



Weblogs for building learner communities

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Drawing on our experience with the Weblogging in Kumamoto (WinK) fledgling community, we explore a range of issues relevant to developing a vibrant community centered on blogging. Our main claim is that providing students with ample channels for self-expression can serve as a foundation for community. Another foundation is, we suggest, a technical one: blog aggregation enables community members to find new writing by other members easily and thus creates easy opportunities for interaction.

ブログを通じて、学習者がアイデンティティーを表現する事ができ、そして科目、機関の境を超えるコミュニティを構築することができるというのが、本論文の主な主張である。現在構築中の Weblogging in Kumamoto (WinK) コミュニティーについて述べる。

Speaking, writing, community, identity

It is our sentiment that, at least at tertiary level here in Japan, it is more difficult to conduct a writing class than it is to conduct a conversation class. Though inherent difficulty of writing may have something to do with this, we suspect that it has more to do with classroom dynamics. While conversation classes taught according to communicative language teaching principles, broadly defined, typically have a variety of patterns of interaction—with the teacher, in pairs, in small groups, with the whole class—interaction in writing classes may focus on student and teacher, followed by student and paper text, or, in more high-tech settings, student and computer screen.

It is in the very nature of writing that it will typically take longer than speaking, so this dynamic perhaps cannot be changed completely. And it is also true that many teachers have developed methods that can

go some way towards making even traditional writing classrooms more dynamic and varied. But it seems to us that our generalization has some validity. And we would suggest that a big part of the difference under discussion lies in the way that personal identity is expressed in class.

In speaking classes, personal identity is expressed automatically through faces, clothes, gestures, body language, accessories, and so on. In a writing class, if students are just seated at their desks or worse still in front of computers, not much of this comes through, without taking some special measures. A possible partial solution is to ensure lots of interaction in paired speaking activities, for example, used as pre-writing activities. The problem here is that the interaction all goes out the window once the main writing activity starts. Once that main writing activity begins, it is impossible for students to communicate their personality to other students through their writing, unless the teacher creates some kind of distribution system.

Many scholars (see, e.g., Beauvois, 1998; Chun, 1994; Kern & Warschauer, 2000) have suggested that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has great potential to improve language learning. CMC's main strength appears to lie in its facilitation of a rich variety of interaction and its ability to lower barriers to participation. As a medium for CMC, blogging shares these general advantages. But it is our experience that blogging has much greater potential than other widely-used media for expression of personal identity. We believe that it is this that encourages greater participation in the form of writing, and also greater participation in the form of reading and responding, because students' expressions of personal identity naturally draw

in other students. In the remainder of the paper, we will outline our experiences with our still fledgling Weblogging in Kumamoto (WinK) blogging community, demonstrating the technical and pedagogical measures we take, first to get students to a point where they have sufficient technical proficiency to engage in blogging, and then to encourage the expression of personal identity and the growth of community.

Foundational steps

Initial assignments are generally designed to have students become familiar with the process of blogging, including logging-in procedures, keyboarding skills, and the ability to include links and pictures. The assignments are general rather than specific and are chosen not for subject matter but for mastering the use of the blog interface and realizing the possibilities of blogging.

We also believe that students need to treat writing as they would physical exercise, with steady constant effort yielding a greater improvement than cramming. To that end, an exercise called *juppun wa juubun* (10 minutes is enough), as a repeated opening classroom exercise, helps to increase output and reduce anxiety about writing, and makes writing more like speaking. This is a variation on timed writing, an established technique for creative writers (see, e.g., Fowler, 2007; Goldberg, 1986). This exercise also appears to help alleviate the painfully slow typing speeds that act as a block on progress for many students.

If the time is strictly kept to 10 minutes throughout the course, even at the beginning when an extra couple of

minutes might allow the slower students to finish their first paragraph, or even sentence, a pretty good gauge of students' progress is afforded by a glance at all their *juppun wa juubun* posts through the course.

Another feature of our approach is the incorporation of extensive reading within the writing course. One of the key contentions of extensive reading advocates is that massive exposure to English, managed by the individual learner rather than the teacher, results in improved language acquisition (Day, et al., 1991; Hill, 2001; Krashen, 2003). To support this notion, we ask that students write book reviews or reports and post them to their blog. We then encourage students to read their peers' reviews in order to help them find more books to read and expose them to more English prose. In this way, the blogging classroom approximates theoretical ideals of learning based around input, interaction, and output (Seliger, 1977; van Lier, 1996). An important feature of the *juppun wa juubun* exercises, the book reviews or reports, and any other more or less conventional exercises, is that what each student writes can be shared with the whole class.

