedagogical goal of language teachers. These teachers will find the book an interesting read and a useful addition to the research on authentic materials and the genre approach to teaching.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Sonja Lind is a second-year Ph.D. student in Education, with a specialization in Language, Literacy and Technology, at the University of California, Irvine. Her research interests include identity and community construction, and discourse and text analysis. She is currently researching Third Culture Kid identity and community formation in online communities.

Email: slind@uci.edu

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