

Finding New Pathways in a Dynamically-Changing Profession¹

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*"The unexamined life is not worth living."
Socrates*

Abstract

During the past twenty-five years, significant changes have taken place in the world of technology that have altered the way teachers approach their instruction in the classroom. However, these changes have not always been seamless, painless, or even warranted. As a result, teachers often find themselves stumbling through the dark on their way to professional growth, eventually realizing that mistakes can lead to more realistic expectations on what we can accomplish in our classrooms. In the end, teachers often discover that in times of deep reflection and error, we actually find ourselves. This article recounts one such journey.

Resumen

Los últimos veinticinco años han traído cambios significativos en el mundo de la tecnología que han alterado la práctica docente en el aula. Sin embargo, dichos cambios no han sido siempre ni fáciles, ni indoloros, ni justificados. Como resultado, los docentes se encuentran en ocasiones dando tumbos en la oscuridad, en busca del desarrollo profesional para finalmente darse cuenta que los errores llevan a expectativas más realistas de lo que se puede lograr en el aula. Finalmente, los maestros llegan a descubrir que en tiempos de profunda reflexión y error es donde un se encuentra a sí mismo. Este artículo recuenta un tal viaje.

Change is a natural and vibrant part of our lives, both professionally and personally, and being somewhat chameleonic—the ability to adapt to changing environments—can help propel us forward, even in times of uncertainty. Since entering the teaching field in the 1980s, I have experienced the rise and fall of different methodologies and technologies, including my own evolutionary change as a teacher and materials developer. The goal of this article is to explore and share my own personal growth as a language educator, particularly in the field of educational technology and language learning over the past twenty-five years. It also addresses how we as educators adapt, how we change, and how we come face-to-face with our own struggles to fit into an ever-evolving profession.

1989 – 1999: Professional Infancy

In the 1980s, I graduated from college with a degree in Spanish education, but I was also drawn to working with international students. Having spent some time overseas previously, I enjoyed opportunities to learn new languages and experience exotic cultures, and I enrolled in a master's program in the Department of Linguistics at Brigham Young University. During that time, I was fortunate to have had Frank Otto as my thesis advisor, a visionary in instructional technology and former Director of Computer-Aided Language Instruction Consortium (CALICO), as well as the founding Editor of the CALICO Journal. Although there was significant emphasis and push in the Department of Linguistics on empirical, data-driven research in preparing theses, Dr. Otto was very open and supportive of my curiosity and interest in materials

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development instead. This experience served as an incubating period in which my ideas on technology would later flourish.

After graduating in 1991, I found a job teaching in Japan, and my family spent the next eight years in Tokyo and Nagoya. Early in my career, I was always trying to find my bearings on how to teach effectively and efficiently, often feeling somewhat bewildered and paralyzed with the fear that students would know more about some obscure grammar form than I did. At the same time, I was struggling to envision my future place in the profession two, five, or ten years down the road. Around that time, I attended a session at the national conference of Japan Association of Language Teaching (JALT) in which a speaker addressed the changing demographics in student populations and language teaching. He highlighted the fact that landing teaching positions in Japan would become more competitive because of the decreasing number of graduating high school students, and teachers might have a more difficult time finding employment without developing a professional niche in the field.

Consequently, I started to gravitate towards using video in the classroom, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and the Internet in 1996, as possible areas in which to specialize. I heard of people like Susan Stempleski, Dave Sperling, and Larry and Charles Kelley who were icons in their respective fields. At that point, I started dabbling in different areas of technology, a personal interest that had been percolating just under the surface for a couple years, and I eventually launched my very basic Web site, *Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab* (esl-lab.com), at the end of 1997. (Today, I maintain this project completely outside of my university teaching position.)

My initial goal with the site was to provide some online listening clips for language learners, focusing on pronunciation and conversation starters, but it was during a time when online audio and video were very much in their infancy. Personally, I felt like I was stumbling in the dark for a long time, trying to make technical sense of hard coding HTML, recording and encoding audio and video, and using different file transfer protocols such as SSH (secure shell) and FTP (file transfer protocol). Frankly, my days and nights were filled with so many false starts, hair-pulling frustration, and short bursts of success that left me unclear whether or not the whole idea of creating a Web presence would take off and last more than a few months. Furthermore, finding a healthy balance of family and work was difficult to figure out at times, but my wife was supportive as I tried to find my place and expand my limited abilities.

