Teaching Online: Tools and Techniques, Options and Opportunities
(Book Review)

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Teaching Online. Tools and Techniques, Options and Opportunities belongs to the praised Delta Teacher Development Series which has become one of the most innovative and important resources for ELT professionals in the past few years. This book is designed to reach a wide variety of readers immersed in the teaching of the English language at all levels. Not only will it be useful for professionals who are already experts in online tools and environments, but also for educators whose teaching methodologies have not yet included online or computer based activities and tasks. Thus, this work is aimed at a wide range of audience, from beginners who may not feel sure about the use of computer technologies in class, to advanced users who look forward to learning new teaching practices related to this field. Teaching Online. Tools and Techniques, Options and Opportunities is also commendable because it is clear, reassuring and motivating because it removes the terms “complexity” and “difficulty” from the general understanding of online teaching.

The book is divided into three main sections (A, B, and C) that cover the basic rudiments to start an online course, a lot of practical activities to be carried out by both teachers and students, and possibilities for further online development. Section A deals with the growing importance of online teaching and learning, as well as the different possibilities to establish courses depending on the level of online work. The reader is informed of the differences between online learning and blended learning, (combining both face-to-face and online learning elements) and its advantages and disadvantages. The authors then highlight the importance of organisation regarding different aspects such as the number of classes a week, duration of the course, and the type of students. Having taken into account these elements, the reader is guided to reflect on the amount and purpose of online components in the course, the role of the teachers themselves, different learning scenarios and options to establish the most suitable type of course depending on the variables mentioned beforehand (mainly face-to-face, half-and-half, and mainly online).

Section A also highlights the importance of the right choice of software for the online sections. The use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is mainly recommended to deliver the online course content, apart from other course site tools such as Social Networking Sites, Wikis and Discussion Groups. These “Web 2.0” tools are expanded and studied in depth where the reader is presented with a wide array of free activity tools ranging from the traditional blogs and word clouds to the more advanced screen capture tools and shared whiteboards. Finally, this section informs the reader of the importance of the human factor when working on the online part of a course. Aspects of meeting and greeting, setting of objectives, celebration of achievements, deadlines, manners and netiquette are brought to the front so that the potential online teacher knows how to act and establish the basic grounds for online co-existence.

Section B offers a varied set of practical activities with possible variations, follow-up tasks, and feedback options designed to cover the whole duration of the course. To attain the goal of clarity and easy accessibility, the authors have divided this section into five chapters. The first subsection, “The Starting Line”, is designed to facilitate the process of the teacher getting to know the learners online and the learners getting to know themselves. In addition, the reader is given effective advice on how to make this initial period of the course easier by means of, for example,
creating a strong sense of community. Then, the authors propose twelve different activities with clear outlines and purposes which makes use of the different tools already explained in Section A. The second chapter, “Reading and Writing Online”, offers twenty-one activities for these two skills, which are usually thought to be the easiest to teach online because they are supposed to be individual processes. The authors do not agree with this point of view and, thus, make an emphasis on the most difficult aspect of teaching Reading and Writing online: the engagement of the students in interactive, encouraging tasks oriented to both skills and the reinforcement of the learners’ community by providing private and public places of contact.

The third chapter, “Listening and Speaking Online”, is arguably the most successful section in the book. Teaching the skill of Listening online does not pose any serious difficulty, since there are lots of available resources and materials for teachers and learners. However, the skill of Speaking is really challenging because the most typical set of activities are “listen and repeat” ones. The authors propose eighteen activities (from less demanding to more demanding ones) to cover both skills starting with two listening tasks which use generic sites. Afterwards, the book focuses on individual speaking activities and, finally, group speaking tasks. The fourth chapter, “Language and Evaluation Online”, suggests language work and assessment methods that can be performed online individually or as a group in meaningful and communicative ways. Nineteen activities are proposed for such objectives. They are easily adaptable and implementable to any course regardless of its level and content. The fifth chapter, “The Finishing Line”, offers four activities aimed to provide teachers with tasks to draw their course to an end with a sense of closure. In fact, the final activity is designed to make learners reflect on their learning process and proposes teachers to encourage them by suggesting online resources to continue learning.

Finally, Section C remarks that the improvement of the internet has provided teachers with huge development opportunities worldwide. As the authors state, knowledge is not only in the hands of a few experts and we can share tips, strategies, techniques, etc. with colleagues working in different countries with different contexts. As a means to facilitate this educational exchange, the book lists six different discussion groups and recommends teachers to join and contribute to them. The authors, then, investigate the field of Development Courses and give readers some tips to select the most appropriate one. Furthermore, online conferences are still a key means of teachers’ development for the authors and they include their favourite ones, ranging from a one-hour webinar to a four-day international conference. Blogging and Micro-Blogging are also mentioned in this section along with their differences and the authors’ favourites. E-Portfolios are explained in-depth regarding their intended audience, the tool the teacher is going to use, its sharing, and distribution. Lastly, Personal Learning Networks (PLN) are also part of this final section and are dealt with in a clear accessible way, so that readers do not get lost in this sea of technology and development.

In conclusion, Teaching Online. Tools and Techniques, Options and Opportunities is highly recommendable to any person dealing with the teaching of English. Its clear structure and its motivating tone engages readers who will be willing to incorporate these tools, techniques and activities in their teaching practice, since they encompass the four skills and even go beyond the mere teacher-learner relationship. Moreover, the recommended activities are highly adaptable to any level, and they facilitate the creation of new activities and class dynamics by teachers themselves. It is remarkable the ease with which the authors tackle this topic of online teaching and the demystification it is subjected to in the book, making it accessible to anyone curious enough to explore a new field that is not as complex as it appears to be. Finally, although oriented to English language teaching, it cannot be denied that it is also applicable to the teaching of any language, since the activities are not only restricted to one language. To sum up, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in incorporating computer technology and the internet in class.