

Teaching Online:

Tools and techniques, options and opportunities

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One of six in the Delta Teacher Development Series, *Teaching Online* is just what it says on the tin: 'practical, accessible and reassuring', both in the content and the organisation. Users will appreciate the positive tone and the straightforward clarification of technical terms, as well as the suggestions salted throughout. There are three clear sections: 'getting started' (A), 'what to do with students' (B), and 'further development for the teacher' (C). Each is distinctly formatted so you quickly find your way about.

Section A explores choices to consider relating to the hardware, software and 'liveware' – that's humans – when setting up an online course where users communicate and interact online synchronously and asynchronously (as opposed to using self-study tools such as CD-ROMs). This section is a little thin on depth as it attempts to cover a complex area in relatively few pages, via four typical scenarios (a freelance teacher, a language school Director of Studies, a university teacher and a teacher of young learners up to the age of 16), and is further fractured by other variables such as the degree of blended learning (the ratio of face-to-face to online hours). Still, it certainly does the necessary for the novice, offering pertinent practical considerations and questions to make the prospect sound less daunting, while leading you through the steps in the process and helping you to visualise the possibilities. These steps are organised into subsections (each somewhat laboriously titled to start with the letter 'O': 'Ordeal or Opportunity', 'Objectives' and so on), which can be quickly reviewed by referring to the summarising statements to the left of each. Re-read the letters from the authors in the preface too, to be reassured by their experience learning as they went.

However, where Section A really becomes valuable is when it describes the most

common course site tools, such as VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) and wikis, followed by a comprehensive set of twenty activity tools: for example, sites to access and create slideshows, mindmaps, movies and comics. The succinct and very clear information is simply organised, according to what the students do and what the teacher does. The tools cover the use of images and audio not just text. Another bonus is the authors' three recommendations for things to do with each tool, plus a suggested search term so that if the given ones are no longer accessible for some reason, you can update them by finding your own. Note that while there is no index for the whole book, the activity tools here are at least listed alphabetically. There are very simple reminders throughout (such as remembering your passwords!) and a list of basic 'netiquette' tips at the end.

Section B begins with some comments about specific issues applicable to any online course but which may be overlooked, such as creating a sense of community, correction policies, privacy issues, and the use of L1. The issue of copyright is rather quickly covered by the advice to tell learners to check creative commons copyright for images, and warrants further work on the part of the teacher (and the nearest legal department). Very soon after there is again plenty to plunder, with about 70 tasks organised into five groups: 'the starting line' (tasks suitable for launching a course), reading and writing, listening and speaking, language and evaluation, and finally 'the finishing line' (tasks suitable for closing a course).

Students have been inspired by these activities, and particularly benefited from those taking the fear out of writing. Some tasks initially struck me as very me-me-me focused ('Hello, this me', 'Me, myself and I', 'My favourite...') but they do prompt sharing and are exploited by techniques ensuring interaction, as well as engagement with language and skills. I found the columns layout of this section very user-friendly, and each activity is well organised with a to-the-point title, a brief synopsis, the necessary tools bullet-pointed, easy-to-follow techniques scaffolding their use, plus follow-up, variations, comments and occasional extra notes. It's wise that some thought is given to familiarising students with the necessary tools. Of course, quite a few can also be adapted for 'normal' use in the face-to-face classroom. All up, this is a good place for any teacher to start or to be re-inspired.

The final section focuses on personal professional development online, such as discussion groups, blogging, e-portfolios and the very popular PLN (Personal Learning Network). This time the titles are brought to you by the letter 'f' – 'Forms' (what it is), 'what to do First', 'Further comments and advice', and finally 'Favourites' (very useful websites with comments by the authors). There's enough in Section C to get any neophyte going and drag any Luddite over the hurdles without injury, while those with more experience will also find plenty to explore.

Any book called *Teaching Online* would attract attention at this moment. This one was nominated for several prizes including the 2010 Ben Warren International House Trust Prize, and the 2011 ELTons UK Award for Innovation. I would highly recommend it.

Clare McGrath is a teacher trainer at the Australian TESOL Training Centre, Sydney and is currently involved in professional development for colleagues using IWBs.