As far as online technologies were concerned, the RealPlayer and Netscape Navigator were kings in their respective domains, and I created my initial content with these software; unfortunately, Internet connection speeds back in the 1990s were so excruciatingly slow that playing even a small audio file off the Internet was like sipping molasses from a tiny straw. Such conditions, compounded with the prohibitive cost of going online, made authoring and using online multimedia impractical for many and impossible for many home users around the world. Keep in mind this was way before the days of WiFi hotspots and broadly-available Internet access. Unfortunately, I was not fully aware of these challenges in the early stages, and I had to change the way I created my materials as well as alter my expectations on what I could accomplish.

The more challenging aspect of Web site development, however, was the creation of meaningful content. In other words, even with the most dynamic and technically-advanced tools, attempts to create language-learning content often result in pointless, overly-simplistic, and tedious exercises. For me personally, it took me a great deal of experimentation to realize that creating pedagogically-sound activities and tasks would be the focus on my energy over the coming years. Then, with about fifteen short activities online, I traveled from Japan to Seattle, Washington, in 1998 to attend the International TESOL Convention, and I gave a presentation in the Electronic Village (EV) at the conference, organized by the CALL Interest Section. The EV sessions are similar to poster sessions in which multiple presentations are going on in the same room, except in the EV, you are demonstrating your ideas with a computer as attendees look on. This experience was exhilarating for me, as a somewhat neophyte, to have people gathering around my computer and hear my Web site exclaim: "Hi. What's your name?"

So, were my early attempts with technology overly simplistic? Absolutely, but such initial enthusiasm for online self-access listening content propelled me to invest more time and other resources in developing the site in a more expansive direction.

2000 – 2010: Professional Adolescence

Throughout the first decade of the 21st century, more and more educators, institutions, and businesses viewed the Internet as a tool that could revolutionize online learning; however, other equally-compelling voices have felt that the educational benefits in the classroom may be underwhelming, overstated, or limited in their application (Hew & Brush, 2007; Lam, 2000; Nickerson & Zodhiates, 2013; OECD, 2015; Salaberry, 2001). In addition, there are other cases in which a technology was chosen from the administrative level (top-down decision making) without fully considering the instructional goals and desired learning outcomes in the classroom trenches, and then failed miserably in the classroom (Oppenheimer, 2007; Toyama, 2011). The commonly-held myths that technology enhances learning are often the result of educators wanting to believe this so badly that they sometimes turn a blind eye to the actual data beyond simplistic anecdotal claims. In response to all of this conflicting rhetoric, I simply attempted to adopt, adapt, synthesize, and even abandon notions on language teaching and technology that did not seem to apply in my own work, and I was very reticent about clinging to new-fangled gadgets and gizmos just because they were the latest fad to come along. Simply said, I became wary of technologies that were trying to do much for no sound reason.

To illustrate this point, I attended a presentation at a conference in which a school district had spent over \$50,000 to purchase video iPods for its students for the sole purpose of being able to record students' voices—a task that could have been accomplished easily by buying very basic voice recorders for a mere fraction of the cost. Furthermore, I also saw many language learning Web sites popping up on the Internet that were supported by unsustainable organizational, business, or pedagogical models, and that soon drifted into obscurity. Such attempts can fail because technologies are often selected first, and then learner needs are considered as an afterthought. I also have visited many institutions where significant money had been invested in purchasing

a computer lab system that now sits idle because of unrealistic expectations, insufficient training, or simply a lack of need for such an elaborate system in the first place.

