Enhanced Writing Skills through Blogging

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Abstract

In a technology driven framework of teaching and learning, blogging plays a very important role in enhancing the ability of a learner to write. As a strong motivational tool, involving, integration of specific skills, blogging motivates the learner to share personal information, inductively learning specific language structures and vocabulary. This article deals about the process of blogging, rationale to use blogging in the process of enhancing writing skills and other affective aspects involved.

Key Words - blog, Internet, Weblog, World Wide Web, RSS

A weblog (or blog) is a web-based space for writing where all the writing and editing of information is managed through a web browser and is immediately and publicly available on the Internet.(Godwin, 2003) There are a range of potential applications of blogging technology in education and training including for learners and teacher communication, delivery of learning materials, the provision of mentoring to learners, collaboration and professional development for teachers and knowledge management.

As blogs become more and more commonplace, educators in recent years have begun seeing the potential of blogs for teaching and learning. At this time, using blogs in education, and particularly in language learning, is still novel in Indian context. Few Studies that have been published include research on blogging's effect on learner autonomy, increasing writing fluency, as a place for completing writing assignments (Ward, 2004; Wu, 2005), posting class materials (Johnson, 2004), and as a way to open communication with E-mail bloggers outside the classroom (Pinkman, 2005).

Application of Blogs in Education Setting

The Oxford English Dictionary Online defines the noun blog as, "A frequently updated web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary." On the Internet, a blog is a personal or professional journal that is frequently updated and intended for general public consumption. The essential characteristics of the blog are its journal form, typically a new entry each day, and its informal style. Many blogs include photo, audio, and video information.

Even though weblogs have been in existence since the very beginning of the World Wide Web itself, free, commercially available blogging software seems to have made its first appearance in July of 1999 (Blood, 2000). Because of the relative quickness and ease of publishing this type of software affords, the number of users has grown tremendously since then, and we can now observe blogs being used for personal, educational, journalistic, and commercial purposes.

A blog has geography just like any static website and features several specific territories that in combination create the uniqueness. It can be discussed from following factors:

- Blogs do not require sophisticated software or knowledge of computer programming. Everyone can participate with a variety of different easy-to-use, free blog accounts available on the Internet.

- Blogs offer several security options, such as limiting access for reading and posting. You have total control of who is authorized to view sensitive or confidential information with Blogware's easy to use security tools.

- Many blogs are written by only one author and visitors can not make posts or edit posts, but they can add comments to an existing post. Some blogs are community blogs, where all members of the community can make posts.

- Blogs disregard the status of users —all users are equal. Users often use screen names rather than their actual names. Sometimes anonymous posting is allowed.

- Blog entries are generally written like a letter to someone: oriented to an audience, informal, first person narrative. It often reflects the author's perspectives on issues. Comments to posts can act as a form of discussion.

- Blog entries can consist of text, images, audio, video, and hyperlinks. No need to email photos anymore. Through hyperlinks, readers can be sent directly to other resources. Hyperlinks are used as supporting information for any claim. Hyperlinks can bring news, pictures, and other information from the outside to the blog's readers.

- Blog has an auto-archiving feature. All posts are archived. Archives can be searched by keyword, or by date. Reverse chronological order of posts allows readers to identify the most recent posts made since the last time they read the blog.

- Blog content can be distributed via subscriptions. A person can subscribe to many blogs and have the content aggregated in one place. RSS aggregators gather entries from many blogs and send them to the reader instead of the reader going to each individual blog. Aggregators allow readers to sort through more blog entries in less time.

Since 2000, when Weblogs became widely available, a surprisingly wide variety of blog uses can be observed in the higher education and research arenas. Researchers, academics, teachers, and students are excitedly embracing blogs. In the field of higher education in particular, where online asynchronous communication has taken place, either through email or discussion boards, blogs have been used in a number of different roles, which have both extended and in some instances replaced existing online communication tools. This has indicated the usefulness of blogs as communication and cognitive tools for specific disciplines, such as language learning, journalism and communication studies, academic research, law, higher education in general, and teachers' professional development.

