

Interview with Steve McCarty

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1. Your research interests span a number of areas but have generally followed the rise of online learning. Looking back at your work, why did you get involved in this area and how has your own interest in it evolved? Have there been different phases in your work?

Like many far-flung IATEFL members, solitude on an outer island of Japan was becoming less splendid, and I was chafing even at national EFL activities because the native and non-native speaking teachers would not get out of their enclaves and work together. So when my college got connected in 1995 I immediately started networking with colleagues abroad concerned with the educational possibilities of the Internet. Mailing lists, electronic bulletin board systems (BBS), completely online academic conferences, chat rooms like MOOs and proto-videoconferencing software such as CUSeeMe captured the imagination of early adopters.

There were relatively few with a Net presence, however, in liberal arts areas including TEFL and my specialties of Asian Studies, Japan, and bilingualism. By learning HTML I sought both to have most of my publications available online and to make Japanese versions of my main Websites, starting in 1996. Since 1997 the bilingual Website with annotated links to my online publications has been an Asian Studies WWW Virtual Library 4-star site, linking to over 200 sites. In 2000 I started a Website for mobile phones, in 2003 a blog, and 2005 a podcasting blog, with my East Asian students involved all along in expressing their culture online.

As for phases, studying Japanese including the Chinese characters from 1979, and moving to Japan thereafter, turned me into a hard worker. Then professional development opportunities in TEFL were essential to my work, and I tried to give back the enrichment through volunteer work for academic organizations and Japanese society. Researching bilingualism suited my background, and recently I can finally teach it in the

content-based EFL curriculum at Osaka Jogakuin College. Online education cuts across all disciplines, so this phase since the mid-90s has added multidisciplinary as well as multimedia to my research. As the leadoff keynote presenter of the 1998 Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference, I proposed turning online education into an academic discipline, which resulted in the World Association for Online Education (WAOE).

2. Which areas of CALL and online learning would you like to have explored more if you'd had the chance? Why?

CALL was too expensive for my college at the time, but my sons enjoyed the CD-ROMs from age 3 with a Mac. Whereas Internet technologies were affordable and leveled the playing field for students as well as scholars. I lack the time for synchronous events, such as with HorizonLive Wimba or Elluminate, even if they were not scheduled in the middle of the night, Japan time. I would use a Web cam, Skype and the like for more lifelike online communication if I had the time. Similarly I would add video to Websites and podcasts.

3. Having taught for twenty years or more in Japan, what is your view of the relationship between teaching and research in higher education?

As a college faculty member I have always seen research as an everyday process of enquiry and experimentation in a mutually reinforcing relationship with teaching, professional development, and publications. It may be no coincidence therefore that teachers who value students, do action research, and network online are also more visible in publications and academic societies. Japan's education ministry encourages documentation in all these areas, and does not discount online publications and projects, perhaps because technological proficiency is valued.

4. You are the President of the World Association for Online Education (WAOE). Can you tell us about your involvement with this association, what its aims are, and how you see its role developing in the future?

From geographical isolation, riding the wave of new technologies for education, this organization made global communication and pioneering

in educational technology an everyday event. Educators from over 50 countries, otherwise going from site to site like masterless samurai, have collaborated and shared expertise. They formed a library of experience that could in turn answer the questions that frequently came from outside the organization. Which new technology would be best for a certain pedagogical goal? Is a certain online university claiming accreditation legitimate or a diploma mill?

While the WAOE cannot take credit for online education becoming professionalized, our emphases from the start on ethics and open source sharing have set an uncompromising standard in the field of distance education. A reliable international group can be set up on short notice, recently for example mentoring a new open university for Mongolia. When I was asked to teach online education at a national university graduate school of education, WAOE mentors participated in audioconferences and other communications via WebCT learning management systems based abroad, with people and technologies spanning six countries. After working together for years in virtual learning environments, several members finally met f2f for a group presentation in 2004 at the University of Sussex.

5. English language education in Japan has been hampered by a number of cultural factors. What is your experience of the role of CALL technology in the Japanese institutions where you have worked? Is it being used to improve English language education in Japan?

The Japanese have positive cultural attitudes toward technology and mediated experiences. The notion of English conversation has been used lightly even for children when it is actually a challenging set of proficiencies. Foreign language speaking is a risky business in a culture of peer group affiliations where individuals avoid directness and mistakes to save face. My idea has been that we should talk about the native and non-native *acquirer*, and not measure acquisition by speaking. CALL technology can actually bring realism to the classroom by focusing on achievable tasks.

But CALL has two different meanings, I think, historically. One refers to offline technologies through which students practice discreet skills like reading, listening and speaking. Our college has, for instance,

computer-assisted speed reading software that incorporates pedagogical principles to improve L2 reading. But CALL as a field seemed to flounder at the turn of the century until it reinvented itself to include network-based or Internet-based language learning. Among online technologies our faculty and students can use blogs, the Criterion Web-based essay-correcting software, WebCT, and a well-staffed CALL center.

