

## *Book review*

*Learning Language and Culture via Public Internet Discussion Forums*, Barbara E. Hanna and Juliana de Nooy. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 221 pages. ISBN: 978-0-230-57630-8. Price: £50.00.

The use of modern technologies in education is not new to language teachers: practices in the classroom have evolved significantly from the beginning of CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) in the 1970s–1980s to today’s Network-Based Language Teaching (Warschauer & Kern, 2000). Current methods enable human to human exchanges – as opposed to the human-computer interactions of the early days – with intercultural e-mail exchanges. As part of the current interest in Web 2.0 tools for teaching purposes, Hanna and de Nooy suggest that educators consider the inclusion of online discussion forums in their curriculum. The authors feel that these underused authentic tools have great benefits to language teaching. In their book, they show how public discussion forums “offer great potential for experiential learning in the intertwined areas of language, culture and identity” (p. 186). The book offers useful guidance and recommendations to teachers willing to introduce public forums in their course, and a summary of the theoretical literature of the discipline.

Hanna and de Nooy are both senior lecturers in French in the University of Queensland, Australia, and have published numerous articles about intercultural computer-mediated communication in the last few years (Hanna & de Nooy, 2003; Hanna & de Nooy, 2004; de Nooy, 2006). *Learning Language and Culture via Public Internet Discussion Forums* is a continuation of their recent work and concentrates on the cultural practices in French and English speaking forums. Though focused on these two languages, the suggestions made can be applied to other teaching contexts. The book is composed of ten chapters and two parts. The first part (Chapters 1 to 4) gives a theoretical background which highlights the cultural characteristics of Internet discussion forums. The second part (Chapters 5 to 10), which is rich in pedagogical suggestions, describes a number of case studies. Part I and Part II can be read in order of choice depending on the readers’ main interest.

After an introductory section (Chapter 1) which lays out the different sections of the volume and the issues that will be raised, the book concentrates on the role of culture on the Internet. The authors detail the changing views on the role of culture in web-based communication and offer an extensive list of key research conducted in

the area of cultural difference and technology from 1994 to 2008. This inventory of essential readings would be of interest to any individual interested in developing their knowledge and expertise in this area.

Chapter 3 starts with a brief history of discussion forums in media websites. Then, four public discussion forums from news websites (two British, two French) are analysed in order to demonstrate cultural differences between the norms of participation. Findings show significant variation between the French and British approaches to information exchange even though all four sites provide similar technology (public online forums) and aim at information sharing. The French forums are characterised by written communication features, namely elaborated argumentation on a specific issue, whereas the British forums mimic oral conversations where digression from serious debate is common. Results also show similarities shared by the British and French regarding the length of the messages posted.

Chapter 4 concludes the theoretical part of the book and looks at the changeable nature of public discussion forums. The authors draw attention to the dynamic characteristic of cultures and the artefacts through which they are expressed. Hanna and de Nooy compare the observations they made in their case study of 2000–02 news sites forums (presented in Chapter 3) with more recent data. They emphasise that practices on Internet forums are not only different from one culture to another, as stated in the previous chapter, but also vary within cultures over time. Moreover, the changes do not affect cultural diversity despite worldwide use of online forums.

Chapter 5 briefly describes the history of CALL from human-computer interaction to current practices, namely e-tandem and telecollaboration. Hanna and de Nooy lay out the benefits and drawbacks of such methods in comparison with the implementation of public forums for language and culture learning. In a rather long list of advantages provided by forums, they stress the added value of authenticity, the availability of speakers, the asynchronous factor, and the development of autonomy.

Chapter 6 is an updated version of Hanna and de Nooy's article entitled "A funny thing happened on the way to the forum: learners' participation strategies" (2003). In a light entertaining tone, the authors tell the story of four language students who went online with the aim of improving their linguistic skills. The case study reveals how the manner in which the four students engaged in online discussions resulted in successful or failed interaction. The authors identify the reasons why two students were successful in their participation in the forums, namely that they adopted the same cultural practices as native users. They emphasise that discussion forums are part of a written genre with its distinct codes which are familiar to native users. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to analyse these cultural conventions and familiarise students with them for best practice.

Chapter 7 raises the issue of identity for Internet users and the effect "facelessness" (p. 123) has on their perception of interlocutors. Depending on the context, one may choose to reveal one's identity, to take a different one or not to reveal it. Hanna and de Nooy claim that in discussion forums these strategies, whether intentional or not, are used to be socially accepted or to validate an opinion. Extracts from real public forums illustrate their argument.

This notion of identity is further developed in Chapter 8. This section of the book begins by highlighting the limitations of dedicated learners' sites, partially due to

their unauthentic nature, and continues with the study of an intercultural forum composed of English, French, and Welsh speakers from around the globe. The authors noticed that the inclusion in a discussion topic was seemingly favoured according to the language(s) spoken by the users. For instance, an opinion regarding French society could only be accepted if the user was a French speaker. Similarly, successful participation was made possible according to the users' ability to adopt strategic positions or identities through the interactions. These online tactics are particularly vital to acquire as they also replicate face to face intercultural exchanges.

Chapter 9 describes a case study where undergraduate students of the University of Queensland were asked to participate in public discussion forums in order to enhance their French argumentation skills. Drawing on the recommendations that were advocated in the previous chapters, the author did preparatory work before letting the students engage in forum discussions. Students firstly sensitised themselves to the forums' conventions and then reflected on what strategies to use to present themselves. Finally, they carefully chose a pseudonym meaningful to them and started their assignment. This chapter provides invaluable real life lessons to teachers and offers several suggestions for future use which were disclosed by this study.

The final chapter summarises the recommendations made throughout the book. Hanna and de Nooy remind readers that public discussion forums can be profitable to teachers and students on condition that their implementation is well integrated in the programme, i.e. developing an existing course rather than being an added activity. In addition, the authors insist on the crucial need of preliminary work in order to give students the prerequisites for successful interaction. Furthermore, they call attention to the fact that teachers should allow time for technical guidance to students. Finally, they underline that the implementation of a well-designed forum in the classroom provides students with transferable skills, enabling them to learn through other forums in their own time: "Beyond the learning they offer in company with classroom support, internet Discussion Forums can provide rich opportunities for ongoing, further development as an interculturalist" (pp. 188–9).

In conclusion, this book provides a complete guide from theoretical background to practical advice based on a number of case studies. Its prime quality is its simple portrayal of the opportunities that discussion forums can provide without pretending to be a panacea. *Learning Language and Culture via Public Internet Discussion Forums* is more focused on "how intercultural communication [is] negotiated in online discussion" (p. 2) than on defining the close relationship between language and culture as suggested in the title. In other words, it concentrates on cultural practices. However, it cites many relevant references (Belz, 2005; Belz & Thorne, 2006; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; O'Dowd, 2007) which concentrate on the language-and-culture issue. This book should be of interest to all interested in intercultural computer-mediated communication, cultural identity, and the negotiation of cultural differences in Internet discussion. It most certainly would be a useful starter reading for educators willing to broaden the perspective of their teaching or those looking at improving their use of discussion forums.

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