The Blog appears to enrich the learning experience and provide an opportunity for learners to shift from surface to deeper levels of learning. Surface learning is characterized by the approach of the learner to complete only the minimum content necessary to meet assessment requirements, whether that is learning only what may be presented in a test or simply attending and completing activities. Conversely, deep learning is how learners stand back from an experience, seek out connections between concepts, and contextualize meaning. In general, the blog as a learning journal is a way of documenting learning and collecting information for self-analysis and reflection, it helps learners' nurturance a habit to study from surface to deep.

Rationale for Using Blogs to promote Writing Skills

There are numerous reasons for using blogs in education, such as to provide a real audience for student writing, to provide extra reading practice for students, to increase the sense of community in a class, to encourage students to participate, to create an online portfolio of student written work (Stanley, 2005). The novelty factor creates student interest in starting to use blogs.

It is claimed that blogs work best when learners get into the habit of using them. If learners are not encouraged, blogs can quickly be abandoned. Blogs are well suited to serve as on-line personal journals for students, particularly since they normally enable uploading and linking of files. Language learners could use a personal blog, linked to a course, as an electronic portfolio, showing development over time. By publishing the blog on the Internet, the student has the possibility of writing for readers beyond classmates, not usually possible in discussion forums. Readers in turn can comment on what they have read, although blogs can be placed in secured environments as well. Self-publishing encourages ownership and responsibility on the part of learners, who may be more thoughtful (in content and structure) if they know they are writing for a real audience. This same degree of personal responsibility is lacking in discussion forums.

Using Blogs for English Writing

Recent innovations such as weblogs offer learning opportunities online. Blogs are easily linked and cross-linked to create larger on-line communities. Language learners can use a personal blog as an electronic portfolio that shows development over time. By publishing the blog online, the learner has the opportunity of writing for readers beyond their classmates. Readers in turn can comment on what they have read.

Based on the proposed possibilities for classroom application, one might expect blogs to offer many reading and writing incentives for English learning and writing because blogging places emphasis on content, the possibility of speedy feedback, the option of working with both words and images, and the ability to link one post to another. Scholars who use blogs also say that because students know they are going to have an audience by publishing their writing on the Web, they often produce higher quality work than students who write only for the teacher or for others in the class. Several scholars have reported on how they use blogs to support their classroom instruction and have found that blogs offer many reading and writing incentives.

Effectiveness of Blogs in English Writing Class

Since 1998, weblogs (or "blogs") have gained increasing notice in the cyberspace community, more and more foreign educators have applied this user-friendly technology to classroom instruction and language learning (Campbell, 2003; Johnson, 2004). Although not originally created for use in language education, blogs have formidable potentials as a useful tool for the teaching of EFL writing class.

In a short blog posting titled "Do weblogs improve writing?" Bernstein (2004) advocated "Frequent writing improves writing", "Writing for an audience improves writing", "Writing that matters improves writing", and "Writing on a computer improves writing". However, to EFL learners, frequent writing may not necessarily improve writing. Nevertheless, it will definitely be helpful if students do not only write frequently but also look up English dictionaries or use Internet to help them express their ideas clearly and correctly. EFL learners' writings will be more or less influenced by their first language. The improvement of writing will be questioned if

EFL students write English frequently but present their thoughts with the style of their first language. And some students answer that they will look up an English dictionary or ask someone else when they don't know how to express their ideas in English. To an EFL learner, it is a critical step to become a successful writer if whenever he is aware that something wrong with his writing, he can effectively find an answer from an English dictionary or Internet.

