

# Weblogs and wikis in language teaching

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This paper explores the uses of weblogs and wikis as asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools in language education. After a brief introduction outlining the author's approach to technological tools in language teaching, the main section of the paper discusses the place of weblogs and outlines possible advantages of weblogs over discussion forums. A definition of weblogs is suggested, as well as a conceptualization of their use in terms of purpose, weight, mode, and implementation. A shorter section introduces wikis as possible complements to weblogs and argues that, in contexts where time and technical know-how allow, they have possibilities offered by no other major technology and warrant greater attention.

本論文では、wiki 及び weblog の非同期 CMC の道具としての可能性を探る。Weblogの幅広い活躍を期待し、ある場合には、BBSを代替することが出来るであろう。さらに高度な交流を実現するためには、wiki が重要な役割を果たせるであろう。但し、wiki を導入するためには、教員に求められる技術、また使用法を学習者に指導することにあたっての問題点について議論を行う。

## Impetus for a non-monolithic model

**A**t the simplest level, the addition of email or discussion forums to a face-to-face course can prove to be a useful enhancement, in that it may encourage deeper engagement with the course material, and with other course members, as well as encouraging more connection between class sessions. As we move towards richer possibilities for computer-mediated communication (CMC), we may feel a need for more, or more elaborate, tools. In these cases we are often steered towards what are usually called learning management systems (LMS), such as WebCT, Blackboard, Moodle, Desire2Learn, Sakai, Claroline, or Angel Learning, which are centered around courses and offer a complete package of tools such as forums and quizzes. Although these may offer many features, they may also entail problems such as inflexibility, a feeling of being overwhelmed, loss of control, and a move towards a “computer as tutor” model of CALL (Levy, 1997), as well as considerable costs and “lock-in”, whereby the difficulty of moving to a better system may be so overwhelming that change is resisted for many years. For this reason, as detailed in

Lavin (2005) and Lavin & Claro (2005), I favour the use of “small” technologies, tools that have just one major function and that are introduced one by one as the need arises, in a model commonly known as “small pieces loosely joined” (Weinberger, 2002). Readers should be aware that the price of the flexibility allowed by this model is a willingness to learn enough about each technology and its deployment to be able to use it with confidence and provide instruction to students. The two tools considered in this paper are weblogs and wikis, and the main focus is on weblogs for several reasons. They are less well-known than discussion forums and email, which have been extensively researched; however, most teachers will by now have heard of them, and may be considering how to use them in their classes. They also provide an easy entrée for teachers seeking to introduce CMC for the first time. Further, weblogs reveal the same basic principles as wikis, and may serve as a useful gateway to this more demanding technology.

### Weblogs

Weblogs have only a short history, having started around 1999, but, as of April 2005, there were already an estimated 31.6 million weblogs on the major hosted services such as Blogger (formerly BlogSpot) and LiveJournal, in addition to all the weblogs hosted by individuals and organizations on their own servers (Perseus Development Corporation, 2005). Countless scholars and journalists have written about weblogs (e.g. Blood, 2002; Glogoff, 2005), and in recent years there have been a number of articles regarding blogging in the service of language learning (e.g. Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Ward, 2004).

### *What are weblogs?*

Most definitions of weblogs include the term “online journal”, and this is indeed a good working definition. Most weblogs are owned by individuals and, as Winer (2003) puts it, “the personalities of the writers come through.”

I suggest a four-part definition of weblogs: Weblogs are websites that are usually personal; radically hypertextual; incrementally updateable; and chronologically organized. Radically hypertextual and incrementally updateable in turn require further definition.

Incremental updateability, a characteristic shared with wikis, may be a more radical innovation than it first appears to be. A conventional website typically goes through a cycle of planning and development, launch, stasis, redevelopment, and relaunch. A problem is that, except where considerable resources are available, the period of stasis may be very long, due to the perceived complexity of changing a website, or simply the minor hassle of editing and then uploading. This may be appropriate in the case of, for example, a University department’s curriculum, which would change at most annually, or a company mission statement, which may be unchanged for many years or decades. For more time-sensitive sites or sections of sites, it is desirable that the software used be designed with regular updates in mind.

Posting to a weblog typically may involve one mouse click, followed by typing of the text to be added, and finally another mouse click. Tools are usually available within the weblog software to include web links and images without typing or learning code, often with additional functions such as finding a book on Amazon.com, and posting a picture of the book cover along with a link to purchase the book, in one or two easy steps.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly for a tool that is associated with the creation of personal journals, weblogs also appear to be suitable for fostering conversation. A blogger reading a post worthy of comment on a fellow blogger's Weblog A can, while keeping visible the post she wishes to comment on, call up a text-input window for creating a new post on her own Weblog B that links automatically to the post on Weblog A, while simultaneously alerting the owner of Weblog A about the link. Thus, the new post on Weblog B exists simultaneously in two contexts rendered explicit by the software: firstly, it is part of the "vertical" stream of the writing of the owner of Weblog B, while remaining traceable in the "horizontal" relations it has with other weblogs.

