

REVIEW OF *ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING: SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES*

Online Teaching and Learning: Sociocultural Perspectives

Carla Meskill (Ed.)

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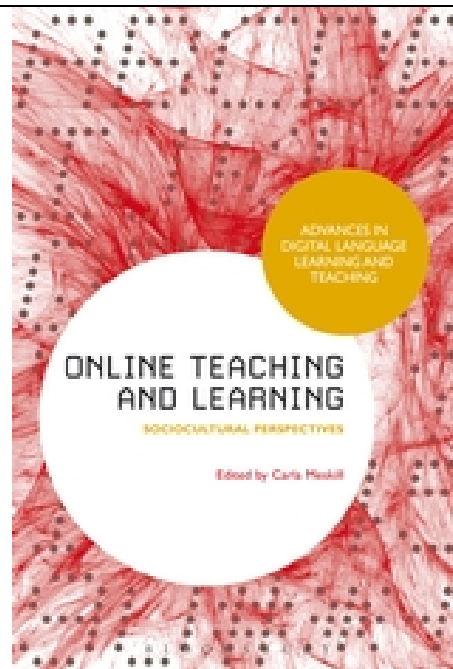
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Review by [Emily A. Hellmich, University of California, Berkeley](#)

Meskill's 2013 edited volume, *Online Teaching and Learning: Sociocultural Perspectives*, brings together research that explores a sociocultural orientation to teaching, learning, and living language in online spaces. Meskill situates the volume as bringing a sociocultural conceptual lens to an area that she suggests has primarily held a social constructivist orientation to online interaction; in doing so, she provides a welcome and refreshing perspective that includes a more socially-oriented alternative to understanding and researching language learning in these spaces.

The book is offered as a resource for both beginning and established practitioners and researchers. First, the volume provides a straight-forward overview of sociocultural orientations to learning, and their relevance to language learning in particular, that is ideal for anyone interested in becoming familiar with this theoretical framing and its affordances. Second, practitioners of any age and experience level can benefit from many of the chapters that provide models for the integration of different technologies, practices, and participatory structures into online or digital educational endeavors (e.g., Chapters 2, 3, & 4); several of the chapters that focus on teachers are likely to spark important reflection on the part of instructors (e.g., Chapters 2, 7, & 10). Many of the chapters also offer valuable methodological models for conducting research into online language learning and teaching from a sociocultural angle (e.g., Chapters 1, 5, & 11); these chapters would be of particular use to graduate students, young professionals, and established scholars who are framing their work from a sociocultural perspective.

The volume is divided into four parts preceded by an introductory chapter. Meskill uses this introductory chapter to review the conceptual underpinnings of the sociocultural perspective that informs the edited volume. Within a sociocultural perspective, learners are understood to be agentive and inextricable from the contexts in which they interact with others; in other words, it is no longer tenable to see learners as passive recipients of instructor knowledge, nor to separate learners from learning contexts. In addition, this learning is seen as rooted in the assistance of more experienced and capable others, occurring first on

a social plane before its appropriation by the individual via language. Learning from a sociocultural perspective is not confined to the classroom but is seen as a fundamental and innate human disposition that expands learning spaces to all spaces in which individuals interact. Lastly, the learning process and the identity development that accompanies it are both seen as dynamic processes.

These underlying assumptions are clearly reflected in the eleven chapters that comprise the four sections of the book. Part 1, *Diversity/Identity Online*, explores what a sociocultural perspective can afford the diversity of teachers and learners who are brought together in online spaces. In Chapter 1, Sadykova examines how one graduate student, Cathy, navigated her native Chinese educational discourse systems with American educational discourse contexts in online and face-to-face American courses. This study reveals not only the complicated processes of encountering and navigating new discourses, but also the new ways of thinking, being, and behaving in online environments that engage learners in opportunities for growth.

In Chapter 2, Samburskiy shifts the analytical attention to teachers and uses Critical Discourse Analysis to look at how they construct their identities in relation to their students in an online telecollaboration. He identifies presentational strategies used by five instructors based on their introductory overtures posted to their students at the beginning of the course, as well as the student responses engendered by such overtures. This analysis leads to suggested guidelines for practitioners in their own self-presentation so as to promote equitable online learning cultures.

Part 2 moves from issues of identity and diversity to issues of practice with chapters that examine how we can come to understand the transformational impact of online environments on pedagogical practice. Varli begins the second section of the book with an exploration of practices and perceptions of ESL/EFL teachers in the virtual world *Second Life* (SL). Varli's work reveals that teacher practices in SL are in line with sociocultural components of language teaching, such as assisted activity (Vygotsky, 1978), participation in a community of practice (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000), and engagement with authentic tasks (Felix, 2002). He advocates for professional training in the potential of virtual worlds for both language learning and language learners.

