

Blogging in the Language Classroom: It Doesn't "Simply Happen"

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Abstract

This paper describes the importance of guiding students to use blogs (Web logs) for educational purposes. While blogs are commonly thought of as "simply happening," in fact, educators in a media literate world need to rethink and redefine best practices for using this tool.

Introduction

Ideally, through blogs, students would create content and construct knowledge using the wonders of these publishing tools that abound online. I definitely believe in the power of blogs to improve students' abilities while learning a second language, in my case, in an EFL context. However, blogging doesn't simply happen. The word has been spread about the potential of blogging for the language classroom, but there needs to be more than an idea to convince students that they can really profit from this tool on the read/write Web. There are numerous options for blogs, depending on the goals set for them. In the English as a Foreign Language setting, one can find blogs for professional development, class blogs, and students' individual blogs, among others. In this sense, unleashing the potential of blogs for language learning will be directly related to teachers' understanding of the pedagogical benefits of such a tool, and the students' perception of its value in their learning process. As pointed out by Glogowsky (2008) in his post about *blogtalk*, "Blogging is not about choosing a topic and writing responses for the rest of the term. It is about meaningful, thoughtful engagement with ideas" (para. 2).

Blogs as Conversations

Blogs imply conversations. And, for these conversations to happen, there first needs to be a redefinition of the educator's presence and role in the blogging classroom. Educators should facilitate the process of establishing the online conversations within oneself, among learners, with other teachers, and possibly the world. Students will have to get used to the blogging experience to learn how to properly answer posts, how to cite, and how to establish their own blogging tone through their posts. In such a way that they find their unique channel of communication in the target language.

In fact, there are many ways that students will become proficient after blogging, enhancing more than their language skills. They will be dealing with some of the current "buzz" concepts associated with literacy. They will have to be media literate as well as information literate to become proficient bloggers. As Richardson (2006) states, "this is a world where literacy is changing, where readers need to be editors" (para. 18). In order to fully engage in conversations through blogs, students will have to reflect on the quality of their writing and the language being used, be more attentive to their audience, and more selective of their sources. Furthermore, there are some blogging tricks and technicalities that educators and learners will need to be aware of in order to keep track of the online dialogues.

Blogging lends itself to aggregating content produced by our online communities in spaces in which everybody in the process can follow what's happening in that particular corner of the blogosphere. This means that concepts such as staying updated on new content through RSS feed aggregators and the nuances of tagging become essential elements that connect the learner's voices and engage them in conversations. Some blogging platforms make this aggregation process easier than others, as explained in Glogowsky (2008):

What I like about this platform--21Classes [<http://21classes.com/shop/product/>] is that my comments appear in a separate space from that devoted to comments left by other students. The author of the blog can use the dashboard to quickly scan the entries where the teacher left comments. It may not be a very important feature to all teachers, but it is of significant value to me and my students because it makes conversations easier to track. (para. 3)

In my opinion, this feature encourages instructional conversations. Comments are not just an extrinsic part of having a blog--in 21Classes they are presented as an integral part of the activity. The caption at the top says "Follow Your Threads" thus making it seem like there's a discussion forum attached to every blog entry. . . . [T]he students can easily follow all the comments left by their teacher. They don't have to check every single entry. All they need to do is log into their dashboard and the latest comments and the entries they are attached to will be displayed for them. (para. 4)

Although the digital jargon and concepts may seem "Greek," once these new literacies are part of the bloggers' array of tools, chances are that through blogging, discourse in the language classroom can blossom, and learners will not only be better speakers of a foreign language, but also 21st century literate netizens. I couldn't agree more with Davis (2006), a blogger and information systems training specialist, who says that once the blogging framework is part of the routine of the group:

Blogging lets many more become engaged. Blogging can be a place where we can make connections and dig deeper into how and what we are learning, both student and teacher. Sharing these thoughts and discoveries with others builds networks of learning that can cross continents. We get to toss our ideas out, have reactions to them,

receive suggestions to build upon them and many more become involved in the process. It becomes more personalized and certainly more meaningful. Students are creating meanings that make sense to them because they are constructing them, not having pieces delivered to them that they just repeat. (para. 4)

Blogging for Thinking Skills

Another aspect of blogging is the promotion of higher order thinking skills. In order to establish a conversation, to encourage people to comment on a certain topic, and to construct knowledge collectively, students and teachers will have to go beyond superficialities, posting entries that increase reflection, analysis, discussion, and synthesis. Students should be writing from their hearts about topics that engage them in the act of writing. Teachers, in their transforming role as educators, must be prepared to support learners in the process of finding their voice by inquiring, commenting, and dialoguing with students. Educators must also highlight the numerous possibilities of the powerful features a blog provides through the addition of visual cues, external media sources, and hyperlinks that can engage the audience in the discussion of topics.

