

Foreword

When I first used the Internet in the early 1990s, I was immediately impressed with its exciting potential for second language learning and teaching. By the mid-1990s, a number of us were writing books about this potential, organizing conferences, conducting research, forging online communities, and otherwise working to promote new ways of learning languages through networked communication. For the first time since its inception in the 1970s, the field of computer-assisted language learning had expanded beyond the purview of a narrow group of specialists and was attracting the attention of a large numbers of educators.

At the same time, the Internet was still in its infancy. Only a small percentage of the world's population had access to the Internet in the 1990s, and often through slow and unreliable dial-up connections. Publishing information online required specialized commercial software or knowledge of complex code. And online material existed for the most part in isolated information silos, rather than in interactive community-generated well-indexed sites. The Web was thus developing more as a tool for accessing information created by small numbers of people, rather than for creativity and collaboration on content contributed by the broad public.

A decade later, the situation has changed dramatically. Today, Internet access is nearly ubiquitous in developed countries and increasingly commonplace in developing countries. Most people now connect to the Internet through direct high-speed connections, often wirelessly. Desktop and laptop computers have fallen in price, and the Internet can also be accessed through a variety of handheld devices such as mobile phones. At the same time, barriers to online publishing, collaboration, and creative production have fallen dramatically. Widely available software and sites allow computer users of all types to interact through blogs, collaborate through Wikis, play multiplayer games, publish podcasts and video, build relationships through social network sites, and otherwise shape the content of the Web through feedback and evaluation mechanisms.

The technical definition of Web 2.0 has been the subject of debate, but the social significance of this next generation of the Internet is clear. Whereas the first generation of the Web linked information, this next generation links people, and does so in ways never before possible. Those of us who were excited before about the potential of the Internet for language learning and teaching thus have even more to be excited about today. And learners, teachers, publishers and others are already showing great creativity in exploiting this potential. However, efforts to do so are so dispersed and localized that it is hard to keep track of basic information about this fast-breaking field, much less gather critical, reflective analyses.

Fortunately, this Handbook brings together a wealth of thought-provoking material about the field. A wide range of important Web 2.0 topics are covered, from blogging to podcasting, to social networking and learning with mobile technologies. Perspectives of theory, research, and practice are artfully combined within the individual chapters and across the book. The editor has done a superb job of bringing together cutting-edge work on this topic. Though I have been investigating technology and language

learning for some 15 years, and authored a major review article on Web 2.0 and applied linguistics a year ago¹, many of the projects described in this book are so recent that I had not been aware of them before reading it.

Yet while this book is forward looking, it is not dreamy-eyed. Complex cognitive, social, and technological phenomena are critically addressed throughout. Web 2.0 is not viewed as a magic bullet to solve educational problems, but rather as a powerful tool that can have both positive and negative impact, and that must be carefully exploited in line with learner needs, teacher capacity, and local social contexts. The relationship of Web 2.0 to language learning is considered in all its breadth, from its use to promote diverse skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, writing) to its relationship with an array of cognitive and social processes (e.g., identity formation, critical literacy, information overload). Contributions to understanding Web 2.0 in higher education settings are particularly valuable, though many of the topics will be of value to those interested in K-12 education as well.

I was fortunate to have authored and edited several of the books that helped spark interest in the use of the Internet for language teaching in the 1990s. Some of these, such as *E-Mail for English Teaching*, *Internet for English Teaching*, and *Virtual Connections*, brought together practical ideas for language teachers. Others, such as *Telecollaboration in Foreign Language Learning*, *Network-Based Language Teaching*, and *Electronic Literacies* focused on research and theory. Today, this Handbook brings together in a single volume about Web 2.0 much of what I tried to accomplish in multiple books about Web 1.0, providing a valuable overview of research, theory, and practice related to the current iteration of educational technology. The Handbook will be of value to a wide range of teachers, administrators, policy makers, and researchers concerned with technology-enhanced learning and will contribute greatly to timely debates affecting language education around the world.

Professor Mark Warschauer
Department of Education, Department of Informatics
University of California, Irvine, USA

ENDNOTE

- ¹ Warschauer, M., & Grimes, D. (2007). Audience, authorship, and artifact: The emergent semiotics of Web 2.0. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 27, 1-23.

Mark Warschauer is a professor in the Department of Education and the Department of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine. He is director of UCI's PhD in education program, and founding director of its Digital Learning Lab. Dr. Warschauer's research focuses on the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in schools and community centers; the impact of ICT on language and literacy practices; and the relationship of ICT to institutional reform, democracy, and social development. His most recent book, *Laptops and Literacy: Learning in the Wireless Classroom*, was published by Teachers College Press in 2006. His previous books have focused on the development of new electronic literacies among culturally and linguistically diverse students; on technology, equity, and social inclusion; and on the role of ICT in second language learning and teaching. Dr. Warschauer is former editor of the *Language Learning & Technology* journal.