Self-expression through blogging

The ability to add images is another way in which writing benefits from CMC. With advances in cellphone technology, it is relatively simple for students to take photographs and then upload those images by email, providing the basis for various writing topics. There are many ways of implementing this. One is to use Flickr (www.flickr.com) as a photo hosting site. This provides probably the most satisfying solution, but has the disadvantage that students

need to register with Flickr's parent company, Yahoo (www.yahoo.com), and this can be an arduous experience for novice learners. If Blogger, owned by Google, is the main blogging service of choice, it is possible to leverage its integration with Google's photo service, Picasa. A less immediate but effective solution is to have students send their photos from their cellphones to their email account, and upload the photos to their blogs later when they are at a computer. This again provides an enhancement of the students' personal experiences and the ability to share them, as well as facilitating the gradual shift of the students' language learning outside of the classroom.

A further enhancement related to images is the ability for students to create avatars, which appear in their personal profiles and are automatically attached to any comments they make on others' blogs. An avatar is a graphical representation of oneself, and when designing an avatar it is possible to aim for physical resemblance to your actual self, an image of how one would like to look, an abstract representation of a psychological trait, or even an image of a musician, actor, or object that one likes. An avatar site that we have used successfully is Abi-Station (www.abi-station.com/english/); a promising alternative is Meez (www.meez.com).

An important part of identity is the ability to take stock and evaluate oneself. To this end, we have created a Weblog Assessment Index (WAI), which can quantify student effort. In some ways, the WAI is similar to the notion of a portfolio of student work. However, because all of the material resides in cyberspace, a student creates the electronic equivalent of a coversheet or index by making a final post summarizing his blogging over the course of the semester or

year, organizing his account into categories and linking to posts that instantiate that category. For example, one of our standard categories is posts with photos or other pictures, and in this example the student would simply find and count his previous posts containing photos and link to some or all of them. This task is aided technologically by the use in Blogger (the service that we favour currently) of labels, a feature more commonly known as tags or keywords: when writing a post with a photo, the student simply attaches a label such as *photo*, and the software can then count the number of such posts and display them all at any time. The WAI can be used purely as a portfolio for personal use; alternatively, or additionally, the teacher can make use of it in evaluation. This is particularly powerful when the student's blog is designated as the primary or sole collection point for all the student's work, work which cannot be contained in the blog being referenced in some way (by linking if it is online, summarised if not). The WAI could then potentially serve as an accurate predictor of final grades, allowing the student to take appropriate actions in good time to salvage a disappointing grade. An example of the WAI is provided in the Appendix.

As blogs permit the students to establish an identity, the interaction with other students, either by simply reading other student blogs or, even better, linking and commenting on posts, leads to a sense of community, which is at the heart of the many-to-many relationship that we advocate.

Community through blogging

Whittaker, et al. (1997) suggest that the following properties serve as a good definition of community:

Members have a shared goal, interest, need, or activity that provides the primary reason for belonging to the community.

Members engage in repeated, active participation and there are often intense interactions, strong emotional ties and shared activities occurring between participants.

Members have access to shared resources and there are policies for determining access to those resources.

Reciprocity of information, support and services between members is important.

There is a shared context of social conventions, language, and protocols. (p. 137)

More recently, McKee (2005) proposes a much simpler definition: "A community is a group of people who form relationships over time by interacting regularly around shared experiences, which are of interest to all of them for varying individual reasons." Our feelings about the issue of community are expressed most closely by Preece & Maloney-Krichmar (2005), citing Amy Bruckman, when they suggest that it may be best to accept that the concept has fuzzy boundaries and put aside a concern with rigorous definitions, focusing instead on issues such as how communities are created. Allen (2006), citing Dean Wasiolek, suggests that "community is like pornography—with pornography you know it when you see it; with community, you know it when you feel it." More than defining what we have we are concerned with finding ways to make it better. A sense of community is motivating

to students and can lead to greater quantities of output (Meunier, 1998). Like most teachers, we are pleased when we perceive a sense of togetherness in the classroom, and we wish to extend this outside of the classroom.

Preece and colleagues' notion of social interaction (Preece, 2000; Preece et al., 2004) is related to our attempts to aid students in establishing a self-identity and then communicating with other students. By making the blogs the focus of the writing class, we attempt to create a shared purpose, beyond the presumed already existing purpose of learning English. We build repeated, active participation by lowering barriers to participation, by not stipulating a minimum length for posts, and by simple exercises such as *juppun wa juubun*. We utilize the Internet and the blogging engines themselves to help support and mediate social interaction. We have as yet little evidence of strong emotional ties arising as the result of blogging, but we encourage students to reach out to each other by making friendly comments on each other's blogs. The communal site that we outline towards the end of this paper provides a locus for shared resources, as does each blog's sidebar and each book report or review. Students all post multiple book reports, and thus they can each learn from each other.

