

Using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the EFL Classroom: Hosting a Student Blog Project

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Abstract: Having students create and manage their own blog is one potential method to increase the quality and fluency of their writing, general vocabulary and word usage, as well as enhance student interest through the use of “New Media” tools and interactive feedback and communication blogging can provide. This article focuses primarily on the basic components of setting and running a student blog project, as well as offering a general overview of the benefits and drawbacks of two common approaches, collated from personal experience in two ESL courses at two separate Japanese universities: the “Individual” blog project type, wherein students design their own blog and are totally responsible for its theme and content; and the “Collaborative” blog project type, wherein students link their individual work in teams into a single blog, focusing on a set theme and subtopics. Both approaches offered distinct advantages and disadvantages, and it is the hope of this paper to not only recommend the efficacy of blogs as an adjunct to regular writing curricula, but to highlight some possible classroom problems and pitfalls that might occur in implementing such a project, and suggest some possible solutions.

Keywords: Classroom blogging, EFL writing, collaborative learning

要約

学生にブログを立ち上げ管理させることは、作文能力や語彙数、語法の質向上につながる。さらには、道具としての「新しいメディア」を駆使し、自身のブログサイトをもつことが対話型フィードバックやコミュニケーションを実践することにつながり、学生自身の関心も高まっていく。

本論文では、まずはじめに、ブログプロジェクトの設定と運用における基本要素に焦点をあてる。同時に、一般論として、二つのアプローチの利点と欠点に触れる。それらは、日本にある2つの大学でESLクラスを教えた個人的経験と照合するものである。

「個人」型ブログプロジェクトでは、学生がブログをデザインし、ブログのテーマや内容全てにおいて学生が責任を持つ。「コラボレーション」型ブログプロジェクトでは、学生は自分がつくったブログを協同ブログの中に位置づけながら、自身のテーマと副題に焦点をあてることによって固有性をもたせるものである。それぞれの方法には利点と欠点がある。本論文では、ブログを通常の作文クラスの補助として利用する効果を推奨するのみならず、授業内で起こりうる問題やプロジェクトを遂行する際の落とし穴ならびに解決策についても触れている。

キーワード：授業におけるブログ利用、EFLにおける英作文・共同学習

Introduction

Teachers today who are used to more traditional methods and types of teaching materials, and who are looking to do something different in their lessons by using more of the technological tools at their disposal, can find a number of options out there, ranging from the relatively simple to more complex. One option is to assign students a blog project. While such a project does involve some basic familiarity with the internet, some word processing and layout skills as well as a certain facility with navigating the type of blogging software chosen, the main focus of writing a blog is just that: writing. As there are a variety of easy-to-use blogging software programs available for free on the net, the time investment required to gain basic skills in using said software is minimal. Therefore, teachers with experience in teaching traditional composition courses might find this a worthwhile tool to add some visual interest and a fresh angle to the classroom environment. It can spark some creativity and enjoyment within the students.

Blogging has been used as a learning tool in classrooms for over a decade, and as a result, numerous studies have been conducted regarding the effectiveness of using blogs to increase students' writing ability. Many of these studies can be found online, others in academic journals, and most make reference to or include data conducted in ESL classroom environments. Nakatsukasa (2009), Gedera (2011), and Cequena (2013) each offer useful overviews of several studies conducted which indicate the quantitative advantages gained from using blogging in the classroom. Such post-blogging project benefits referenced in the above articles included students' increased word count, fluency and lexical complexity in their writing; increased facility with revision and editing as a direct result of collaborative feedback from other students (in the form of blog comments), and increased honing of students' information researching, reasoning and critical thinking skills. This paper takes as a given that using blogging can be a useful tool when used to complement more traditional, textbook-based writing and composition curricula, and is designed as a basic overview of simple techniques on how to use blogging in an ESL classroom environment, including an anecdotal comparison between individual and collaborative approaches.

