Book Review

Ian Lancashire, ed. *Teaching Literature and Language Online*. New York: Modern Language Association, 2009. viii + 462 pp.

William Patrick Wend, Burlington County College

In the past 15 years, the rise of the use of online resources to not only teach courses, but also supplement in-class coursework with a plethora of materials, has been a hot topic of debate in academia. I have experienced online courses both as a student, taking my first online course in 1998 and taking nearly a year's worth of courses almost exclusively online in 2004-2005, and as an academic now teaching for my third year as a lecturer at a community college. I have used podcasts, wikis, weblogs, and many of vast tools discussed in *Teaching Literature and Language Online*, edited by Ian Lancashire. The essays in this anthology discuss successes, some failures, and many experiences somewhere in between. Online pedagogy is fluid and constantly being reshuffled, remixed, and rewritten.

Lancashire's introduction to the anthology sets the stage for what is to come in the following essays, but is a mixed bag itself; he makes some interesting assumptions about online pedagogy. Early in his introduction, after expertly laying out the wide range of online teaching formats today's instructors use, Lancashire declares that "most courses are Web-facilitated" (1). Is that really true? Just from a small sampling on my own campus, I can safely say that many are not at all and are still taught successfully.

Lancashire wisely follows this up by also quoting Martha Nell Smith, who argues that "successful courses" are "bereft of thoughtful application of technology" (qtd. in Lancashire 1). Whether a smart cart projector, Blackboard, or even just Google, the college classroom is filled with numerous technological advances that have vastly changed how students are taught and engaged.

The numbers are staggering for online enrollment by students. According to The Sloan Foundation, in fall 2006 nearly 3.5 million students took a course online (2). Online courses, according to Lancashire, attract a more motivated segment of the student population, willing to put in the time management needed to be successful in an online class. Online courses don't just aid an instructor's pedagogy: students who normally would not speak during a class may speak more freely online, perhaps, benefiting from the numerous supplemental materials an instructor, not constrained by the classroom, may add to a course management system (CMS), wiki, or weblog (3).

Teaching Literature & Language Online is broken into three sections, which Lancashire introduces in the introduction. These sections cover the three key players in online education: institutions, teachers, and students. The first section looks at a general overview of how online education is approached in various MLA disciplines. Sections two and three are specifically about various scenarios involving either online courses or software.

One of the problems with an anthology such as the one under review is the fluidity of the field in its current state. According to Lancashire, *Teaching Literature & Language Online* was developed between 2004 and 2008 (4). There is also a lack of discussion of student skills. Sure,

this is an anthology about teaching, but a big part of online pedagogy is how do students' skills, or lack thereof, affect teaching.

Despite my criticisms of some of Lancashire's wording in his introduction, he does ask the right questions about teaching online. I strongly agree that someone should "think twice" before diving in too deeply. Students will often, as Lancashire notes, have different expectations for online instruction. Emails in the middle of the night are expected to be answered before the sun rises the next day. Less time on campus can lead to communication issues with colleagues and a real lack of belonging more generally (I felt this as a student too). Perhaps the biggest change with online instruction is having to redo notes, whether "mental, penned, or typed" to a new format. This can take an extremely long time, especially when dealing with a new CMS (5).

Another assumption that Lancashire buys into is the "digital natives" meme that has been repeatedly refuted over the past few years. Study after study are showing that the assumptions that anyone born after 1992 is a "digital native" and that teachers are "digital immigrants" are often the opposite. While studies show that students come to college lacking even the most rudimentary technology skills, many teachers, like the ones in this anthology, are thriving and working hard to bring technology into the classroom (14).

The point of this anthology, as Lancashire notes at the end of his introduction, is "rethink[ing] pedagogy" on the college level (17). A number of the essays in this anthology do just that, reinventing analog pedagogy for the digital age. By far, the finest essays in this anthology are in the third section, which is a series of case studies on various literatures and technology.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick's "The Literary Machine: Blogging The Literature Course" discusses her attempt in the fall of 2003 to have students, in a course titled "The Literary Machine: Writing In The Human/Computer Interface," participate in a group blog (205). Fitzpatrick hypothesized that students would be able to engage with the computer/human interface around which the course centered, hoping it would let them see how the computer changed how they read.