A shared event outside of the class can occasion a variety of posts by students, regardless of whether the event is generic like Halloween, or more specific to the students, such as the school festival. Importantly, many topics arise naturally from the students' work, although sometimes a teacher may assign a specific topic.

Along with many other scholars, Preece (2000) suggests that an online community is also supported by having a

variety of specialized roles within the community: we have had some success in fostering such developments by encouraging students to choose specific subjects they have an interest in and become a kind of class expert. For example, in one class, a student, taken by her teacher's fondness for chocolate and other sweets, made a point of writing about the range of chocolates available at various convenience stores. Another student chose to write extensively about tennis, which came to incorporate places to play tennis, places to buy tennis equipment, favourite players, and famous tournaments.

We attempt to further support the development of community by asking the students to add specific features to their blogs or carry out specific exercises. For example, one exercise is to ask the students to include a blogroll of other students, which creates a number of bloggings within the class. Thus, a student reading one student's blog can easily jump to another student's blog, then another and another. An example of an ongoing class activity that aims to build community is blog tag. In this, the teacher starts as *it*, and writes a short post of a specific type. The teacher then chooses a student to be *it*. This student must write a brief related post, which must link to the teacher's post. An example is the Alphabet game, where the teacher makes a link to a website about, for example, apples (ideally with a picture of an apple); the next student needs to link back to the teacher's post and include a vocabulary item starting with *b*, and then invite the third student to move on to *c*.

Because we work at regional universities, another option open to us is to have students introduce links and places in the region, so another easy task is to ask students to make

a Kumamoto link list. Each list is different from the others, thus to an extent the choice of items reflects the individual student's identity, and this is communicated in some measure when another student visits a blog and clicks on the links provided. Additionally, the students collectively are in effect compiling a vast aggregate resource of local materials. For those teaching at institutions with a more diverse student population, students could be asked to make a list of links from their hometown or prefecture.

Our underlying notion is that, in creating a community of writers, we are also creating a community of readers. In addition to requiring weekly blog posts about students' regular reading, we encourage students to make use of sites such as Amazon (www.amazon.co.jp or www.amazon.com), linking from their blog posts to individual book pages or Listmania pages, which collect a number of related books recommended by the author of the list. A few students have even made their own Listmania lists. A more recent development involves bloggers using LibraryThing (www.librarything.com) to maintain a graphical representation of the books they have read and incorporate this in their blogs.

Further extensions include having students write about movies or videos, linking to trailers or embedding YouTube (www.youtube.com) videos that they have used as listening practice, using Microsoft's PowerPoint or Apple's Keynote presentation software as an organizational tool for outlining collaborative essays and then sharing those presentations in their blogs through Slideshare (www.slideshare.net). By increasing the range and variety of media that students can incorporate, their writing ceases to be a walled-off skill, but something which supports and is supported by other skills.

Until students have long experience of using blogs, there is a tendency for them to retreat into the comfort zone of their own blog, and not reach out to other blogs. At its most basic that reaching out means taking the time to read other students' blogs. The most important thing to make sure they do so is not to put obstacles in their way; students need to be able to find other blogs with ease. We keep class lists of all students' weblogs so that students need not do a lot of housekeeping or hunting to read other community members' posts.

This creates community within the class, but at a certain point we move to expand the community outside the class to include other classes that are also engaging in blogging. The first step is to make a full list of all student blogs from our various classes. However, this is still just a long list that students may or may not have the inclination to explore. And even if they did explore, students might choose a blog at random, perhaps find there was nothing interesting, click on another one, find it was by a student who was on the verge of dropping out of the course so there was almost nothing to see, then become bored and give up.

The bloggings mentioned earlier can be a partial solution, because they represent blogs that students have actively chosen as being worth reading, but they might lead to small cliques of bloggers reading each other. We need ways to make it easy for students to find recent posts by all members of the community. We encourage each student to find a blog in another class that they find interesting and include a link to that. Thus there will usually be a way for a casual reader happening upon a student's blog to escape any narrow micro-rings. But this leaves too much to chance, as some

students may neglect to follow this step, or one micro-ring may by chance lead to another micro-ring that simply leads back to the first one. A more powerful, technological solution is provided by Really Simple Syndication (RSS), which provides feeds of new postings on a website.