Radical hypertextuality is also a characteristic shared with most wiki softwares. It consists in the ease alluded to in the previous paragraph of creating links, in contrast to conventional HTML coding conventions, and the fact that links are two-way. Thus, the alert sent to Weblog A in the example above simultaneously creates a link from the commented-on post on Weblog A to the commenting post on Weblog B (though this does not always work flawlessly on Blogger). The significance of this may be illustrated by analogy with books: When reading a book and encountering an in-text citation, we can easily go to the reference list and see the details of the citation. The reverse is not possible, however. If we leaf through a reference list and see a work that interests us, there is no reliable way of finding in the book the context in which it was cited. Two-way links (also called backlinks or trackback) tell us who is linking to us and increase the interconnections in the WWW. Ease of link creation also tends to encourage more links between related information.

Finally, it is generally true that weblogs' appearance can be easily customized. Thus, if students create their own weblogs in a writing class, for example, it is generally easier for students to develop an attachment to a weblog, and a strong sense of ownership, than they would with discussions in forums, for example, where an individual student's writing is simply part of a stream of writing formatted according to forum conventions outside the student's control.

### *Using weblogs in language education*

How are weblogs used? Just as there is no simple answer to the question, "How do teachers typically use whiteboards?", it is not easy to give a short answer to the question of how weblogs should be used. Framing our discussion may be easier, however, if we consider the question in terms of purpose, weight, mode, and implementation.

#### *Purpose*

Since a weblog is a writing tool, it is natural to think in terms of writing instruction and study. However, it is also conceivable to think chiefly in terms of reading practice (c.f. Ducate & Lomicka, 2005). In these cases, advanced students could read a range of weblogs on certain topics (self-chosen or chosen by the teacher), perhaps with a view to comparing and contrasting them, or read regularly the writings of one or a small number of bloggers of particular interest. In this latter case, clearly, there is scope for gaining a sense of how the writer's voice develops over time, what blend of topics the writer addresses, and so on.

In a successful simpler example, the author posted a number of links to weblogs and other sites whose subject was

chocolate, and asked students to write a post about chocolate themselves, commenting on (and linking to) one or more of the sites they had viewed. Some of the posts on this topic by students in the author's classes can be seen at <ponta3yoh.blogspot.com/2005/12/i-like-chocolate.html>, <smile840528.blogspot.com/2005/11/chocolate.html>, and <raindrop0909.blogspot.com/2005/11/chocolate.html>.

Even where blogging is conceived of as a writing activity, writing can be easier if there is something to respond to, and responding to other weblogs is a natural thing to do. Having followed one or two other bloggers over a period of time can also serve as a useful reference for one's own development as a blogger. Anecdotal and experiential evidence suggests that blogging may be one of the best ways to introduce large amounts of incidental reading "on the sly", possibly as an informal complement to more conventional extensive reading. In this respect, the focus is on fast reading with sufficient comprehension merely to find a topic of interest and one or two relevant facts or opinions to refer to on one's own weblog.

### *Weight*

Weblogs can be used as a pure online journal, where students write daily or weekly about what they have been doing. Students could be instructed to choose a topic (or have one assigned to them) to write about over an extended period of time, for example a semester, year, or full degree course. Students can also be encouraged or instructed to keep language course notes, or even notes on all their courses, on their weblogs. It is at this point that a weblog becomes much more than a conventional CMC tool.

Since blogging is fairly easy to do and to enjoy, there is the potential for it to become a ubiquitous tool. If, in addition to any assignments and journal-style entries, students also keep an ongoing record of their studies, the weblog begins to turn into a kind of portfolio. This could conceivably be used for assessment, and it may be quite convenient for that purpose as it is easy to make a weblog the central hub that links to any other work online, whether or not it is contained within the weblog. An example from one of the author's students, Erika, can be found at <raindrop0909.blogspot.com/2006/01/wai.html>.

A weblog as portfolio may, moreover, be equally useful as a tool for self-reflection, allowing a student to look back at past writings and trace his development as a writer. As can be seen in Erika's post cited above, the writer can place links to previous writings identified as important in the present post, thus potentially "containing" a whole history within one snapshot.