6. Osaka Jogakuin College has had a prominent place in the use of iPods in its English courses. Can you describe how this project has developed? Has it been successful? What is going to happen in the future?

This college was first in the world to distribute iPods to all students in early 2004 and to load the iPods with English listening materials and conversational strategies. The idea arose intuitively, and there was a learning curve at first, but then the iPod became a popular product, which solidified student motivation. Students often have long commutes to the middle of Osaka, and so they do more English listening than they would otherwise. Certain courses require the use of iPods, such as a current events course where students have to synch the latest news from a Mac computer room to do their homework, which is graded. In the future video iPods may become more prevalent as video materials are produced by faculty and staff.

7. The use of iPods looks forward to the next phase of mobile learning. What is the potential of this technology in the field of language education? What kind of initiatives can help to make it effective in Japan?

When all the students have devices like a mobile phone and an iPod, it becomes a mobile infrastructure, and the educational applications are limited more by our imagination than by the requisite technical skills. When podcasting sites were made available mostly free of charge in the iTunes Apple Music Store, a whole new source of authentic and up-to-date listening and video materials could be recommended to students and produced ourselves. In North America, Apple is slowly rolling out iTunesU, a software solution to house the audio and video files of a college, both privately for courses and publicly for PR or to contribute to society. Whether Apple goes far or not with this free service requiring a Google scale of memory, there will be a need for this kind of service, and both universities and companies will pay for it. If nearly every entity has

wanted a home page, they will also want their voices to be immortalized on the Net.

This semester (April-July, 2006) I have a “coursecasting” site for an upper division Bilingual Education class, meaning that the lecture parts of the course are recorded with an .mp3 format voice recorder and uploaded to an annotated podcasting blog for the students to review. I also maintain a public site “Japancasting” at <stevemc.blogmatrix.com> where there are various presentations and interviews including content by students when their performances would be of general interest.

At Buckingham Palace and some museums one carries an audio set as a guide. Imagine iPods used similarly for campus tours for visitors, or during college events and festivals. For example, students could race to computer rooms and download an audio file in English, then follow the directions on a sort of treasure hunt around campus. The best listeners would thus be rewarded.

The goal would be a two-way mobile infrastructure where the wired and wireless technologies were seamlessly and authentically integrated into the curriculum. Students would see the technology as a path to achieving their own goals. Although teachers would have to dedicate more time to online communication, the students need to be transmitters as well as receivers.

8. Japanese universities have been slower in taking up online and distance education programs. Why is this? What is the future of online and distance education in Japan?

The education ministry prefers incrementalism to maintain its grip on trends, while they need a deeper understanding of the online education field. They started merging formerly national universities without realizing that Internet technologies can integrate the campuses most efficiently and economically. There is also an element of competitive protectionism among universities in Asia, knowing that the educational flow of distance education would be predominantly *into* their countries from prestigious English-medium universities that also have better technological expertise. Japanese people rationalize that everything is close together so distance education is not needed, but ultimately everyone with a busy schedule

can benefit from surmounting time and space through distance technologies.

Certain rituals of everyday communication privilege face-to-face relationships in Japan, but there is a countervailing trend already emerging whereby mobile phones and computers provide a comfortable distance and add intrigue to otherwise dull everyday communications through their very mediation. A recent TV show where a young man posted his love life to a BBS, and people around Japan vicariously got involved, may have helped people to realize that, rather than a human-machine interface, the computer can widen one's social as well as intellectual horizons.

9. You have had extensive experience with WebCT and Blackboard. What role have course management systems had in English language education in Japan? Can they be used as something more than merely administrative platforms? What is the future of course management systems of this type in the educational process?

Even with many hours of training there are difficulties with these systems. As many functions as they have, users grow exasperated with what they cannot do. While they provide a platform, generally other software solutions are needed for the content. Open source systems such as Moodle have become popular, but teachers have to be volunteer administrators and trainers. Since WebCT was localized into a Japanese version between 1998 and 2000 several dozen colleges have used it, often struggling to afford it, such as professors pooling their research funds. With WebCT recently acquired by Blackboard, there is uncertainty again about the cost-benefit ratio.

Learning management systems have a suite of course management and communication tools that are empowering for 21st Century networking and teaching online. But in terms of training they represent a long march that is starting to be superseded by the next phase, audio-video exchange systems over a mobile infrastructure.

10. Looking to the future, what are you working on at the moment? How do you see the future of your teaching and research interests in online learning developing?

The first semester of coursecasting is accomplished, so the cycle turns to compiling and imagining further research. Three book chapters are coming out this year, on global online education, global virtual organizations, and the global classroom, respectively. Reactions from readers are also part of the cycle.

Content will always be king, so in whatever medium I aim to investigate and publish about convergences among Asian Studies, bilingualism and online education. May the next long march in educational technology be more user-friendly like Australia. Next stop is Sydney, the 20-22 September 2006 applied linguistics conference at Macquarie University, with a presentation entitled "Interfaces of Bilingual Education, Japanese Socioculture, and Podcasting Technology."

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