Mind the App!

Inspiring internet tools and activities to engage your students

Thomas Strasser

Helbling Languages, 2012

Reviewed by Kyle Smith

2014 represents an obscure but interesting anniversary for educational technology: 30 years since Cleborne D. Maddux first described the 'Everest Syndrome', the belief that technology should be utilised in education simply 'because it's there' – a belief which can lead to 'ill-advised educational practices' and a wider backlash against educational technology (Maddux, 2005, p. 21).

Maddux's concerns remain valid today. In this reviewer's opinion, there are abundant examples of technology used in education with little added value for either students or teachers. On the other hand, there also many examples of what Maddux refers to as 'Type I applications': applications of educational technology which enhance traditional ways of learning and teaching (e.g., students using mobile devices to record, replay and reflect on their spoken English). For Maddux, Type I applications are valid and to be encouraged, but it is Type II applications – those which facilitate new and more effective approaches to teaching and learning – that will ultimately determine the long-term impacts of educational technology. Maddux's simple taxonomy provides a useful framework for evaluating Thomas Strasser's *Mind the App!* Are the activities presented in the book of Type I, Type II or neither? Is a strong case made for the use of technology in language teaching or is it used in the activities simply because it's there?

Mind the App! is intended as a 'complete introduction' (p. 8) for teachers to Web 2.0 apps – that is, applications such as Facebook, YouTube or VoiceThread, which allow users to upload, download, share and interact with content rather than simply read, watch and navigate through pages. Strasser has attempted to keep the appeal of the book as broad as possible, but a significant number of the activities described

would seem to be most suitable for teenagers or young learners. For example, the 'Once upon a time . . .' activity has learners using *PiratePad* to collaboratively write a fairy tale, a genre which is arguably of little relevance to adults.

Across five chapters ('Teacher Tools', 'Visualisation', 'Collaboration', 'Audio' and 'Writing'), Strasser presents a large array of Web 2.0 apps with step-by-step instructions for teachers. The clarity of Strasser's instructions is the book's major strength: occasional lapses aside (such as the suggestion that teachers 'use Flickr for copyright-free images' when in fact, most images on Flickr have attribution requirements as a minimum), they are extensive and well-supported by screenshots; the accompanying website also has instructional videos if further assistance is required.

Such attention to detail reflects Strasser's obvious enthusiasm for educational technology: an enthusiasm that is certainly infectious but borders on evangelical at times. In his introduction, Strasser claims that familiarity with the 'best' apps 'makes a balanced, multi-methodological approach possible' (p. 10) and describes Web 2.0 variously as interactive, creative, collaborative, fast, authentic, popular with students, motivational, democratic and environmentally-friendly. However, none of these bold claims are satisfactorily elaborated on or supported by references to peer-reviewed literature. This kind of uncritical advocacy is unfortunate. Firstly, it risks putting off teachers who remain cautious and sceptical of educational technology. Secondly, it oversimplifies the benefits and challenges of using technology in the classroom and this may lead to unexpected and unnecessary frustration for those teachers who are keen to experiment.

A further consequence of Strasser's enthusiasm is the sheer number of Web 2.0 apps presented in the book – around 50. Making use of such a wide range of tools might be reasonable over the course of a year (for instance, teaching language in a K-12 context); in the context of a 10-week 'intensive English' course, too much time could easily be taken up with teachers and students familiarising themselves with the technology.

All this creates the impression that the kind of teacher envisaged by the author is one who spends a great deal of time focused narrowly on the next Web 2.0 app he/she is going to use, possibly at the expense of the students and their learning. It suggests an overemphasis on the means rather than the ends, which is also apparent in the lack of clearly articulated language learning objectives. Each lesson does have a 'focus' but these tend to be along the lines of 'interpreting and creating visual input' or 'working collaboratively on online texts' and perhaps relate more to digital literacies than language learning.

For these reasons, teachers who are particularly interested in developing their students' (or indeed their own) digital literacies will likely get the most out of *Mind the App!* Nevertheless, teachers looking for Type I applications of educational technology may also find *Mind the App!* a suitable starting point. What is certainly missing from Strasser's book are any Type II applications – anything that is likely to facilitate fundamental changes to pedagogy – but this is possibly more a reflection of the fairly unsophisticated state of educational technology in ELT currently. There are opportunities to leverage technology in order to bring about new approaches to teaching and learning, at least once the industry moves beyond the classroom tinkering of individual teachers and begins to evaluate at a deeper level how technology can assist learners to achieve language learning outcomes. Readers interested in such an evaluation, however, will need to look elsewhere.

REFERENCE

Maddux, C.D. (2005). Information technology in US education: Our mistakes and how to avoid them. *International Journal of Technology in Teaching and Learning, 1*(1), 19-24.

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