

A story of using weblogs in English teacher training

James M. Hall

Iwate University Faculty of Education

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This paper is a story of how weblogs were used in an English teacher training course taught by the author. The weblogs served as a means for students to 1) discuss the teaching ideas presented in class, 2) provide each other feedback on their practice teaching, and 3) exchange ideas with teachers of English primarily from Japan about issues in English education. The course sought to encourage students to become lifelong learners of English teaching through a process of collaborative learning and critical reflection. The weblogs were well-received and successful in providing a means for dialogue between class members and people outside of class, although only thirteen people from outside of class participated. Problems encountered with using the weblogs, such as declining student interest, effective evaluation, attracting the interest of bloggers outside of the class, and keeping track of 26 different weblogs, are also discussed.

この論文は英語教員養成の授業でのウェブログ導入について述べている。ウェブログは授業の中で次のような役割を果たした：1) 授業で紹介された教授法について論議する2) 授業で実践されたプラクティスティーチングについて、学生同士でフィードバックをする 3) 日本の現役の英語教師、世界中の英語教師が加わって、英語教育に関する様々な課題について論じる。ウェブログを取り入れた授業を行ったことにより、協同的学習と振り返り、今後の改善策の検討を通して、学生に英語教育法の生涯学習者となるような促しを与えることができた。学生による評価も良く、学生同士の対話、外部関係者との対話をする機会を提供することに成功したと考える。しかし、ウェブログを導入した授業の問題点として、学生の関心の低下、ウェブログの効果的な評価法がないこと、外部からの参加者の少なさ、26名もの学生のブログ更新状況をモニターすることへの困難性が挙げられた。

A message to the reader

Although the students were aspiring Japanese English teachers, this story is written for anyone working in the field of TESL/TEFL. It is a story of how I used weblogs; it is neither a paper introducing the concept of weblogging nor a prescriptive paper on how to use weblogs.

Nevertheless, I do hope that through learning about this experience the reader will come to her own conclusions on how weblogs should and should not be used in an ESL/EFL setting.

The Setting: English Teaching Methodologies III

The story begins in my English Teaching Methodologies III (hereafter ETM3). ETM3 is the last of three English teaching methodologies courses that students take from April – July before their three-week teaching practice in August. This class was comprised of 26 students and was designed to prepare them to teach junior high school English. Of these 26 students, 22 were juniors and 4 were seniors.

The format of the class was for the instructor to demonstrate new teaching methodologies one week and for a group of students to conduct a demonstration lesson the following week using the teaching methodologies they had learned. Most often, two groups of students would conduct two demonstration lessons on a practice teaching day. The English language learners for the demonstration lessons were non-Japanese adults who lived in the area or attended the university and had never studied English.

Goal of the class

The goal of ETM3 was to encourage students to become lifelong learners of teaching English through a process of collaborative learning and critical reflection. It was hoped that students would continue collaborating with their colleagues and critically reflecting on their own teaching during their training periods and into their careers.

Richards and Lockhart (1996, p.4) write that experience alone is insufficient for a teacher to grow professionally. In addition to experience, critical reflection and collaborative learning can help an instructor gain a deeper understanding of her teaching. Collaborative learning is defined as “sharing

skills, experience and solutions to common problems” (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p.12). Critical reflection is defined as “posing questions about how and why things are the way they are, what value systems they represent, what alternatives might be available, and what the limitations are of doing things one way as opposed to another” (Richards & Lockhart, 1996, p.4).

Tsui’s (2003) case study of four young, developing EFL teachers in a Hong Kong secondary school illustrates the importance of collaborative learning and critical reflection in a teacher’s professional development. Of these four teachers, Tsui found that the most improved teacher had a willingness to learn from colleagues and used the methods of regular reflection and self evaluation (p.261). Sato (2002), who conducted a case study of an English department at a senior high school in Japan, observed that those teachers who improved the quality of their classes by experimenting with new methodologies either participated in learning opportunities outside of the school (i.e. professional development programs or correspondence courses) or collaborated with each other in planning classes. Sato concluded that for innovation to happen in English education in Japan “we must find ways to help teachers to become lifelong learners in a collaborative environment” (p. 81).