So what is a blog? Short for "web log," a blog is, in essence, an on-line magazine. Articles, essays, stories or criticism are published in "posts," and appear in date order, i.e. the most recent post is on top of the webpage, with previously published posts appearing next in descending order backward in time. Blogs come in many types, ranging from text-heavy essays to more image-based content, and cover all manner of topics and subjects. While it is likely that few of your students will have designed or created their own blogs before, most will undoubtedly have at least a basic familiarity with the concept of a blog from their time spent on the internet. This article aims to provide a step-by-step guideline for setting up and managing a class blogging project, as well as a brief overview of the various types of blogging software available for general use. It also covers tips for

handling potential problems that might arise, based upon anecdotal information gleaned from recent, and past, experience.

This project occurred to me first and foremost because I have a fairly long history of not only reading and visiting blogs daily, but of writing my own, having started and abandoned several blogs in the past until finally establishing a film history and review blog in early 2012, which I continue to run to this day. The blog has been both a useful tool to sharpen and develop my creative writing and basic design layout skills, as well as providing a diverting hobby. The relative ease of setting up and maintaining such a project made it seem a natural fit for college and university classes, especially those with a higher level of English ability. I have used this blogging project concept at two different universities, with varying levels of success. This piece will primarily focus on a blogging project conducted in an English & the Media course, an upper-level EFL course taught at Otemae College in spring semester, 2014. The article will finish with a comparison between this recent effort and an earlier example conducted at another university several years prior, with some thoughts on the pros and cons of the two approaches. It is hoped this will give a balanced assessment and guide for other instructors who might wish to attempt such a project in the future.

Choosing the Right Blogging Software

Most net users read various blogs on a daily basis without paying much attention to the type of blogging software used. People who write and manage blogs (known as “bloggers”) have a variety of options to choose from. Those who have prior knowledge or skill of HTML or code writing often purchase their own domain name and build their own dedicated webpage, which is ideal but too costly, time-consuming or technically difficult for most casual users. Thankfully, a number of software companies exist which offer both free and paid services. These companies, such as Blogger, WordPress, Weebly and others, provide the software, basic design templates and bandwidth hosting capabilities. All the end user has to provide is some limited design choices and the content.

All the main blogging software providers listed above offer simple, easy-to-use, perfectly acceptable free blog options, and these are the types recommended for use in the classroom. Students who sign up for the free blog option will have sufficient freedom to play around with the design elements of their blog. Both Blogger and WordPress appear to be the most popular and commonly-used services on the net. For varying reasons, including its user-friendly interface, I chose Weebly for the 2014 English & the Media “Individual” class blogging project; Blogger was the service used in the earlier “Collaborative” project.

Choosing the Type of Blog Project

There are numerous types of blogs populating the internet, and as a teacher you have the option of how much freedom or restriction you care to give the students. I conducted two distinct blogging projects at two different schools, the latter and most recent being at Otemae. The earlier project was for a 3rd year university essay writing course, made up of students who were all planning to complete a study abroad program in the following semester. The blog project was designed to act as their “final essay” in the course grading criteria, and followed a chosen theme. Each year a large number of foreign exchange students, primarily from the U.S. and Canada, attend that particular university, and so the topic of the blog project was to introduce Japanese culture in general, and the Kansai region in particular, to similar foreign exchange students. The “Study Abroad” Composition students were split into self-chosen groups, or teams, of approximately 5-6 members. Each member was then responsible for their own “page” on a given facet of the topic, such as “Typical Kansai Dishes,” or “Sightseeing Destinations,” “Practical Information,” etc. The members would then link their individual blog pages to those of their fellow members, and the course finished with a group presentation in front of the class. While not without some technical challenges and snafus, stemming from the logistics of interlinking the varying group members blogs, this was overall a successful project which, judging from verbal feedback and overall enthusiasm on their part, the students clearly enjoyed.

For the 2014 spring semester Media course at Otemae College, I opted to allow more freedom and creativity on the part of the students. Students were required to produce three distinct pieces of text - “posts” - each one to include a minimum of one or two images (photos, illustrations, etc.) The theme and content of the blogs were left entirely up to the students discretion (within accepted limits of taste and decorum). Students were encouraged to build their blogs around their own personal interests, i.e sports, travel, manga, video games, movies, food, etc. A considerable amount of time was then spent helping them with the technical side of building their blogs as well as giving them some advice and ideas about content that fit their chosen theme. As might be expected, some students responded very well to this freedom, while others struggled without a more rigid focus, and the ultimate outcome ran the gamut from very successful blogs to poor or incomplete projects.