Fitzpatrick makes the rules for the group blog clear from the start. She may post on it during her off hours, but the primary load is on the students. Each student should write at least one post per week. They should also comment on at least two other students' posts. They should be well written and grammatically attentive, an important requirement that helps to differentiate a group blog from more frivolous web writing (qtd. in Fitzpatrick 208)

According to Fitzpatrick, this course's group blog didn't work out for the best, but in more recent group blogs she has found more success (205-206). One of the strongest portions of this essay is the extensive detail offered regarding the numerous positive aspects of using blogs in the classroom. The hierarchy of posts and comments gives each post its own private section of the class for discussion purposes. The sense of "ownership" that a single blog post can give to an author forces her to focus on that post and make sure it is intelligible, and that it serves as a piece of writing that students will want to respond to and engage with on the blog. Commenting is also "more focused" than the traditional web forum post because students are responding to something more specific than on the rest of the web (206).

Another great aspect of group blogs that Fitzpatrick details is the ability of students to

link to previous posts and draw out more comments and feedback as time goes on. In a

traditional classroom, the discussion often ends after class is dismissed. Perhaps a story or article

comes up again in another session, but group blogs, as Fitzpatrick notes, open up a "twenty-four

hour classroom" for constant discussion (207).

Some problems did arise as time went on. Many posts received no comments. Fitzpatrick

notes that she should have spoken to students about their requirements more often, a reflection

that in my own experience also only came after a poor first experience (210). Other positives

came up as well. Some students who didn't feel comfortable writing in class came alive during

online discussions, allowing them to contribute to the class more often. Some students also

brought up topics they requested could be discussed in their next class session, gaining agency

over classroom discussion while not even in the classroom.

A course blog is great, and something I have used many times, but what happens when

actual literary works are put online? Michael Best's "Seeking The Best Of Both Worlds: Online

and Off-Line Shakespeare" discusses his teaching of Shakespeare online and how his pedagogy

has evolved to engage with emerging technological advances and student responses. This essay

is particularly interesting because it discusses the evolution of online teaching over about 25 to

30 years, beginning with Best's experiences teaching courses in the 1980s for the Open

University of British Columbia (255).

Best continues to talk about the role of hypertext, the Internet, student assignments,

marking papers online, and plagiarism. Tracing the evolution of the course through HyperCard to

CD-Rom and then, in 1998, moving to the world wide web, each page on the website served as a "sandbox" for students to discover topics for their papers (256). This allowed even beginner students to be playful and discover their the area of research they wanted to engage with on their own time.

Two of the most important issues that Best discusses are how to assign work that mitigates the temptations students will have to use websites like 123HelpMe to copy a paper; and how to use the electronic format of digital papers to mark student work. Best offers solutions like shorter assignments and collaborative work that engages students with others in the class and removes the solitary impulse to plagiarize (259). Digitally submitted student work can be annotated via comment macros inserted as footnotes. As someone with very poor penmanship, I strongly agree with Best both that electronic marking can be even more burdensome than analog marking, but that its rewards include an ease of reading that is sometimes lost by poor penmanship (264). Annotations can be inserted into the work so a student can see what he needs to improve on in a revision or future paper.

Finally, a subject dear to my own pedagogy, Smith's "Enabling Intellectual Collaboration: The Use of Wikis and Blogs" builds on a lot of what Fitzpatrick brings up in her essay about group blogs, and briefly discusses the use of wikis in the classroom. Wikis remove the need for a professor to send out numerous emails to a class of students probably already inundated with emails from various instructors and college functions. Discussions of a specific topic or assignment can take place in real time as a wiki page is updated and edited. By posting notes on a wiki, a lecture can begin before an instructor "walk(s) into the auditorium" (429).

Online teaching is a very fluid field that is constantly evolving and expanding.

Lancashire's miscues in the introduction show how the continued evolution of the field and how

assumptions about pedagogy can continue to change as time goes on. *Teaching Literature &*

Language Online is a worthwhile anthology filled with great essays about tools that will be

helpful to both someone who is an experienced online teacher and those who are just beginning

to enter the field. There is something here for almost anyone who has an interest. I would highly

recommend the text to both old and new online teachers.