Three Types of Blogs in English Writing

Three types of blogs have been described for use in English writing class: the tutor blog; the learner blog; and the class blog. The tutor blog is run by the tutor for the learner, and its purpose is to give reading practice to the learners, promote exploration of English websites, encourage online exchange by use of comment buttons, provide class or syllabus information, and serve as a resource of links for self-study. Learner blogs are run by individual learners themselves. Learner blogs are best suited for English reading and writing classes. The class blog is the result

of the collaborative effort of an entire class. It can be used for posting messages, images, and links related to classroom discussion topics in English. Class blogs could also be used as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange.

Influence of Using Blogs in student Writing Process

A) Facilitating Learners' Critical Thinking Skills

The learners engaged in collaborative learning through their interactions with others which serves as a catalyst for critical thinking. Blogs foster critical thinking by encouraging students to evaluate what they read and write. Writing blogs offers learners a way to improve their writing skills and encounter new ideas through interaction with other students. Blogs allow students to easily link to resources that support their assertions, and thereby encourage critical thinking.

B) Providing Examples for Learners to Model and to Learn

Publishing reflective commentaries on the Internet is an effective way for learners to share each other's reviews. Not only will readership increase, when learners see each other's works, they can learn from one another, thereby motivating them to produce better reviews. Furthermore, the creation of online portfolios on the web amounts to a showcasing of their works over the development period of their learning. Such knowledge artifacts are a display of learner's growth and reflection on their learning. When a sizeable number of interested visitors give comments and input to a blog, a community of learners may be formed.

C) Affecting the Learners' Quality of Writing

The quality of writing is manifested in several ways. Some learners who study English state that they are always aware of their audience, and, as a result, write with their audience in mind. They don't know whether they are right or wrong. The permanent nature of publishing online encourages learners to pay more attention to the content and language in their blogs. And the feedback received from the various sources as well as the different types, critical and non-critical; also affects the quality of their writing. The learners also enhance the quality of their writing by adding visual representation to their blogs. This helps to clarify concepts for the reader. Visual literacy, visual thinking, and visual learning are concepts related to the purpose of Constructing Meaning. Multimedia research shows that learners with visual learning styles can benefit from technology with a multimedia format. In other words, adding visual associations to their blogs helps the learners express their points of views.

D) Facilitating Meaningful Learning for Learners

Blogging facilitates meaningful learning for the learners because they explore other blogs and links to learn more about other countries, cultures, and the people who write to them. In foreign language classes, the benefits of blogs include language gains and furthering cultural understanding. Some learners even use blogs exchange different culture with some foreigners. By participating as active readers of blogs, learners can gain the insider's perspective on various cultural topics, thus leading to better understanding of other cultures and what shapes them.

E) Giving Learners a Purpose for Writing

Blogs increase learners' interest and ownership in learning. Learners direct their own learning about topics important to them, while receiving feedback from others. Learners take ownership in blogging activities by actively searching for information. The use of blogs gives students chances to participate in a community. They learn that posted content can be read by people other than their teacher and classmates. The world can provide encouragement or feedback on learner writings. Learners interact with an authentic audience.

Strategies for enhanced Blog Writing Activities

a) Promoting Comfortable Interaction for Learners

Most of the learners prefer blogging interaction to face-to-face interaction because it is a more comfortable learning environment for them. Some learners may feel very comfortable with the blogging interaction because they do not like interacting face-to-face with their classmates. They indicate that they do not understand the accents and pronunciation of some of their classmates when they speak and read in English, which make them feel that the class interaction is a waste of time.

b) Motivating Learners' Writing and Interaction

Publishing in blogs motivates some learners because they want to make an impact on the readers with topics that were important for her. Posting makes they feel emotionally connected, happy, and eager to get audience responses. For most learners, publishing their work has been proved to be a motivational incentive to write using blogging. It especially empowers them because they felt in control of their writing, and as such they are intellectual explorers.

c) Giving Learners Self-confidence

This is a finding that emanated from the learners' lack of trust or lack of confidence in their classmates because they are ESL learners and not proficient enough in English. One aspect of trust and confidence pertains to how the students viewed their classmates' ability to critique their work. The acceptance or rejection of feedback is based on the learners' trust in the reviewer and confidence in their advice, and they have the least amount of trust in their own classmates because they are non-native speakers of English just as they are. However, blogging has provided the learners with a broader audience with whom to interact, they believe that they could learn and improve their writing skills from those who are more knowledgeable than they are. On the other side of the issue, the learners' degrees of self-confidence affect their judgment to accept or reject the comments of others. This is a factor that blogging and its ability to reach an outside audience for feedback could not overcome.