The pros and cons of both approaches will be covered at the end of this article, but at this point it is important to note that both approaches are potentially quite effective, depending on the particular make-up and interpersonal bonds of the students, and the environment of the classes being taught. These two approaches are not the only options, either, and represent only two ways of using blogging technology. It should be noted that the level of English ability in both cases ranged from intermediate to high intermediate. This would not necessarily preclude this type of project being used in lower-level classes; however, the nature of the project and content would likely need to be simplified to be effective.

Implementing the Project

Depending on the nature of the course being taught - whether it is a once-a-week or twice-a-week course, the number of students in each class, etc. - the length of time that seems to fit best for the blogging project to be completed properly is between 4-6 complete lessons, from inception to final presentation. This could conceivably be shortened or lengthened if the needs of a particular course dictated such measures, but roughly 4-5 lessons seems a sufficient amount of time to get everything done without undue haste. In the two test cases performed, the 4 lesson model was followed, which can be broken down into the following steps:

- Lesson one – Introducing the Blog Concept
- Lesson two – Nuts and Bolts: Setting up the Blog and Crafting a “Look”
- Lesson three – Tweaking and Perfecting the Design and Content of the Blog
- Lesson four – Presenting the Finished Blog to the Class

Note, unless your classroom is equipped with multiple computers, Lessons two and three need to be held in a Computer Lab. This means you will need to make reservations or other arrangements for such rooms ahead of schedule.

Lesson one – Introducing the Blog Concept

Some preliminary groundwork in the classroom is necessary before the students enter the computer lab. First, the teacher needs to introduce the concept of blogs and blogging, define the terms of the project and give the students some in-class time to brainstorm ideas. The English & the Media course started with a group discussion of various questions about “new media,” including Social Networking Sites, discussion boards, online dating sites and of course, blogs and other related content-based websites. The basic parameters of the blogging project were outlined using a whiteboard, accompanied by a detailed, printed handout that ran through the parameters of the project. Via an overhead projector, students were shown some of the content on my own movie review blog, as well as a handful of other types of blogs, to give them an idea of the scope of content available to them. The rest of the lesson was spent in the students generating possible blog topic ideas on their own. The lesson concluded with the assignment of the students to do some preparation work in choosing a likely theme and some possible content in anticipation of Lesson two.

Lesson two – Nuts and Bolts: Setting up the Blog and Creating a “Look”

Due to the technical details of this stage, the second lesson is perhaps the most chaotic and micro-managed of the process. The students convened in the computer lab and, through the use of

the overhead projector and the example monitors located between each pair of PC work stations throughout the classroom, were taken step-by-step through the process of setting up their own blogs, using Weebly's free blog software program. First, each student needed to sign in with their university or college I.D., then proceed to the Weebly homepage (www.weebly.com). From there, the students had to register an account with the blog provider company. The software then led them through the set-up process in a fairly smooth fashion, though some confusion and questions from the students occurred during this stage. While Weebly and other similar sites do have their own “blog building” online tutorials, it is helpful if teachers have some familiarity with this stage of the process to troubleshoot and assist the students as needed.

Students will need to choose a basic title of their blog, as well as the URL for their blog at this stage. This information can be easily changed later, but it is important to remind students to write down and keep a record of their Weebly password and ID, as well as their final URL domain name (which, since it is a free site, will always end with weebly.com at the end – i.e.: www.myblogpage.weebly.com). Students' failure to record the above information tended to be the biggest problem encountered during the “Teacher Review” and “Presentation” segments of the project.

Students then will arrive at a large selection of “Blog Themes” (design templates) to choose from. These free templates were designed by either by Weebly staff or other bloggers, and there are a sufficient number of them to allow a good deal of freedom in choice of color scheme, design and layout. It is helpful to remind students that they are not “locked in” to a particular template, but can always change it later if so desired. At this point, most students will happily play around with all manner of different themes until they find one which suits them. To allow for students to personalize their blog, it is important that some time should be allotted in Lesson two for this. It is helpful to encourage them to decide on a template before too much time passes, as some time also needs to be spent in searching the web for various images to incorporate into the “header” or “banner” of their site, as well as image content for their blog posts.

