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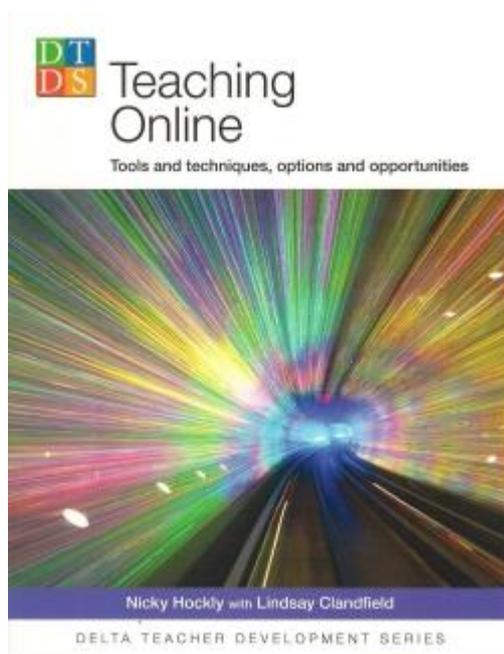
English Raven

Jason Renshaw's Weblog

http://jasonrenshaw.typepad.com/jason_renhaws_web_log/2010/11/teaching-online-a-review.html

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Teaching Online: A Review



With the relative surge of online learning happening (or apparently happening) these days, this new title in the rather impressive (and rapidly growing) [Teacher Development Series](#) from Delta is sure to get some interest around the traps.

[Teaching Online](#) is the work of [Nicky Hockly](#) and [Lindsay Clandfield](#), two people who need very little in the way of introductions in our field (I'm sure).

The whole notion of online language learning is one that has grown somewhat organically -- but also chaotically -- over the past 5-10 years, and I think Nicky and Lindsay have pulled off a pretty amazing feat to pull so many strands together into such a cohesive and easy to follow resource book.

The structure of the book is fairly straightforward:

PART A: Software and Liveware

PART B: Practical activities section

PART C: Avenues for online teacher development

In Part A, I liked the approach to defining online learning and presentation of various models that split F2F (that's face-to-face, if you're not up with the lingo yet!) and online elements in courses that aspire to blended learning delivery.

The "software" elements are very well organised, explained and referenced, and looking through the recommended tools I have to admit that most all of the ones I recognised have proved to be quite reliable: "masters" on the web (which is so crucial if you're going to write about online learning and the Internet in the frozen time capsule format of a physical book).

My only potential criticism on this front is that, for the average moderately-to-very-tech-challenged teachers out there, they may find the explanations here too brief and put the book back down on the shelf because they get the impression that this book is clearly only for people who already tech-literate and have some awareness about web 2.0 in particular. I'm only talking about appearances here, and clearly a book has space limitations and needs to think about a particular market of potential readers (and here I get the impression it is teachers who have a bit of tech and are ready to branch out with it).

The focus on "liveware", following the software listing, is an absolute gem, and one of the real achievements of this book. This is very much about the human and teaching elements involved in online instruction. It is tackled sensibly and coherently, and I hope features prominently enough to help teachers realise that online learning is not (necessarily) about replacing people/teachers with automated systems of learning. In fact, one of the most appealing things about this whole book is how teachers are encouraged to see themselves as front and centre (or, perhaps, better said: at the "hub") in the whole process of creating and delivering a course online.

All in all, I think the practical, organisational and pedagogical aspects of teaching online are very nicely covered.

Section B presents a pretty comprehensive set of practical activities that might be used in online courses, neatly organised into "the starting line" (setting up and getting started with an online course), reading and writing activities, listening and speaking activities, language and evaluation activities, and "the finishing line" (how to tie things up and finish a course).

These activities have the trademark Clandfieldian Creativity stamped all over them. Some of them are quite brilliant, and all of them have a lot of potential to genuinely engage students and get them developing and using language. I did, however, think that the "evaluation" activities were a bit too scarce, given the massive emphasis on this in most language learning contexts.

Section C emphasises ways to harness the Internet and web 2.0 to develop as a teacher -- and in particular as a teacher with online tools at his/her disposal. These range from established courses to things like blogging, micro-blogging and building Personal Learning Networks. The suggestions here are great, and a part of me would like to see this section at the start of the book, to help get the more technophobic teachers out there moving in practical and accessible ways to get over their doubts about technology and join a very supportive and informative online community of teachers. In any case, it is good to see that a book about online teaching places this much emphasis on actually developing as a teacher in an online medium.

So, mostly only very positive things to say about the book up to this point... Where do I feel the book potentially let me down or missed something?

Well, the book certainly does an outstanding job of covering all the essential bases for teachers out there who want to bring online learning into an already established (and somewhat institutionalised) context. As in, the teachers already have their students (in a school, institute or business setting), and are now looking at ways to deliver part or even all of the coursework online. Okay, that's where most teachers and learners find themselves -- at least at present -- so it certainly makes sense to focus on those aspects.

Where I think this book may have left a bit of a hole is with the prospect of teachers and learners going online independently to find and engage in language instruction. There is obviously a whole new dynamic to consider there, encompassing things like how to find students (as well as design the sorts of programs that online students will find appealing), how to charge fees, and -- in short -- how to potentially make a living for oneself as a fully online teacher. *Teaching Online* doesn't really go near this, and I can't help but feel that at least some teachers out there -- when they see the title -- will expect it to and perhaps be disappointed that it doesn't deliver the goods.

I personally feel, as an online teacher myself, that one of the most promising avenues the Internet and web 2.0 provides is a bona fide meeting and learning place for teachers and students, completely (or at least greatly) removing the necessity for published materials and institutions.

I would have loved to see *Teaching Online* try its experimental hand in this area, but this could be just a personal and ultimately erroneous view of where online learning could be heading now, and -- if so -- the authors and publisher were right to avoid it.

At least for *now*... :-)

But in a nutshell, *Teaching Online* is a beautifully well written and presented work, and deserves a place on any online (or potential online) teacher's bookshelf.

(And, erm, when the digital version eventually becomes available, it can have an even *worthier* place in your "My Documents" folder on the desktop, laptop or tablet, as well!)