What can be learned from these studies is that good teachers collaborate with one another and critically reflect on their own teaching throughout their careers. Thus, ETM3 strove to create an environment where students could begin their lifelong endeavor of mastering the art of teaching English by learning from each other, critically reflecting on their own learning and teaching, and sharing their thoughts

with other class members. As students were extremely reluctant to give each other critical feedback in front of their classmates, and as class time for studying and practicing new teaching methods was limited to one and a half hours per week, weblogs were the primary vehicle for students to reflect on what was presented in class and give each other feedback on their teaching practice.

What is a weblog and why use one for ETM3?

A weblog (hereafter *blog*) is an online collection of personal commentaries and is usually maintained by a single individual. Most blogs enable readers to write comments on any personal commentary or “post” the owner has written. While web pages are static and are there to be viewed, blogs give the reader the chance to interact with the writer. This changes the readership from a passive audience to a participatory public (see Blood, 2000).

According to Gurak et al. (2004), blogs can be used as a “means of representing and expressing the self, forming identity, facilitating student-centered learning, building community, and disseminating information.” These uses are in harmony with the objective of creating a critical and collaborative learning community in ETM3 to promote lifelong learning. To build this kind of community, blogs were used in the class as a means to fulfill the following enabling objectives:

1. for students to discuss the teaching ideas presented in class;
2. for students to provide each other feedback on their practice teaching;

3. for students to talk with Japanese teachers of English and teachers in different parts of the world about issues in English education.

How students used the blogs

The purpose of this section is to describe how the blogs were used to create a critical and collaborative learning community in ETM3. I have provided numerous excerpts from students’ blogs. The posts referenced here are hyperlinked and also indexed in Appendix 1 by title. When referring to students by name, I will use their blogging pseudonyms. A list of the students’ blogs and their links is in Appendix 2.

Use 1: Class members provided feedback on my teaching

To demonstrate how to make input comprehensible to beginning learners of a foreign language, I taught a 20-minute demonstration lesson in which I talked about my family in Spanish using a family tree. The rationale for using Spanish was for students to step into the shoes of a beginning language learner and for them to experience firsthand how one can learn from comprehensible input. After the class, students were asked to answer the following questions:

[JH, Spanish Lesson on April 28 and Change to the Assignment!](#)

- 1) How much of the presentation in Spanish did you understand? What made the input comprehensible and what could have been done to make the language easier to understand?
- 2) Did you learn any new words or new grammar in Spanish?
- 3) How did you feel about being a beginning foreign language student?

The following entry was written by [Riverdance](#) (please note that students' original writing is being displayed in this paper and no grammatical or spelling mistakes have been edited).

Riverdance, [My First Spanish Class](#)

- 1) I could understand most of the presentation about the family. Words were easy to understand, but the grammar was difficult for me.
- 2) Yes, I did. I learn words about family.
- 3) I enjoyed Spanish class. I felt freshness like a freshman. And I also remembered German class in my fast year.

The above post was particularly surprising because when I called on Riverdance in class and asked her in Spanish what the name of her father was, she froze and showed a very uncomfortable, worried expression. I wrote a comment (See Riverdance, [My First Spanish Class](#)) to her post asking her how I made her uncomfortable and whether there was something I could have done differently to which Riverdance wrote the following response:

Riverdance, [Addition](#)

I was confused then, because nobody knew my father's name so I hesitated to answer.

In this case, the use of blogs helped Riverdance and me clear up a misunderstanding; I had thought that my question

had somehow made her feel terribly uncomfortable and turned the Spanish class into a bad experience for her. However, in her blog entry she wrote that she understood and enjoyed the Spanish class. Thus, I learned that perhaps the Spanish class was not such a negative experience for her. In our exchange, though, I learned that although she had a positive learning experience overall, the question about her father's name most likely made her feel uncomfortable.

The next entry was written by [M&M](#) who commented on the methods for teaching vocabulary that I introduced to the class. M&M disagreed with the way I used students as examples to teach "tall", "short", "blonde hair" and "black hair" in Spanish. Her reason was as follows:

M&M, [May 12 ~ About the Lesson ~](#)

Some students don't like to appear in front of other students. Especially, Japanese tend to hate it. So do I. If the teacher knows everything (their character, favorite things, something hateful etc.) about his or her students, it might be good way to teach vocabulary using students as example. But I think it is difficult to know such things. Thus, I don't agree with that.