At this stage, teachers are advised to use Weebly's “hot blog designs” page to show the students, via the projector, just how colorful, varied and “cool” a blog can look if presented properly. It is also recommended to show students the “Pages” option, which allows them to link additional blog sites or pages to their main blog page, under any headings they choose (default headings usually include an “About” page, where the students can post a personal photo if they choose, or list some general information about themselves).

Next, students should try to at least start to post a piece of text, using the “Post” function. Weebly has a sidebar on the left of the screen which includes these various posting options, which can be “dragged and dropped” into the post and rearranged both before and after the post is “published.”

Note: a handy step-by-step guide on how to post is also available at the Weebly site, at:

<http://hc.weebly.com/hc/en-us/sections/200354313-Beginner-s-Guide-to-Weebly>

There is also a handy video guide hosted at YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qu50A7sZPCQ>

Daniela Munca-Aftenev also has posted an online Power Point presentation on “Creating a Blog for ESL Students”, available online at:

<http://www.slideshare.net/daniMD/creating-a-blog-activity-for-esl-students>

Students need to be reminded that they must “publish” their post before it will be accessible as a webpage. They can edit and save their post content as long as they would like prior to publishing, but others will not be able to read the post until it has been published. Once published, a post can be edited, re-arranged, deleted, etc. at the writer’s discretion, using the “Edit” function.

Lesson three – Tweaking and Perfecting the Design and Content of the Blog

Since most of the basic set-up of the blog should have been completed by the end of Lesson two, time in Lesson three should be devoted to working on content. Ideally, students should have done a good deal of work on their blogs at home, but in actuality, this rarely happens, as many students tend to procrastinate until close to the deadline. That means that most of the class time in Lesson three should focus on making sure the students’ have a clear identity and point of view for their blog, have its look and design mostly finalized, and that they have some direction or ideas related to post content. For the Otemae class, I asked them to produce three distinct posts, each to be approximately 2-3 paragraphs in length. This proved to be a taller order for the group than at first expected, as many students seemed to struggle with providing sufficient text content. The third lesson is thus important not only because it focuses on the students’ blog content, but also because it is the last time you as the instructor will be able to provide feedback, guidance and technical help prior to their class presentation. You will likely receive many questions at this stage, and it is highly advisable for teachers to stroll around the PC lab, going from student to student, not only inquiring if they have any questions or need any help, but checking their progress, giving them some design or content feedback. The time can be used to confirm that students understand the process and are moving towards the creation of a fun, informative and visually-attractive blogs.

Lesson four – Presenting the Finished Blog to the Class

The final stage is, of course, where the students show the results of their effort by presenting their blog to the class. Teachers should have given students the basic guidelines and format for the presentation in a prior lesson, so the students have sufficient time to prepare. Instructors will also

need access to a computer and overhead projector in the classroom to facilitate the presentations. Students may need some initial assistance in getting their blog pages set-up on the PC prior to giving their speech, so time needs to be built into the schedule to permit such transitions. For the purposes of the Otemae blog project, each student was responsible for creating and presenting their own blog, so most speeches could be completed within about 5 minutes. If you have a large group, you may need to allow 1½ to 2 full lessons to get through all the presentations.

In the Otemae group, students' work was assessed in two areas: blog content and presentation quality. Notes were taken to critique each student's performance along basic presentations skills guidelines: proper voice control, clarity of message, eye contact and audience interaction, use of visual aids, etc. The blog content portion of their grade was determined post- presentation, by visiting each student's blog page and critiquing the design, content and basic English writing skills found on their blog. (To this purpose, it is recommended to have some sort of a sign-up sheet that can be passed around the class, where students can write down their name and the URL website address of their blog.)