Students have the choice to organize their ideas and content in their own ways, leading to divergent and creative thinking. That's exactly the point Weinberger (2007) makes in his book, *Everything is Miscellaneous*, when he mentions that in the online world people have "wide flexibility to order the pieces as they want, even and especially in unanticipated ways" (p. 100). Thus, while the group chooses how they are going to share meaning, they're certainly using their higher order thinking skills to connect the pieces together and yet being challenged to communicate in a foreign language.

Blogs give the teachers the possibility to establish a different kind of rapport with and among their students, which is a positive development in the language classroom. Blogging allows the chance to give a voice to each one of the learners. Some who were not prepared to expose themselves in the face-to-face classroom can become brilliant bloggers. Talents are discovered and personal vignettes are revealed in ways that wouldn't be possible in a three-hour weekly encounter. In fact, when Weinberger (2007) talks about the characteristics of this digital era, he points out that "it's the wisdom of groups, employing social expertise, by which connections among people help guide what the group learns and knows" (p. 131).

Blogging gives this sense of belonging to writers and readers. They become part of a community who engage in meaningful conversations in which what each one says matters. However, it's not an ideal, organized world. And that's why so many language teachers are so uneasy with blogging. Incorporating blogs in teaching routines requires an educational paradigm shift in which educators need to relinquish control and authority in order to favor a collective construction of knowledge. Many teachers still don't feel prepared to take the plunge, but it's a totally enriching, engaging process that is worth experiencing even if it seems a bit chaotic given lack of control by the teacher over what is being produced.

Blogging for Authentic Audience

Also, blogs promote a relationship with an audience beyond just the instructor. This can motivate more carefully written texts, including an expansion of new vocabulary to convey the ideas of the student bloggers precisely. As Ferdig and Trammel (2004) state:

Blogs allow all students to participate in a discussion, opening up diverse perspectives. By blogging, the classroom also extends from the physical constraints of those who fit in the room and are registered to a limitless international audience. It is likely that someone outside of a class will come across student blogs, thereby extending diversity to include perspectives outside of the classroom. (para. 4)

Therefore, due to this potentially extended global audience, major benefits of blogging in the language classroom include:

1. The choice of more appropriate language on the part of the learners. leading to better writing skills
2. The addition of new perspectives to the learners' thoughts, giving them the possibility to move forward in their own reflections
3. The motivational aspect of realizing that one's voice echoes in distant parts of the globe and is heard by others

However, the most positive impact of blogs in the language class is having students perceive the importance of learning a language as a communication tool. They can learn about different cultures, develop a more comprehensive understanding of cultural differences, and internalize the idea of the benefits of diversity. Blogging promotes the authenticity every language educator seeks, authenticity that makes language learning stick and makes the students embark on a rich cultural experience. Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves (2003) list these affordances as including authentic activities that:

- have real world relevance
- are ill-defined, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity
- comprise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time
- provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources
- provide the opportunity to collaborate
- provide the opportunity to reflect
- can be integrated and applied across different subject areas and lead beyond domain specific outcomes
- are seamlessly integrated with assessment
- create polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else
- allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome (para. 10)

Blogging and Tagging

During this year's annual Electronic Village Online free professional development

seminars [<http://evoo8sessionscfp.pbwiki.com>] we held a session entitled Blogging for Educators [<http://blogging4educators.pbwiki.com>]. This session included a week totally dedicated to the concept of tagging and RSS. From the beginning of the session, we advised participants to tag all their content with our unique tag for the session, *blogging4educators*, without further explanation about the idea behind it. In due time, when the participants had grasped the basics of blogging and had created their own blogs, we then emphasized the importance of tagging and how the Writingmatrix concept would be applied to our blogging reality. First, the educators made a search in Technorati with the posts that had already been tagged as *blogging4educators*. Surprise! The tagged posts were already there, ready to be explored in one single place.