[Peanuts](#), on the other hand, disagreed:

Peanuts, Comment on M&M, [May 12 ~ About the Lesson ~](#)

I thought the opposite from you, as "use a student as an example to teach vocabulary" is good ways. But, your reflections are satisfied myself, because I couldn't guess relation to Japanese characteristic and using a student as example. Surely, many Japanese don't like speaking in public, but is it really good characteristic? Certainly, many Japanese think that they'd like to be a good speaker and want to be accustomed to showing in public. So, using a student as example will connect to oneself grow up!

There were four comments to M&M's post, one was from me and three were from students: Two disagreed with M&M and one agreed. This dialogue is an example of students sharing contrasting opinions that they would hesitate to express in the classroom. It should be noted that M&M never responded to the comments that Peanuts and the other students left on her post.

Use 2: Class members provided feedback on each other's teaching

To demonstrate how class members provided each other feedback on their teaching, I have included extracts from a blogging assignment (JH, [*How to write Reflections for DHC2 and Team A's lessons*](#)) where students were asked to comment on two in-class mini lessons conducted by 2 student groups: Team A and DHC2. Firstly, in her reflection of her group's lesson, [*Nyanji*](#) from Team A wrote about the goals of the lesson: 1) to understand the difference between "*this*" and "*that*," and 2) to learn to say "*This is ~*" and "*That is ~*". Although the guest student and observers enjoyed the lesson, Nyanji thought that there were some problems:

Excerpt from Nyanji, [*Reflection on Team A's Lesson*](#)

Japanese were too much. I thought we should use easy English. (ex. "Repeat after me.," "Let's practice!" and so on.) If Mr. A cannot understand the means, he will be able to do through seeing another member's action.

I agree with what JH said. This is good way to understand difference of "this" and "that".

(JH said: Hold a ball and say "This is a ball". Throw the ball to a student and point to the ball and say "That is a ball." Have the student say "This is a ball" and throw the ball to another student saying afterwards "That is a ball". This is one possible way to practice the pronunciation of "This" and "That" while learning the difference.)

The main problems were that the group used too much Japanese and the guest student was unable to understand the difference between *this* and *that* by their presentation in English alone. In the underlined section above, Nyanji quotes the advice I gave her group on my blog (JH, [*Team A's Lesson*](#)) concerning how to show the difference between *this* and *that* without using Japanese. This served as proof that a student had read my feedback and thought the content sufficiently worthy to quote on her own post. As a blogger, I was quite satisfied! Furthermore, Nyanji received two comments on her post: from me and from another student, [*Guwashi*](#), and she responded to both.

In addition to the members of Team A, those who observed the class were asked to write what they thought to be the good points of the lesson and suggestions for an even better lesson. Of the 21 observers, 18 wrote an entry addressed to Team A, but none of the members of Team A left comments on the posts about their lessons.

Use 3: Class members had discussions with teachers in the real world

In addition to students' individual blogs, a group blog was created so that we could have dialogues with current teachers of English throughout Japan and the world. The purpose of this was for students to relate class theory to school reality. There were a total of four discussion topics on the group blog that I encouraged people outside ETM3 to comment on. I created three of these topics which were titled *Talk to Current English Teachers*, *Should Teachers Call on Shy Students?*, and *Teaching Reading*. One topic was created by a group of students, who posed the question: The Inductive Approach to Teaching Grammar vs. The Deductive Approach to Teaching Grammar—*Which Do You Think is Better?* (For a description of the inductive and deductive approach, please see the post.)

All together, 22 people commented on the post. Of these 22 people, three were Japanese teachers of English, one was an aspiring English teacher from Brazil, and the rest were from ETM3. As Table 1 shows, in contrast to the students, two of the three Japanese Teachers of English wrote that the deductive approach worked best for them.

Table 1: ETM3 students' and current English teachers' preferred methodology for teaching grammar

Students			English Teachers		
Deductive	Inductive	Both	Deductive	Inductive	Both
2	8	8	2	0	1

Atz, an English teacher from Hokkaido, wrote the following comment about which approach she preferred.

Atz, Comment on *Which do you think is Better?*

...using the inductive method in a classroom with 40 students doesn't seem effective to me. I could use it, but in that case most of my students will give up to take part in the discussion.