When planning a course, or conceptualizing an ongoing one, a teacher has considerable freedom in deciding what weight to attach to students' work with weblogs, and can opt for any point along a scale: blogging could be an optional and occasional activity, or it could be at the centre of a course. Or it could start in a minor role and move to centre stage if students enjoy the activity.

### *Mode*

Since blogging is a relatively easy activity, it may not be necessary to continue it long-term in order to justify the initial investment in learning how to blog. With students having some degree of computer literacy, it is possible to

teach the fundamentals of blogging very quickly, meaning that it is feasible to use blogging short-term for a specific project. An example given in Ducate & Lomicka (2005) encourages students on trips abroad to maintain a weblog during their stay, sharing experiences and keeping in touch with students back home. This approach could equally well be used with a web research project, encouraging all students to share their discoveries and opinions over a short and intense period. This mode of use contrasts with one where blogging is a constant activity throughout a course.

### *Implementation*

When deciding how much guidance to give students, careful thought must be given to students' familiarity with technology. Since weblog software is comparatively easy to use, for experienced learners a minimal set of instructions or guidelines, after guiding students through registration, may be sufficient. In cases where teacher time is not an abundant commodity, especially where students are not expected to devote great energy to their weblogs, it may be possible to tell students simply to write about whatever they wish, whenever they have the time. This was the option chosen by the author when teaching a lecture course in 2004 with more than 80 Department of Science and Technology graduate students, who could safely be assumed to have reasonably advanced technical skills. Technical guidance consisted of approximately 20 minutes devoted to showing screenshots of the registration process. This has the advantage that students have a new venue for self-expression and for linguistic input and output, without distorting course structure. In this specific case, whereas many students unsurprisingly

wrote minimal amounts, some jumped at the opportunity to express themselves in English, some students writing mainly about personal interests and events while others detailed the stages of their research and provided photographs of their experimental apparatus.

For more technologically naive users, or in cases where blogging is assigned great weight in a course, considerably more instruction may be necessary. Instruction may of course include syntax, vocabulary, style, paragraph structure, and all the other things traditionally taught in writing courses. To enable students to respond to posts that they have read, it may also include skimming, scanning, and other reading skills. But there are in addition instructional requirements specific to blogging, both technical and linguistic.

While the registration process for Blogger, a free weblog hosting service provided by Google, for example, is a reasonably simple one for more experienced Internet users, it can be daunting for those with less experience. First-time users have to choose a username, password, and display name, enter their email address, accept the terms of service, and choose a name, URL, and style for their weblog. Any of these steps can cause misunderstandings and difficulties, and examples collected by the author include the following: students do not understand the difference between user name and screen name; students may not have an email address or may not remember it, or they may believe that the Blogger service is creating an email address of their choice for them; students may believe that the name of their weblog has to be their own name, or they may not understand why they have to give the weblog a name and a URL. Once successfully registered, students may lose their passwords, in which

case they may require instruction in retrieving it. They may become confused with the difference between the blogging interface that only the weblog owner can see and the public face of the blog. Experience shows that very many students require repeated help with linking and incorporating images into weblog posts.

### *Weblogs vs. discussion forums*

As has been noted by Dennen (2005), discussions in web-based forums often tend to disintegrate quickly. Farmer (2004) suggests that increasing use of detailed or elaborate signatures (in which a writer appends automatically a favourite joke or aphorism, for example, to every message he contributes) on discussion forums may be an attempt to compensate for inadequacies of the medium in projecting contributors as individuals. Hewitt (2001) points out that discussion forums provide few mechanisms for drawing disparate threads of discourse together. Frequent problems with discussion forums are that: often, large numbers of discussions proceed in parallel, and it is difficult for anyone to follow all of them; people often fail to use suitable titles for topics; people sometimes add a new topic rather than check if the subject of their post is already handled in another discussion, leading to a chaotic structure that is not easily navigable; there are often large numbers of fragmentary posts (such as “I agree” or “Me, too!”), with no meaning in themselves, which forces later readers to search for the context.

For the teacher another problem with discussion forums is that it may not be easy to aggregate all the contributions of one learner for purposes of assessment. This is equally a concern for the learner who wants to get a complete picture

of their participation or linguistic development. In contrast, a weblog, as has been noted, contains or links to all the work of an individual.

Even a very short post on a weblog can usually be read in isolation, since a writer knows that a reader is at liberty not to follow links. Thus, fragmentary posts of the kind found on discussion forums are rare, as weblog posts do not depend on responses for their value (Lefever, 2004). This can encourage bloggers to develop arguments more fully.

What this means in practice for foreign-language bloggers will depend to a large extent on their level. Two examples from the author’s classes will suffice to illustrate the principle. (In these examples, students’ usernames and the names of their weblogs are cited with the spelling and capitalization as can be found on the weblogs themselves.)

