



FROM THE SPECIAL ISSUE EDITOR

In my book on using technology in L2 composition teaching (Bloch, 2007), I begin with an anecdote from one of the earliest CALL-sig (Special Interest Group) meetings at the International TESOL conference in the early 1980s. At a panel of some of the leaders of the sig, a colleague asked whether there was any evidence that computers helped students write better. The experts hemmed and hawed that there was no real evidence to prove this and there was even some evidence that students might even write less. The colleague responded that she couldn't ask her dean to buy computers unless there was proof that they helped students write better.

Today, we may still have to beg administrators for money, but the use of various technologies has become almost inevitable. The issue that teachers must ask now is: Given the vast number of technologies they have access to—be it hardware, software, or Internet technologies—which ones are most appropriate for the teaching they are engaged in? Teachers are overwhelmed by the number of technologies continually coming online. Before one technology is fully understood, a new technology is released that promises an even better learning experience. When I wrote my book, I feared that the moment the book was published, it would be outdated. In fact, a slew of new technologies that I had barely mentioned are now seen as potential tools for composition teachers. Microblogging sites like [Twitter](#), social networking sites like [Facebook](#), and new ways of integrating multimedia have become new sites for potential research.

There is a second issue underlying the question of whether technology can help students write better, which has long intrigued me. Namely, that the answer to this question is always "it depends." This question was first raised to me by Chris Haas (1996), who graduated from the same rhetoric program at Carnegie Mellon as I. Chris had done research on how the size and the resolution of the monitor affected the quality of the writing. Thus, the statement made by the panelist that sometimes students write less does not say anything about the inherent nature of the computer but about how it was designed or configured, a point that Larry Lessig (1999) would later expound upon in his book on the impact of technological architectures on how they are to be used. Haas also did research on another important factor: How do the different backgrounds of students affect how they use the computer? There were few "digital natives" at that time, so Haas focused on the different writing backgrounds of her participants, including myself. If you add the "teacher" factor to this mix of potential influences, especially their attitudes toward technology, background in computers and in writing, and their goals and plans for implementation, we can see that any answer to the question of how a particular technology affects student writing may not be generalizable from one situation to another.

Despite the inability to give a definitive, universal answer to the question "How does technology affect student writing?" we still pursue an answer. The articles published in this issue of *Language Learning & Technology* represent some of the most recent attempts to address the question. Being guest editor of this issue has allowed me to step out of my often confining job as a composition teacher in a large American university to see how different technologies are being used around the world. What frankly surprised me was that the great majority of abstracts initially submitted for this issue came from teachers working in EFL contexts, which, on second thought, should not be so surprising considering the tremendous growth in the use of technologies, as well as a strong



optimism in their potential, in countries where English is not the dominant language.

The growth of the Internet has provided a means for helping teachers deal with a variety of problems that have long concerned them: how to find authentic discourse, how to create authentic interactions, how to extend the audience for student writers, and how to access programs that were once locked behind gated walls. The Internet has clearly become the dominant technology for facilitating interactions among students, between students and teachers, and between native and nonnative speakers. There are also more macro-level issues as well that have contributed to the interest in using technologies in language learning.

There has been a growing recognition of the important role technology can play in social and economic development. Nicholas Negroponte (1995) and Harold Rheingold (2003) have written extensively on the impact of technology in Asian countries, where three of the articles in this issue were written. One of these is from Korea, which has the highest per capita wireless penetration, although the research was conducted in the United States. A fourth article is set in Israel, which has the highest per capita number of start-up technology companies in the world. All of these social, historical, and economic factors have contributed to the growing interest and acceptance of technology in the composition classroom.