One possible problem which will likely occur is that a number of students will neglect to publish the finalized version of their blog, and the instructor thus will be unable to access their website after the presentation. Still others might misprint or misremember their blog's URL address, so when the teacher attempts to visit these students' sites later for content assessment, he or she may not be able to find or open the correct pages. Therefore, it is **very important** to remind students to 1) properly publish their posts before coming to class on the presentation day, and 2) keep clear records of the correct URL address for the final version of their blog, and to print out said URL address in complete and correct form on the sign-up sheet. Clear and consistent reinforcement of these points will make for a much smoother experience for the instructor and the students.

Final Analysis

As previously mentioned, the two blog projects - the earlier "Collaborative" type conducted at another university, and the recent "Individual" type conducted at Otemae in Spring semester 2014 - met with varying degrees of success. The "Collaborative," linked group project proved the most successful, for several reasons. One, students generally enjoyed the process of working on the project together, meeting and coordinating both inside and outside the classroom. This social aspect is an important factor, especially in classes where the students are particularly close-knit and friendly with each other. Another reason is related to the first: the sense of belonging engendered by being part of a group experience, and the concomitant feeling of fidelity and responsibility to fellow members (in other words, not wanting to let their peers down). This seemed to increase the level of effort in nearly all the groups. At the same time, if a certain student opted to not attend the lessons fully, or didn't pull

their own weight in the group, the final result only impacted that student's own assessment, and not the group as a whole. A final component in the success of this "Collaborative" project type was likely tied to the restrictions placed on the students by the parameters of the assignment. Since the students were given a clear set of guidelines as to the general type of blog and content required (i.e., providing general information about the Kansai area to foreign exchange students attending the same university), there was less room for confusion in trying to find a focus for their blogs, such as was encountered in the "Individual" project. The only real disadvantage of the "Collaborative" type project was the technical difficulties in linking all the group members' pages together, but this has been substantially mitigated in the intervening years as various blog software providers' interfaces and tools have improved.

Conversely, the "Individual" blog project met with comparatively mixed to negative results. While a few students thrived in such an independent environment, producing strong blogs with a clear sense of design, purpose and interesting content, nearly half the class turned in incomplete or substandard work. A handful of students even dropped out of the project entirely, due to a lack of direction or disinterest. This became especially apparent on the presentation day, the subdued attitude of the students indicating not only the usual nervousness about giving a speech in front of the class, but the general mood of apathy and perhaps even embarrassment about not delivering work up to their usual standards. While these results were overall disappointing, I think the project would have turned out quite differently had I followed the "Collaborative" group format of the earlier, more successful project. Judging from an earlier group presentation project conducted in the same Otemae class, this particular group of students generally exhibited extremely tight bonds of friendship, and working together provided a much higher level of motivation from them to turn in better work. They also responded strongly to a separate project which gave them a certain level of creative freedom but was done in clear, well-established parameters.

Therefore, in utilizing technology and blogging in the classroom, it is recommended that teachers keep a close eye on the make-up and general mood of their classes, to best determine which type of project is ideally suited to the students, before deciding the type, direction and guidelines of such a project. Some other challenges in using blogging in ESL classrooms, such as students' lack of time, lack of writing skills and passivity in participation are discussed by Yunus, Tuan and Salehi (2013). Overcoming these challenges requires proper planning, tighter controls and continual monitoring on the part of instructors. Key to the success of such a project lies in maintaining students' enthusiasm and interest level. These perhaps are easiest to maintain in a more "Collaborative" type environment. An additional suggestion to add a more "Collaborative" aspect to the "Individual" blog approach would be to require students to visit, read and leave feedback (in the form of comments on individual posts), as well as requiring them to respond to comments left on their own blogs. This would add an inter-class communicative aspect within the "Individual" project parameters, hopefully resulting

in students feeling less isolated and more motivated to assist, and be assisted by, their peers. This feedback requirement could also be used in the “Collaborative” approach, encouraging greater communication and assistance between various blogging teams.

In conclusion, conducting a class blogging project proved a worthwhile exercise, giving students a chance to flex their creative muscles, use current media in a fun and slightly challenging way. A blog can act as a refreshing change from the confines of the same classroom and textbook. The variety and flexible nature of blogging lends itself well to all manner of subjects and courses, and, if the criteria and content are well-matched to a particular class’s needs and aptitudes, should prove a useful and diverting learning tool.

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