(1) Rinrin, a university first-year science major, posts:

*Kumi Kouda is my favorite musician. Her profile...*  
[She goes on to give blood type, hobbies, favorite food, etc. This post is at <[gin02rinrin06myumyu.blogspot.com/2006/01/kumi-kouda.html](http://gin02rinrin06myumyu.blogspot.com/2006/01/kumi-kouda.html)>.]

Pineapple, a classmate of Rinrin’s, writes:

*{Misuzu’s English Blog: Kumi Kouda} I like Kumi Kouda too.* [The words in {} are a link to Rinrin’s post. Pineapple’s post is at <[sweet-and-sour-pork.blogspot.com/2006/01/misuzus-english-blog-kumi-kouda.html](http://sweet-and-sour-pork.blogspot.com/2006/01/misuzus-english-blog-kumi-kouda.html)>.]

Pineapple’s focus here was learning the mechanics of making links, and it is therefore understandable that the linguistic content does not go far beyond a simple “I like her, too” such as might be found in a discussion forum.



Nevertheless, unlike such a forum post, Pineapple's post can be read with or without reference to Rinrin's (and through imaginative use of colour and images is more entertaining than such a post would be), and functions as a part of Pineapple's weblog, *Pineapple diary*. Now that Pineapple has mastered the basics of making a functioning link, with a little guidance she should be able to learn common linking patterns such as *Rinrin {likes Kumi Kouda}. So do I* or *Rinrin {writes about the singer Kumi Kouda} on her weblog. She likes Kumi Kouda very much, and so do I*.

(2) Shinon, a third-year English major, writes:

*Beaujolais nouveau released...I bought it 3days ago, but I couldn't drink until now because I want to drink it with all of my family...* [This post is at [shinon.blogspot.com/2005/11/beaujolais-nouveau-released.html](http://shinon.blogspot.com/2005/11/beaujolais-nouveau-released.html)].]

Her classmate Nyankon (yuki) writes in response:

*Have you drunk beaujolais-nouveau of this year yet? {Shinon wrote about that.} My boyfriend bought the wine on the day that was released. And I tried a little. But I didn't understand the taste.* [nyannkonn.blogspot.com/2005/12/beaujolais-nouveau.html](http://nyannkonn.blogspot.com/2005/12/beaujolais-nouveau.html)

Classmate YUKO\_T notices both posts and writes:

*{SHINON} and {Yuki} wrote about Beaujolais-nouveau. I like drinking, but I love Shouchu(clear distilled liquor) and Sake. In Kouchi, there are wonderful sake...* [coffeeklatchsuger.blogspot.com/2005/12/i-am-drunkard.html](http://coffeeklatchsuger.blogspot.com/2005/12/i-am-drunkard.html)

In this example, the dual nature of YUKO\_T's post is clear: she is interested in Beaujolais nouveau and considers her classmates' posts thereon worthy of mention, yet she decides that her main topic is sake and shouchu. In a forum, this might even be considered an unhelpful move off-topic, whereas in this loosely affiliated community of bloggers that is an irrelevant consideration.

It should be noted here that it is not my intention to denigrate discussion forums, and problems mentioned here can presumably be solved with appropriate guidelines and individual guidance from teachers. Rather, I wish to demonstrate that a discussion forum is not the only tool available to support many-to-many asynchronous CMC and that weblogs are a surprisingly useful alternative tool for this purpose.

The apparent paradox in conversational use of a tool generally defined as one for personal journals has been alluded to above, but weblogs developed in their early days as places to house links and to foster conversations about them. However, the journal aspect of blogging is that most easily apprehended by students, and most will need coaching in linking, including the stylistic problem of how to incorporate a link naturally into a sentence. An example of this was given in (1) above.

While a weblog has a strong monologic aspect as well as an optional and usually weaker dialogic one, with wikis the notion of group collaboration is introduced. Typically, dialogue first comes to the fore and is later submerged into a group voice. This makes wikis a logical progression for the language classroom, and these will be discussed in the next section.

## Wikis

For countless people worldwide, Wikipedia is virtually synonymous with the concept of wiki. An online encyclopaedia with more than 800,000 articles in English alone, and smaller numbers in about 200 other languages (as of November 20, 2005), it is the finest and most prominent showcase for the potential of a largely anonymous and self-selected mass of people to create, grow, and continually improve a vast knowledge base through the donation of time and expertise. Anyone can join the ranks of Wikipedia authors, by simply finding an error or identifying incomplete information on a page, pressing an “Edit” button, editing the page, and then submitting the new, improved version, which becomes visible worldwide instantly.

