Splendid Speaking Articles

Topic: Ten Serviceable Sites

Peter Travis offers a list of online resources for teaching and learning.

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The rise of Web 2.0 has resulted in a flood of services offering easy opportunities to create, present or reuse existing content. The simplicity of blogging and the popularity of sites like YouTube have resulted in a huge growth in user-generated content, a boon for language teachers looking for additional materials for their learners. Of course, the lack of an editorial 'filter' gives rise to issues of quality and even the possibility of coming across materials we might feel inappropriate for our students.

I have put together a list of ten sites which provide a range of services from very simple-to-use text-only creative tools to those that allow users to create highly interactive media presentations. With the exception of 'Newspaper Clipping Generator', the sites featured offer access to user-generated content, which you might want to check out first before deciding whether to promote a particular site to your students.

Before we dive into the list, a quick recommendation for two blogs that regularly feature advice on tools for teachers such as these. Nik Peachey's extremely useful blog (http://nikpeachey.blogspot.com) has featured some of these tools and gives practical advice on the pros and cons of each.

Then there's Larry Ferlazzo's Websites of the Day blog (http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org), which will keep you occupied for hours with hundreds of suggestions.

The list is in no particular order of preference, although the first three sites are probably the easiest to get started.

Newspaper Clipping Generator

www.fodey.com/generators/newspaper

This is a very easy one to start with. It is a tool that creates an authentic-looking newspaper clipping using text which you supply. Give the subject of your next handout a topical feel by inserting the completed image into the document. This site does not host user-content and there is no danger of coming across anything inappropriate.

Witty Comics

www.wittycomics.com

With this tool, you can present homework instructions, language points or study tips in an unusual, attention-grabbing way. Create comic strips with your own captions and dialogue. You'll need to take a screenshot of the completed comic strip as there's no download facility. Be warned: this is an example of a site that does host user-generated content and you may find some contributions offensive.

Crossword Puzzle Creator

www.crosswordpuzzlegames.com

Crosswords are, of course, a great way to practise vocabulary and there are many of these sites that allow you to create your own. This one is particularly simple and allows you to print your crosswords for your students. It could perhaps be something for your students to use to create puzzles for their colleagues. Beware the annoying popup window that greets you on the homepage.

Mindomo

www.mindomo.com

This is a tool which you or your students can use to create mindmaps for vocabulary records, writing plans or anything else that comes to mind. Completed maps can be saved to the Mindomo server or you can print them for use in class. You need to register to save the map.

Scrapblog

www.scrapblog.com

This is a great tool for project work. Students can combine photos, video, audio and text to create engaging multimedia scrapbooks. The Scrapblog community is also a source of ready-made content which you may find useful as an example of what your students can create. Click 'Explore Our Community' to browse the most popular Scrapblogs.

CircaVie

www.circavie.com

Here you will find a highly effective tool for creating visual timelines. As it says on the site, 'CircaVie, or "times of your life", is a place to celebrate your life in an exciting new way ... chronologically through an interactive timeline.' For some examples, use the search facility to find 'A look back at the 80s' or 'The Beatles'.

VoiceThread

www.voicethread.com

VoiceThread is an online media album that can hold essentially any type of media, such as images, documents and videos. Visitors are able to leave comments on existing content in five different ways – using voice (with a microphone or telephone), text, audio file, or video through a webcam. As it says on the site, 'A VoiceThread allows group conversations to be collected and shared in one place, from anywhere in the world.'

Sketchcast

http://sketchcast.com
Sketchcast offers 'a new style of blogging'. Create a sketch and, if you wish, add a voiceover to accompany the drawing. The completed video can be embedded into a blog or you can simply link to it from an email. Students could use this to describe how something works, or have fun drawing and describing a person.

Bigthink
www.bigthink.com
This is a site with a serious mission to encourage debate around important issues. Visitors are invited to respond to interviews with today's leading thinkers. They can do this by uploading their own video response, by using simple text replies or by posting a view of their own for others to respond to.

Pageflakes
www.pageflakes.com
Are you looking for an alternative to blogging to create an online presence, but want something that's just as simple? Try this service, which allows you to pull together content from other websites, including embedded video, subscriptions to podcasts and news services. You can see one I created recently, which is a 'pagecast' for FCE and CPE exam students at www.pageflakes.com/flojoe/15019629/.

Peter Travis is the co-founder of Flo-Joe, a website for Cambridge Exam preparation. He also manages the *Splendid Speaking* website at www.splendid-speaking.com, which features podcasts of students participating in exam-style interviews. Teachers can now sign up to the 'Teaching with ICT' newsletter at the Splendid Speaking website: www.splendid-speaking.com/teachers.

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