But it could be interesting for a small class with several students who are keen to learn English. Like a collage level class. I wish I could purely enjoy my teaching without getting annoyed by some devilish kids.

Atz's comment appeared to have an influence on other students as the following comment from *Apple* indicates.

Apple, *Which do you think is Better?*

First, my opinion was "inductive approach was better!". Because Student could find the rule by themselves, so this way was hard for them to forget the rule. By the grace of a teacher who teach in Hokkaido, I changed my opinion. I thought "deductive approach was useful for big class. And inductive approach was useful for small class. Because there were active student and negative students in big class. And there are the difference of English abilities. There were few friends who have opinions both approaches were better. I agree with them. But I think it needs a lot of time to teach the rule.

Through reading Atz's comment, Apple realized that rather than using one approach, both the inductive and deductive approach to teaching grammar should be used and their appropriate use depends on such factors as class size and students' characteristics. Without reading Atz's comment, would Apple have come to this realization? This question cannot be answered definitively. Nevertheless, Apple's reaction to Atz's comment typifies how participation by English teachers in the blogging discussions could help ETM3 students learn how some of the approaches to

teaching they studied in the university classroom might work in junior high schools and high schools. Furthermore, Table 1 shows that the teachers who posted on this topic favored the deductive approach. The reason for this is that it worked best for them in the classroom. In theory, many students of ETM3 liked the inductive approach, but the Japanese teachers' comments showed that in the reality of the English classroom, there might be problems with it. Thus, the blog served as a medium for students of ETM3 and English teachers to share and learn from one another's thoughts.

Benefits of using blogs in ETM3

Using blogs in ETM3 had the following benefits:

1. As the comments from Riverdance and M&M show, I received invaluable feedback from the students about the content of class lectures and activities.
2. Students were able to learn each other's opinions to an extent that would not have been possible through old-fashioned journaling or class discussion as the comment from Peanuts exemplifies.
3. As the example of Team A shows, students who did practice lessons had access to a large quantity of feedback from their classmates and thus received much more feedback than the instructor alone could provide.
4. We received comments from working teachers in Japan and other countries. Although few in

number, they gave us different perspectives on such topics as whether teachers should call on shy students, reading instruction, and inductive vs. deductive grammar teaching. As the reaction from Apple shows, these comments were helpful to some students' understanding of the reality of the English classroom.

Challenges in creating an on-line learning community

Although there were many benefits, there were a number of problems we encountered throughout the semester in trying to maintain a collaborative, on-line learning community for ETM3. In this section, I will discuss these problems and some possible solutions where applicable.

Problem 1: Students are late in posting to their blogs

This issue was also raised by participants of the *Creating Community with Blogs Presentation* facilitated by Geoffrey Cain (2005) at the Webheads in Action Online Convergence Conference (a recording of the online presentation can be accessed at WIAOC, 2005). A large number of late posts will deny members of a class the opportunity to learn the whole range of views class members have on a topic. For example, in all the blogging assignments, I would ask students to write a post two days before our class was to meet and comment on a classmate's blog the day before. Some students routinely missed the initial deadline, and this resulted in their blogs being virtually ignored throughout the semester. As blogs are different from webpages in their interactive

capabilities, a student's blog that receives few looks or comments from others is not being used for its purpose.

Problem 2: Some students lack interest or lose interest in blogging

There were some students from the beginning who seemed to have little interest in using blogs and remained that way throughout the semester. One of the primary factors was that they were not comfortable using a computer. In addition to this, they did not have a computer connected to the internet at home and had not used the university computers. Upon reflection, perhaps holding the first class in the computer room and showing the students how to use the university computers as well as walking them through the process of setting up the blog step-by-step could have prevented some students from falling through the cracks.

In ETM3, some students were enthusiastic about blogs at the beginning of the semester but wrote fewer and fewer comments on other classmates' blogs as the semester progressed. Some students also stopped writing posts on their own blogs. In the *JALT2005 Using Blogs in Teacher Training Discussion* (see Hall, [2005a](#)), Ken Croger ([2005](#)), an English teacher at a university in Japan, said that he experienced a similar phenomenon in his blogging project in which student participation progressively dropped. The question then is how does a teacher encourage his students to consistently write in their blogs? Does the answer lie in implementing a more rigorous system of evaluation?