Another factor that intrigued me after reading all the submitted abstracts was which technologies were of greatest interest. What initially surprised me was that there was very little interest in what we call Web 2.0 technologies. Web 2.0 is a somewhat controversial term that refers to a growing number of technologies that allow users to become both consumers and producers of web content. Using Web 2.0 technologies in the composition classroom can have a tremendous impact since they can be used not only to help students with their print-based writing but also to help them become literate using a variety of technologies. There has been a growing interest in these technologies in L2 composition, and there have been a number of online conferences or convergences sponsored by [Webheads in Action](#), as well as online courses supported by the [TESOL Electronic Village Online](#), which have focused heavily on the use of Web 2.0 technologies. My own fear of writing an outdated book was partly based on the feeling that I had spent too much time on some of the "older" technologies, like chat rooms or web page design, and not enough on Web 2.0 at a time when books that focused solely on Web 2.0 were being published.

After giving some thought to why there were so few Web 2.0 abstracts, the explanation was not too surprising. Although I have taught ESL composition for many years, my educational background is primarily in L1 composition theory. One of the differences I have sensed, without too much hard evidence, is that L1 composition has become more technologically driven while L2 composition has remained more problem-driven. As I have tried to show in my research, these two areas are not incompatible, but the differences between them can affect not only the nature of the research but also what types of students are being studied. Much L1 composition research has focused on the usefulness of the newest technologies for advanced-level students or those aiming for a professional writing career, as such students are likely to require the technology in future work. On the other hand, ESL teachers, who rarely teach students at such an advanced level, are more concerned with students who have difficulties in their writing ability. The result has been that L2 research has focused in much greater depth on those technologies that were thought to be most useful for solving the problems students



have. Although there has been a lot of anecdotal evidence concerning potential, there has been little formal research on how [twittering](#) or creating Facebook pages help develop student writing at any level.

Of the four articles in this issue, three of them address older technologies and one a relatively new one. The authors of these articles all work in an EFL context. These papers are problem-centered and address not so much whether technologies can improve the writing product but rather the writing process. All these papers share one other quality: they all deal with the implementation of a technology and the interrelationship of the architecture of the technology, its use in the writing classroom, and the backgrounds of its users. Although none of these papers can conclude anything definitive about the beneficial effects of using the technology, they all find that its usefulness depends heavily on the interaction of these factors.

[Yoon's paper](#) is the second of a series she has written on the implementation of a concordancing program in an advanced graduate-level composition course (Yoon & Hirvela, 2004). Her work reflects the evolution of the use of concordancing. While initially the domain of linguistic researchers, the development of Internet-based programs like [Collins Cobuild](#), has allowed teachers to use concordancing first as a means to develop teaching materials and more recently as a tool for student use. Yoon examines how students used the concordancing program to search for strings of grammatical items and collocational relationships. She finds that differences among student attitudes, backgrounds, and writing experiences affect how they used the program and how they viewed its effectiveness. She does not address whether the student writing had improved, something that could not really be addressed, but rather how the use of concordancing could improve the writing processes of the students, which could in turn improve their future writing. Finally, she reminds us that we are dealing with technologies that can, and often do, crash and how this instability can affect students' perception and use of technology.

[Kol and Scholnik](#) discuss an often-used technology: asynchronous discourse. Interest in asynchronous discourse has often been eclipsed by the newer, Web 2.0 technologies such as blogging. However, as Kol and Scholnik demonstrate, asynchronous discourse can be an important tool for generating ideas and reflecting on these ideas. As in Yoon's paper, the technology can provide a space where students can reflect on particular aspects of their writing processes. But perhaps the most important aspect of this paper is how the technology facilitates interaction in an academic writing class. As Kol and Scholnik argue, interaction can be difficult in a class where none of the students are native English speakers. However, interaction is essential in the kinds of argumentative writing assignments Kol and Scholnik have their students write. Argumentative writing requires a dialogue with those who agree with you, those who disagree, and those in the middle. Although Kol and Scholnik do not show whether the use of asynchronous discourse can produce better argumentative papers, they do show how it can produce a more robust process of invention, which, as has long been argued, can facilitate a more sophisticated level of argumentation.