In considering all of these potential benefits and pitfalls to advancing technologies, I decided to stay the course with my own Web site by focusing on enhancing the actual content (e.g., the listening conversations, scripts, types of questions and learning tasks) while making some incremental and important changes to the technology on the site. In other words, while so many new Web technologies kept springing up, I simply focused on improving the audio quality of the audio and video files on my site and keeping abreast of new media formats and delivery systems. For example, I prepared most of my audio and video files in RealMedia format for the RealPlayer in the early years, but over time, the Windows Media Player became the dominate force throughout the first part of decade. Later on, other media formats and platforms emerged, but I stuck with what worked, and I added new technologies and approaches incrementally over time rather than abandoning tools that already were working well. This can be extremely difficult when there are so many competing voices in educational circles as well as companies promoting their wares.

Unfortunately, this understanding did not form in my mind all at once, and I had to learn from humbling missteps and experiences. Perhaps, the most significant impact on my own vision of educational technology resulted from my participation as an invited speaker at workshops to parts of Asia, South America, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia. During such trips more than ten years ago, I encountered the harsh and uncomfortable reality that, at times, the ideas that I was suggesting on the use of technology were simply not applicable or even possible in a number of low-resource learning environments. White boards, the Internet, and DVDs sounded enticing until I realized that such technologies were not accessible in many settings, and some of the techniques that I proposed would not work or needed to be modified due to classroom logistics, culture, and lack of available technology. I found that teachers were thirsting for useful knowledge, but as one participant jested, my teaching ideas were more suited for the next millennium because they could not see a time in the near future where implementing them would be truly feasible.

In sum, my shortsightedness about different learning environments caused me to miss the mark in such workshops. I was simply getting ahead of myself, and I began to see more clearly that certain ideas that might perform wonderfully in one environment could fail miserably in another.

2011 - 2016: Professional Maturation

Although I still feel like I am in a perpetual adolescent stage of development, I have concluded over the last few years that, as Socrates said long ago: true wisdom is knowing that you really know nothing, particularly when the world and our field are in constant flux. I have found that paradigms that I held a couple of years ago about educational technology have shifted under my feet. Therefore, rather than reviewing technology as the catch-all tool to addressing all aspects learning and instruction, I have found myself more comfortable in stumbling forward with some trepidation and a great deal of uncertainty. Now, I tend not to get caught up in the rhetoric and calls for more

technology in the classroom; for me, less is more, and I am very reticent about adopting new technologies at the moment without a great deal of reflection and planning.

That said, a trend that cannot be ignored is the growing use of smart phones and portable media devices, and I have spent time in retooling my main Web site to accommodate this trend while remaining open to weaving new twists in the fabric of our profession. Most recently, I gave a presentation on using smart phones in creating listening activities at the MEXTESOL International Convention in Cancun, Mexico, and the comments from attendees seem to reflect a great interest in finding ways to use this technology in language learning (Davis, 2015). However, just as I have dealt with things in the past, I still take a measured approach; I continue to use what works, and I make small changes as research and practice show that emerging technologies and methodologies actually have a meaningful impact on learners and teachers. I still might be a little "1990-ish" when it comes to some of my educational philosophy, but I know, as the refrain goes, that not all that glitters is gold. As a result, I am still developing my Web site in much the same way even after 17 years, a millennium in terms of the online world.

Conclusion

Perhaps, the greatest lesson I have learned over the years is the ubiquitous nature of being wrong at times and the how error can shape my current and future world view, particularly on our profession. A very thought-provoking book on this subject is *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error* by Kathryn Shulz (2011), in which she investigates "wrongology" as a fundamental human condition. Shulz states that "thanks to error, we can revise our understanding of ourselves and amend our ideas about the world" (p. 5). Shulz then suggests that "however disorienting, difficult, or humbling our mistakes might be, it is ultimately wrongness, not rightness, that can teach us who we are" (p. 5-6).

For me, this framing of our humanity illustrates that our perceptions, our beliefs, and our current notions on things can often propel us forward even when we make serious mistakes in the process. This progression is very relevant to the delicate and complex process of integrating technology into education in a pedagogically-sound way. When I look back on the evolutionary chain of events over the past twenty-five years, I see a mixture of intriguing innovations alongside many false starts, dead ends, and simply wrong approaches and wasted effort to enhance language instruction and learning. Yet, as Shulz (2011) indicated, even our wayward struggles and being wrong at times are the means by which we grow expansively. I have enjoyed this ride, and I anticipate hanging on as we move forward in the coming years.

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