

Cookies and breadcrumbs: ethical issues in CALL

Andrew Blyth

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More and more people are using the internet as a means to socialize outside the classroom. Currently, the leading social networks on the internet include Facebook and Twitter, among others. These social networks are beginning to be utilized in English language courses, especially in Japanese universities. Using these, our students can access a plethora of authentic language and potentially engage in authentic interaction. For instance, Mork (2009) offered interesting ideas on using Twitter as a means to engage students with English, which included 'following' a celebrity, and reporting back on the celebrities' 'tweets'. The Japan Association of Language Teachers Computer Assisted Language Learning special interest group annual conference (JALT CALL 2010) included workshops and presentations on using social media. It appears that such technology is being taken up enthusiastically by a segment of teachers in Japan and elsewhere in the world. However, what appears to be missing in the excitement of exploring this new frontier is a discussion on the appropriacy of bringing the outside world inside students' often private learning environments. Of special concern is our students' privacy and a need to prevent a future loss of reputation, as explained below.

Cookies and breadcrumbs

The title of this article juxtaposes the inside-outside privacy concerns. 'Cookies' are the small bits of data left on your private computer after browsing the web; conversely, Wagstaff (2010) says that 'breadcrumbs' are the bits of data left (publicly) on the net after browsing. Recently, there have been slightly disturbing reports especially concerning Facebook and other website companies (British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) 2010a; The Economist 2010; Wagstaff 2010). Wagstaff (ibid.) noted that Facebook is becoming a repository for all these breadcrumbs we leave around the internet. In increasing numbers, independent websites are connecting their content to Facebook, making Facebook an aggregator of many of the things we write, have written, or have taken a photo of. This, in principle, brings our private activities to a semi-public space, as your Facebook profile is

supposedly viewable to just your circle of friends. However, Facebook has received much criticism for making private information publicly available, for constantly changing privacy policies, and constantly changing member privacy settings without notice (Sheils 2010; The Economist 2010). Facebook also burdens its users with a myriad of unclear privacy settings.

Ramifications

What is clear is that content placed on the internet is or can potentially become publicly available, either accidentally or deliberately. Both immediate and delayed ramifications may affect us. Concerning the immediate, my own Facebook privacy settings were set to very private (Friends only), but a recent check revealed that much of my personal data and content was now publicly viewable, allowing anyone, including spammers to harvest my personal details. Furthermore, a recently discovered security flaw in Facebook allowed friends to spy on private chat sessions held between other friends (BBC 2010a; Wagstaff 2010).

In contrast, delayed ramifications are brought about by a future loss of reputation from our past activities and our personal breadcrumbs. A recent disturbing incident saw journalists' and Chinese political activists' email accounts hacked into (BBC 2010b). I once had an active website hosted on Tripod, which is now nine years old and has been left abandoned for some time, and at time of writing, is yet to be deleted. My old views and opinions lie exposed for anyone to look at, potentially record, and to judge the current modern-day me by. Similarly, what if a current student had left-wing tendencies and expressed these views as a part of a seemingly benign English lesson activity? Immediately in Japan and the UK, perhaps nothing would happen. What if later this student then travels or returns to a conservative society or country? Such countries may not be sympathetic to such former students. Further, what if an individual's views change? Should they be judged by their past statements left on an old and forgotten website?

Furthermore, change in social attitudes to accidental language occurs. A reputable BBC correspondent, Kate Adie, claims that 20 years ago, politicians in elections often made comments that were considered accidental slips of the tongue and that these were largely ignored by the media of the day (BBC 2010c). However, in the British 2010 election, these accidental slips were labelled as 'gaffs' and made headline news. This demonstrates that attitudes to language can change in the media, and it is not clear if in the future English-language students may be affected by shifts of attitudes towards L2 interlanguage as well.

For consideration

The implications of classroom activities are twofold. Firstly, an ethical argument can be that teachers cannot impose upon students a demand to join any particular outside-of-the-classroom social media or website as a part of in-class use or course requirements, especially if that website permanently maintains a record of student activity. Secondly, could our students potentially face a loss of reputation in the future as a result of using English? Using social media is acceptable and even appropriate for some students and classes, but how do we assess and manage risk? Then this begs another question, how do we ascertain what level of risk is appropriate for which students?

Given the current blooming interest in using social media and the internet in ELT, there is perhaps an urgent need to discuss these issues more thoroughly, before social media become a standard part of many language courses. These concerns involve mainly privacy but also a need to prevent our students' reputation being tarnished in the future. The decisions teachers are making now may have ramifications for our current students who are also future managers, political leaders, celebrities, and other members of society.

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The author

Andrew Blyth is a doctoral student with the University of Canberra, Australia, and teaches at various universities in Nagoya, Japan.

Email: ablyth@uni.canberra.edu.au