[Xing, Wang, and Spencer](#) deal with a more controversial problem: the question of how a technology can be used to teach Chinese-speaking students the appropriate rhetorical forms found in Western academic writing. Both synchronous and asynchronous technologies have been popular in second language learning to link native and nonnative



speakers. Xing, Wang, and Spencer take this a step further to explore whether these technologies can be used to teach academic rhetoric. They situate their research in the controversy over contrastive rhetoric. The study of contrastive rhetoric, which has been fiercely debated since the publication of Robert Kaplan's (1966) seminal paper, compares the rhetoric of the student's home culture to the rhetoric of the target language to attempt to explain how the former may influence the latter, often in negative ways (cf. Bloch & Chi, 1995). Proponents of contrastive rhetoric assume that speakers of one language transfer rhetorical forms from their home language to their second language. They argue that Chinese speakers learn a form of rhetoric that if transferred into their English-language writing may be difficult for English-language readers to follow or may be inappropriate in that particular genre. Proponents typically find, as Kol and Scholnick also found, that they can use technology to create a cooperative learning environment that can help students develop their writing.

While Xing et al. tackle a controversial topic, [Chen and Cheng](#) examine one of the most controversial technologies, namely, Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) programs. These programs were first developed to evaluate student essays submitted in high stakes testing programs to reduce the need for qualified teachers to serve as evaluators. Proponents have argued that their evaluations correlate highly with those of human evaluators. Opponents have criticized and even ridiculed AWE programs on the grounds that they promote false criteria for evaluating student papers. Chen and Cheng propose a different direction for using these programs -- as a way of providing feedback for students. Their research raises two old questions about CALL. The first is whether technology can replace teachers. The second is whether technology should be used to relieve teachers of certain tasks, so they have time for other, perhaps more important, aspects of teaching. AWE programs cannot, of course, replace teachers, but this paper asks whether they can provide extra rounds of feedback that could help students in revising their papers. Chen and Cheng do not find a definitive answer to this question. What they do find is how various teacher and student factors might have to be considered in searching for the answer. As in Yoon's paper, both student attitudes and teacher attitudes can have a tremendous effect on whether the technology can be useful.

The articles in this issue provide an important perspective on how teachers can match the problems they are facing with the appropriate technology and how that choice of technology can affect how a course is taught. These articles demonstrate various ways in which the introduction of a technology is never a neutral act but can be affected by a variety of factors ranging from student/teacher attitudes to the architecture of the technology and how stable it is.

Before concluding my commentary, I must give kudos to Mark Warschauer, who founded the journal, and Dorothy Chun and Irene Thompson, who have valiantly maintained it, for their vision of the importance of an open access, online journal long before being "open and online" was cool. As a reviewer, I have frequently seen potentially interesting articles that suffer from the author's lack of access to the latest journals whose growing costs make them difficult for individuals or libraries to own. In the age of the Internet, there has been a tremendous push for freeing information from behind real or virtual gates that deny universal access so that it could be used by anyone who has access to the Internet, regardless of where they live. Richard Stallman has defined this freedom as being "free as in free speech, not as a free beer", by which he means that information should be made available so that anybody can use it and develop it (Williams, 2002). Universities such as MIT and Carnegie Mellon have made



course materials available for anyone to study. Personally, it makes me feel good that when someone asks me for an article, I can give them a link rather than having to download a file from behind a password-protected website to which I have the privilege of unlimited access. No more worries that I'm in violation of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) for bypassing the journal's copy protection. danah boyd (that's how she spells her name) has argued that those who can should only publish in open access journals and that everyone should cite articles from such journals in order to raise their profile in the academic world. I don't know if open access is the future of academic publishing, but I am thankful that Dorothy and Irene have given me the opportunity to participate in this endeavor.

I would also like to thank all the reviewers not only for their time but also for their patience and perspective in helping us shape the articles that appear in this issue. I would like to thank Rick Kern for all his help in putting this issue together, and, most of all, I would like to thank Hunter Hatfield, without whom this issue might still be floating around Cyberspace.

Sincerely,
Joel Bloch

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