Most wikis, of course, are on a considerably smaller scale than Wikipedia, not all are open to the general public, and the majority are not created with the MediaWiki software used by Wikipedia. How, then, should we define wikis?

The definition proposed here is a three-part one. Wikis are websites that are collaboratively editable; incrementally updateable; and radically hypertextual. Thus we see that, although weblogs and wikis look very different, they actually share some features, to the extent that they are often hailed as two key players in what is usually called Web 2.0 or the Semantic Web (Downes, 2005a,b; Danzico, 2005; O’Reilly, 2005). Collaborative editability is a key difference with weblogs. Wikis’ radical hypertextuality is also taken beyond that of weblogs, with the addition of a powerful linking mechanism made much more accessible. With most wikis this mechanism is CamelCase, and as can be seen this involves giving a word an initial and intermediate uppercase

letter to create a link to a page with the title of the word entered (creating the page if it does not yet exist).

The radical hypertextuality of wikis, combined with their collaborative nature, allows for constant restructuring of information as a social process, in a way that no other major tool appears to allow. We might venture to call wikis the ultimate social constructivist tool, as, in ideal cases, users strive together for a summary of their aggregated ideas or pool their knowledge to create a constantly evolving knowledge base. In this model, each user is ultimately and jointly responsible for the entire content of the wiki, and the collaboration is ultimately of a different kind from that witnessed in forum-based discussions about a text: while typically starting as a threaded discussion similar to that in forums, under pressure to actually produce an agreed-upon version of a text collaboration moves to direct manipulation of the text (Bruns & Humphreys, 2005; Morgan, 2004). Changing another’s text implies having a viewpoint about that text, and having the confidence to assert another viewpoint strongly enough to replace the original text with one’s own version. In a sense, the latest version contains all previous versions and attitudes held by editors thereof (and the software allows the previous versions to be retrieved from memory if necessary).

It should be noted, however, that wikis present a number of difficulties. While the existence of services like Blogger means that anyone can have their own weblog for free and customize it as they will, creating a class wiki usually requires someone with sufficient technical expertise to install it. Though this is hardly advanced computing, it does imply a certain familiarity with servers and (usually) the scripting



language PHP. Further, the maturity required to edit others' writing in a constructive way is probably greater than that required to write regularly in one's own space. Beginner or low intermediate students, who have difficulty noticing orthographic differences, may in addition find CamelCase confusing. For example, it is possible that a student will think that links to *MyHome* and *MaiHomu* will go to the same page when, in fact, two separate pages will be created.

By contrast, a weblog allows students to grow from linearity gradually into radical hypertextuality, and may be a more suitable general option; indeed, it may well become the first choice as CMC tool in many common teaching situations. A wiki may best be considered as something to be added where time and technical know-how allow, and where new kinds of interaction are sought (Lavin & Tomei, 2005).

### Conclusion

It can be seen that weblogs and wikis share the qualities of radical hypertextuality and incremental updateability. Incremental updateability can theoretically encourage regular participation, and student weblogs such as *Nyankon* <nyannkonn.blogspot.com/> and *daisy* <raindrop0909.blogspot.com/> would seem to suggest that, for weblogs, this advantage is not wholly a theoretical one. Radical hypertextuality can encourage or clarify links between participants and pieces of information.

It is early days for these two tools in language education, and any definitive statement of their value would be premature. Recent work has sought to delimit appropriate roles for these tools alongside more traditional tools, and in

this context the work of Oravec (2003) and Deitering (2004) on weblogs as a “middle space” between a highly-structured LMS and students' face-to-face networks is of interest. It seems that they do at the very least have great potential as adjuncts to more traditional asynchronous CMC tools, and may even partially replace them.

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## Appendix 1

### Software and websites mentioned in this article

- Angel Learning: <[www.angellearning.com/](http://www.angellearning.com/)>
- Blackboard: <[www.blackboard.com/](http://www.blackboard.com/)>
- Blogger: <[www.blogger.com/](http://www.blogger.com/)>
- Claroline: <[www.claroline.net/](http://www.claroline.net/)>
- Desire2Learn: <[www.desire2learn.com/](http://www.desire2learn.com/)>
- LiveJournal: <[www.livejournal.com/](http://www.livejournal.com/)>
- Moodle: <[moodle.org/](http://moodle.org/)>
- Sakai: <[www.sakaiproject.org/](http://www.sakaiproject.org/)>
- WebCT: <[www.webct.com/](http://www.webct.com/)>
- Wikipedia: <[www.wikipedia.org/](http://www.wikipedia.org/)>