Blogging and Reflective Learning

Reflective learning and thinking is widely regarded as being important within all contexts, especially, in English language learning. Reflective thinking was originally defined by Dewey

(1933) as purposeful thinking oriented toward a goal. Reflection in learning involves a process of recording experience and then revisiting the description with the intent of refining learning processes and strategies. For English learners, two propositions are important in this context: one, that students find it difficult to engage in reflection over time without external support and two, that the learner is primarily responsible for identifying important experiences and then linking experiences to learning. Reflection is governed by both cognitive and affective components and the reflective act is preceded and accompanied by individual feelings and perceptions that could either form barriers to or enhance learning. Understanding the affective components of reflection and their effect on student learning and experiences is essential for identifying appropriate uses of reflection to assist individual language writing.

Numerous strategies have been recommended for encouraging reflection, such as Socratic questioning, journal writing, Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR), and reflecting teams. Journal writing as a feature of weblog serves a number of purposes, including allowing a learners to externalize his or her reflections on experiences and then to reframe experiences within the current context (Pinkman, 2005). Writing about their experiences may allow learners to think critically and develop keener insights into assumptions and beliefs that can interfere with their judgments. It also suggested that learners liked journal writing because it permitted instructors to "monitor" learners' development and journals help them form connection between concepts in class and everyday experiences. One technology-based instantiation of journaling has emerged in the form of tools and practices surrounding personal Web publishing. The most common instantiation of personal Web publishing is a Weblog, which offers mechanisms for learners to publish their thoughts, commentaries, and reflections in the form of individual posts on a Web page. The individual posts are time stamped, archived, and appear in reverse chronological order: that is, the most recent posts appear on the top of the page and older posts are at the bottom of the page. Weblogs allow for personalization and customization by individual Web loggers.

Weblogs offer a relatively convenient and easy mechanism for learners to journal their learning processes, and if used appropriately this technology has the potential of facilitating reflective learning. Weblogs support the ability of learners to record and revisit experience, which is an important part of reflective learning. Eastment, D. (2005) conceptualized that reflection was a function of distance, "they (processes of reflection) are preconditioned by distance" (Johnson, 2004). In Bateson's learning theory, when there is a direct relationship between the learner and the object (to be learned), no reflection happens at this point. However, when there is an indirect relationship (distance) between the learner and the to be learned, "the learner uses reflection as one of the means in his/her learning process…there is a systematic reflection on how to solve a problem, and the learner is conscious about the fact that he/she is learning. He/she is consciously tied to the situated conditions (in a wide sense) and actively using what he/she has learned at other (lower) level" (Johnson, 2004). Based on Baseson's theory, Johnson (2004) concluded that virtual environments are conducive to reflection. Weblog environments can promote reflective activities in learners since they lengthen the distance between learners and the content to be learned. However the use of Weblogs in English writing class is relatively recent and our understanding of the impact of this technology in supporting reflection is incomplete.

Blogs are a very versatile communication medium for using in education. Clearly blogs have been used most often as journals. Blogs are not only a journal tool that used for communication but they are teaching strategy in and of themselves that can be used in a variety of pedagogical methods. Obviously, blogging is an effective tool for delivery of instruction as evidenced in this study by the numerous benefits for its use which outweighed the drawbacks of the traditional communication tools such as email or bulletin boards. Studies should be done concerning how best to motivate students to make use of the full learning potential of blogs as well as how to teach them the necessity of privacy, netiquette, ethics, and appropriate content.

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