As we moved on, we decided to create a unique tag for each week so that it would be easier to keep track of participant's blogging tasks, much simpler, in fact, than following participants' blog posts through the feed aggregators we were using, Pageflakes [<http://www.pageflakes.com>] and Google Reader [<http://reader.google.com>]. Due to the quantity of content being produced and the fact that participants were not at the same point of their blogging production, some were just keeping pace with the weekly tasks, while others were falling behind. Thus, by defining specific workshop tags for the weekly tasks, we were able to aggregate voices and keep the conversations flowing.

Those who gave the Writingmatrix concept of tagging a try were even better able to understand how easily it could be applied to the classroom without spending time with students explaining much about technical aspects of how to keep track of conversations. This could be accomplished simply by finding a unique tag to keep the distributed conversations aggregated. Also, by knowing those tags, the interactions around a topic could be happening as long as participants keep tagging with our session's tags, *blogging4educators*, *edublogtalk*, *edublogpractice*, and *b4echallenge*.

One of the most exciting uses of this tagging connectivity utilizing Technorati in our session was the *b4echallenge* in which many participants decided to write a post about what the others didn't know about them (and the others had to discover the secrets by aggregating those posts). It was like unveiling secrets that you might have never known even if they were your best friends in real life! Tagging can take a community of bloggers to establishing dialogs on any topic that interests the group and keep them archived in one single online space with the advantage of its being dynamic. Often when you tag, you can get an unexpected feedback and start a new node in the communication network you are building up with others who share common interests. After my informal introduction to the Writingmatrix concept, I was able to fully apply it with my tagging partners in the *blogging4educators* community making powerful global connections with educators I might never have interacted with if it weren't for this new era of folksonomies.

Conclusion

As mentioned before, I'm very optimistic about the benefits of blogging in the language classroom, but much depends on the teacher's efforts in establishing the basis for an active group of student-bloggers, which is certainly a challenge

due to schedule constraints, overflow of information, resistance from students, and constraints on educators and their institutions. Nonetheless, when a community of bloggers is created, the learning outcomes can be far-reaching. Going beyond the classroom has never been so easy, literally just at the tip of the learners' fingers. The audience is there, content is produced, meaning is developed, reflection is encouraged, and the target language is the means to establish these elements of communication. Nothing could be more meaningful for a language learner. But language learning through blogging doesn't "simply happen"; it happens only if learners and educators apply themselves to developing semantic webs taking all into another level of understanding of the language being studied and of the vast, fascinating world surrounding them. To summarize the potential of blogging in the language classroom, consider Richardson's (2006) reflection of his own blogging/learning journey: Some 2,500 pieces of published writing later (with almost as many comments back from readers), I can say without hesitation that all my traditional educational experiences combined, everything from grade school to grad school, have not taught me as much about learning and being a learner as blogging has. My ability to easily consume other people's ideas, share my own in return, and communicate with other educators around the world has led me to dozens of smart, passionate teachers from whom I learn every day. It's also led me to technologies and techniques that leverage this newfound network in ways that look nothing like what's happening in traditional classrooms. (para. 7)

Note

A recording of this presentation at the WiAOC may be found at Alado [<http://www.alado.net/webheads/>]. To enter, use any name as the User and leave the Password blank. The presenter and co-moderator Carla Raguseo discuss the EVO 2008 session, Blogging for Educators [<http://evo08sessionscfp.pbwiki.com/Blogging4educators/>] in a Webcast on the EdTechTalk channel at WorldBridges [<http://www.worldbridges.com>], for Teachers Teaching Teachers [<http://teachersteachingteachers.org/?cat=223>].

About the Author

Carla Arena, a Brazilian EFL teacher, explorer of the potential of technology integration into language learning, Carla Arena started to investigate the possibilities of technology applications some years ago and has been trying them out ever since. She is a teacher trainer and site content manager at Casa Thomas Jefferson, a Binational Center in Brasilia. She teaches an online listening course. She's part of the TESOL CALL-IS's Electronic Village Online Coordinating Team [<http://www.call-is.org/moodle/course/view.php?id=5>] and has been co-moderating the EVO online sessions on blogging for educators all over the globe for the past two years. She's a blogging fan (or addict!) and enthusiastic Webhead [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/]. Carla's blog is The Journey: On Learning and Teaching [<http://explorations.bloxi.jp/>].

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