Lund continues the discussion of practice in Chapter 4 through a detailed look at collaboration via wiki technologies in two Norwegian high schools. Lund distills his work into four primary lessons for integrating collaboration via online technologies into classrooms that are useful to both practitioners and researchers: 1) the need to match tasks with available cultural tools; 2) the need to align individual and collaborative contributions; 3) the need to create tasks that combine learning goals with learners' backgrounds; and 4) the need to conceptualize teacher and learner roles as overlapping rather than discrete entities. He concludes that we cannot forget the importance of teachers and intentional pedagogical design when considering technological tools.

This thread of teacher training is picked up in the final piece in this section by Kozlova and Zundel who investigate the factors that influence five foreign language teachers' uses of multimodal tools in online language learning platforms. Of note, Kozlova and Zundel found that the use of multimodal features online largely reflected instructors' underlying theoretical perspectives on learning and teaching language. For example, one instructor who saw language learning as a collaborative effort used pictures and written textual hints to support student discussion of German dormitories; rather than providing immediate correction or answers, the instructor utilized different modalities to support the students in their collective exploration of the topic. Like Lund, Kozlova and Zundel advocate for special attention to be paid to training teachers to use and reflect on online tools.

Moving beyond shifts in practice, Part 3 examines this shift in relation to participation by interrogating how online learning spaces are shaping student-teacher and student-student interactions. In chapter 6, Uzun Smith and Mehta explore the pivotal role of meaningful dialogue to sociocultural perspectives in fully online courses. The authors not only found evidence of educationally valuable talk in the threaded

discussions analyzed, but they also calculated that in all three modules, over 80% of the coded talk was educationally valuable. While practitioners would benefit from the model they provide for purposes of integrating and cultivating quality talk into online discussions, the study also provides support for the importance of quality dialogue in meaningful learning.

Shifting from a focus on students, Dooly investigates what it means for pre-service foreign language teachers to interact in an international telecollaboration. By tracking and analyzing one trainee teacher's online activity over the course of the program, Dooly documents how interactions with peers lead the teacher to develop what had been, at the beginning, vague and superficial understandings of central topics into what later became co-constructed and deeply-rooted conceptualizations of the collaboration project. Dooly suggests that this analysis foregrounds the need to reconceptualize how we think about community, communities of practice, and the integration of technology into teacher training programs in a globalized, interconnected era.

Anthony looks at how humor, what she views as an advantageous component of face-to-face language instruction and participation, is represented in oral synchronous online environments. Using data archived from online interactions among secondary and post-secondary Russian classes, as well as interviews with Russian educators and their students, Anthony found that humor played an important role in relieving stress, presenting cultural information, engaging students, establishing and maintaining social connections, and holding student attention. She did not, however, find sufficient evidence to suggest that humor played a role in memory aid (mnemonic role) or in focusing student attention on form (linguistic role). Anthony's work suggests that many of the benefits of humor can be found in online spaces, but her work also stands as a call for more research into this area.

In the last chapter in this section, Vickers compares the different affordances and participatory structures inherent in face-to-face and asynchronous email-based writing tutorials for English language learners. Vickers found that in the drafting process, the online asynchronous exchange allowed for more streamlined and focused discussions of the topic at hand, whereas the face-to-face tutorial was less focused. Conversely, the email tutorial did not allow for any monitoring of student understanding during the editing phase, which was a valuable affordance of the constant interaction inherent in face-to-face encounters. Vickers' nuanced study points to the importance of understanding the advantages and disadvantages of participatory shifts that are possible via online and digital technologies.

In the final section of the volume, Part 4: Informal Online Learning, two authors explore the language learning that can take place outside the classroom through platforms such as social networks. In Chapter 10, Gonzalez explores the potential of L2 socialization in the social network site of Livemocha and focuses specifically on rapport management. Through conversation analysis, Gonzalez tracks the online interactions of one student, Vincent, who was particularly successful at building and maintaining relationships in Livemocha, and she found that he relied on laughter, humor, emoticons, and small talk to develop and maintain rapport. Gonzalez outlines some possible ways for classroom teachers to use Livemocha to target pragmatics, but leaves the question open as to whether other types of informal online learning should be harnessed for classroom use.

Lamy concludes the section and the book by suggesting that this last question—of how and whether to harness online informal learning opportunities in the traditional classroom—may not be the right one to ask. In a mixed-methods study of beginner Chinese language learners in the Open University, Lamy examines the use of social networking features—re-use, openness, network effects, and link display—in four spaces; two of these spaces are within the Open University: one centered around a general "café-like" environment, and one focused on discussions of culture. The other two spaces are on Facebook: one public group and one private group. Her analysis suggests that institutional attempts to integrate social network features are highly influenced by their framing and by the institutional culture. Lamy suggests that a more productive question to guide future research may be how students' past learning sets the stage

for their use of the different features present in social networking sites, whether such sites are used in informal or formal settings.

While the volume would have benefited from transitional introductions to each section as a way to tie the book together and to make salient for readers the links to overarching themes and questions, it does an overall good job of revealing interesting insights into understanding language learning and research in online spaces, and it identifies new and fruitful questions and areas of research. Rather than being the definitive volume on sociocultural orientations to online language learning and teaching, this volume provides an important and necessary foray into the application of such an orientation to online spaces that will likely inspire additional work and practice.

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