Problem 3: How does a teacher evaluate blogs?

Campbell ([2005](#)) wrote of two approaches to evaluating blogs that arose in the *Using Blogs in Teacher Training Discussion*. The first approach he coined the 'crack the whip approach.' In this approach, students are given blogging assignments and evaluated on the quantity of their posts or the quality. The evaluation method of my class fell under this label: Under the ETM3 system, students would receive a point for posting in their blog or the group blog and a half-point for writing a comment on someone else's blog. The reasoning for not evaluating the content of their posts was that I wanted students to communicate with each other without being preoccupied about producing an online masterpiece to earn a good grade. There were 13 individual blogging assignments, one of which was optional. There were also five group blogging assignments, two of which were optional. A student who accumulated more than 18 points would receive a blogging evaluation of "excellent" (for a sample of the ETM3 evaluation sheet, see Hall, [2005b](#)).

According to Campbell (2005), in the other approach teachers use intrinsic factors to motivate the students. I will call this approach the 'pat on the back approach'. In this approach there are no quotas of posts that students must meet nor are there rubrics to evaluate students' posts. Students are motivated to post in their blogs through the enthusiasm that their teacher exhibits in the class blogging project. Students are also encouraged to find classmates and friends outside of class with similar interests; they can then exchange pictures, sound files, or favorite links with their newly-found "blogging pals".

Campbell writes that a combination of the ‘crack the whip’ and ‘pat on the back’ could be most ideal in motivating the students (2005). With only the ‘crack the whip’ approach, learners might not see the intrinsic value of blogging. For example, M&M never responded to the comments on her post about my vocabulary teaching and Team A did not respond to any of the 18 posts written about their practice class. One possible explanation is that students saw their blogging work as only an assignment and once they had written their post and one comment they were finished! Thus their will to “get the assignment out of the way” was greater than their curiosity to see what their classmates had written. On the other hand, the drawback of the ‘pat on the back’ approach is that learners might not have the necessary extrinsic push to write in their blogs enough to appreciate the experience. The issue remains as to how we can effectively use both approaches.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that students not leaving comments on their classmates’ blogs or not responding to comments on their own blogs does not necessarily mean they are not reading their peers’ blogs or comments. On the other hand, more comments would provide concrete evidence that students were reading each other’s blogs and exchanging opinions. Many blog providers offer functions that notify the author via e-mail when she receives a comment or notifies a blogger when someone has responded to a comment she wrote on someone else’s post. Perhaps encouraging students to take advantage of this option would have motivated them to respond to their peers’ comments or write more comments themselves on other posts. If students do not read what their classmates are writing then the objective of creating an on-line learning community will not be realized.

Problem 4: Finding bloggers from outside the class to participate

The vast majority of the bloggers who posted in the ETM3 group blog were acquaintances or former colleagues of the instructor; finding people outside the class remained a challenge throughout the semester. Unfortunately, the majority of unsolicited comments from outsiders were spam. Although [Blogger](#), our blog provider, offers features that can reduce spam (see miscellaneous notes, Hall, [2005a](#)), if users leave their blogs open for anyone to comment on, spam cannot be eliminated.

Dekita.org ([2005](#)) has recently created an exchange network for EFL/ESL classes using peer-to-peer technologies such as blogs. If the number of classes registered on this network increases, it could become easier for students in all classes to find others to correspond with outside of their class.

Problem 5: Following 26 different blogs

Students who completed their blogging assignment early would have to surf from student blog to student blog until they found one that had been updated. The use of RSS would have made life easier for the students. Farmer ([2005](#)), on his essay on how not to use blogs, warns the reader “not to use RSS at your own peril.” RSS or *Rich Site Summary* allows a user to subscribe to different blogs and websites that have RSS feeds (see Wikipedia, [2005](#)). Using RSS, the user can view a list of her subscriptions on a single webpage and can be notified when a blog or website she has subscribed to has been updated. Thus, a user will not have to blindly travel

from one blog to another to see which one has been posted to recently. In ETM3, I used an RSS service provided by [Bloglines](#) which made keeping track of students' blogs easy. The concept of RSS feeds and how to use Bloglines proved to be difficult for the students to understand and even more so for the instructor to explain. Essentially, one class period in the computer room could have remedied this problem. Unfortunately, we did not have the time.

Final words

The real benefit of blogs is evident from the results: they facilitated critical reflection on the teaching ideas presented and the students' practice teaching. They also facilitated collaborative dialogue among class members and even with people outside the class on a small-scale. However, the goal of the class was very ambitious: encourage students to become lifelong learners of English teaching through collaborative learning and critical reflection. Only time will tell how students continue to pursue their professional development. Nevertheless, after observing many of the students' open classes during their teacher training and attending their *hanseikai* or "meeting of reflection" after their teacher training ended, I am optimistic.

At the time of writing this story, four months have passed since ETM3 ended. In the coming year as these students have job hunting, teacher employment tests, and senior theses to worry about, their minds will be far away from the experiences they had in this class. My hope is that those who become teachers will remember this class, enjoy what they do, and continue to try to grow as teachers through critical reflection and collaborating with their colleagues.

James Hall has lived in Japan for seven years. Currently, he is a lecturer of English education at the Iwate University Faculty of Education. He is interested in how English teachers develop into skilled practitioners of their subject. James welcomes any comments about his paper and can be reached at <jhall@iwate-u.ac.jp>.

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Appendix 1

List of Cited Posts in the Results Section

Post	Link	Author (Comment)
Addition	momogasuki.blogspot.com/2005/05/addition.html	Riverdance
How to write Reflections for DHC2 and Team A's lessons	aspiringeflteachers.blogspot.com/2005/06/how-to-write-reflections-for-dhc2-and.html	JH
May 12 ~ About the Lesson ~	www.englisheducation.iwate-u.ac.jp/announcements/mmpost.htm	M&M (Peanuts)
My First Spanish Class	momogasuki.blogspot.com/2005/04/my-first-spanish-class.html	Riverdance (JH)
Reflection on Team A's Lesson	nyanji.blogspot.com/2005/06/reflection-on-team-as-lesson.html	Nyanji (JH & Guwashi)
Should Teachers Call on Shy Students?	discussenglish.blogspot.com/2005/06/should-teachers-call-on-shy-students.html	Group
Spanish Lesson on April 28 and Change to the Assignment!	aspiringeflteachers.blogspot.com/2005/04/spanish-lesson-on-april-28-and-change.html	JH
Talk to Current English Teachers	discussenglish.blogspot.com/2005/06/talk-to-current-english-teachers.html	Group
Teaching Reading	discussenglish.blogspot.com/2005/07/teaching-reading.html	Group (Atz & Apples)
Team A's Lesson	aspiringeflteachers.blogspot.com/2005/06/team-as-lesson.html	JH
Which do you think is better?	discussenglish.blogspot.com/2005/07/which-do-you-think-is-better_15.html	Group

Appendix 2

Blogs for Members of ETM3
(also available from Hall, 2005a)

Name of Blogger	URL
Amemane	amemanegreenapple7.blogspot.com
Apple	popppo.blogspot.com
Ayu	ayu-ayu015.blogspot.com
Center of Rice-Field	centerof-ricefield.blogspot.com
Cube	blogtogether.blogspot.com
Ellie	globaldream321.blogspot.com
Eri-chan	eri-chan1212.blogspot.com
Forestsheep	goatinricefield.blogspot.com
Gami	mamimurakami0919.blogspot.com
Group Blog	discussenglish.blogspot.com
Guwashi	guwashi.blogspot.com
Jenny	jennys-room.blogspot.com
JH	aspiringefteachers.blogspot.com
Kasiwamochi	kasiwamochi.blogspot.com
Kee-na	kee-na-o.blogspot.com
Keeta-Club	mrthousandvolt.blogspot.com
Kurobikari	to-chan0923.blogspot.com
M&M	diary-of-mm.blogspot.com
Nyanji	nyanji.blogspot.com
Peanuts	sachishihakata.blogspot.com
Riverdance	momogasuki.blogspot.com
Samma	samma3count.blogspot.com
Sari chan	sari-chan0227.blogspot.com
Today's Dog	kyounowanko.blogspot.com
Tommy (1)	ryonoheya.blogspot.com
Tommy (2)	tommy-tony.blogspot.com
Tomy	tommy-tomitomi.blogspot.com
Tunobue	tunohornuno.blogspot.com