A simple RSS feed gives a list of all the posts in a student's blog, so that readers can see the titles, an arbitrary number of characters of the post body, and the date of each post, without visiting the blog; readers can then click to visit the blog to see any specific post that appears interesting, or to browse through the blog as a whole. This is powerful, but arguably only moderately useful at this level: if there are 40 students in a class it is still arduous to study 40 separate feeds. This is where second-generation feeds become useful: we use a feed aggregator such as Feed Digest (www.feedit.com) to combine the 40 feeds into one or two feeds, so that a snapshot of the blogging activity of the entire class can be obtained at any time.

As more classes become incorporated into our web, even this has proven to be insufficient, as students are generally observed to gravitate to the list generated by a single class feed. Therefore, we have combined the class feeds into a third-generation feed that incorporates all blogs in all participating classes. It is important to note that, in our view, this isn't just a matter of added convenience. Farmer & Bartlett-Bragg (2005) have investigated several examples of blogging initiatives that have failed, and in each case they found that no use was made of RSS. Our experience leads us to believe that syndication and aggregation are key technologies that make sustainable communities possible.

We are attempting to incorporate these principles in Weblogging in Kumamoto (WinK; www.winkhome.org), an initiative that brings together teachers and students alike from multiple faculties and institutions in Kumamoto, and provides a webspace for lists and webfeeds so students can easily access and read other students' work, as well as instructors' blogs. The site includes catalogues of the extensive reading material available at our university libraries, links to class feeds, the third-generation feed mentioned above of all students' blogs, and a set of useful Internet resources for students.

We are also in the process of recruiting student editors and writers from upperclassmen who will, as paid assistants, scan student blogs and identify interesting posts and blog about them. In this way, we hope to provide interested students with further blogging practice and experience and create a multi-year, multi-class, multi-institution community.

Conclusion

A traditional way to share writings, often used for creative writing courses, is for students to make copies of completed work and distribute them to their peers. Weblogs and other CMC tools provide us with a way to recreate this practice much more effectively: students can access the writing of a much larger group of peers, much more rapidly than before.

Writing classes at low- to medium-level English departments in tertiary institutions are often seen as a place for an almost exclusive focus on formal grammar instruction. We firmly believe that there is a place for such instruction in any complete English language programme; however,

it disturbs us to see students attempting to write sequences of paragraphs for almost the first time when preparing their graduation thesis. However poor the initial product, and however far the classes from our idealized images of academic writing programmes, students need to be writing in a more or less casual way from the early stages of their university life, and need to learn to see such writing as not necessarily any more taxing than the activities they do in their speaking classes. Our experience suggests that blogging is an excellent medium for realizing this aim, and for making writing a communicative activity rather similar to speaking, and furthermore one that has potential to reinforce (and be reinforced by) activities in speaking and other classes. While orienting the students to not only the linguistic but the technical challenges naturally takes some time, we feel overcoming these hurdles has hitherto been well worth the effort. Once these basic writing foundations have been laid, instruction in academic or technical writing may be a more realistic option.

Our approach aims to help the students express their personal identity online, while becoming acquainted with the various options available in blogging. We work to create a classroom community of readers and writers through a range of activities also designed to improve computing skills. This sets the stage for us to move the locus of activity out of the individual class and across classes and institutions.

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Appendix

An anonymized example of an early Weblog Assessment Index (WAI) follows. With the exception of number of words, which appears as a raw figure, desired behaviours are assigned a multiplier for each instance they appear. Behaviours that in previous course iterations were found difficult to encourage have high scores to provide an incentive to students. It was intended that the final figure would translate fairly automatically into a final score for the course, and in most cases this worked well. The student below, however, scored a number above 100, despite not writing an usually large number of words, because of her social and technically adventurous behaviours. (This was one of the best two scores in the class.) This figure was rounded down to 100. Since her university has a maximum score of

A (80-100), this simply becomes an A. The raw numbers, however, are useful in one-year courses, if numbers are all reset to zero between terms. Number of posts with poems (9) was introduced after one student's spontaneous regular posting of self-composed poems in English. Item 15 only is a negative score, intended to provide a disincentive to taking a total break from blogging during Golden Week, the period around the campus festival, and other slack times. Use of this item during school vacations would depend on students having access to a computer at home, a local Internet café, or a cellphone and sufficient knowledge to use it for mobile blogging. Item 14 has a similar motivation, tending to benefit students whose output is fairly constant.

Current work aims to separate pure output quantity measures from community-promoting measures such as commenting and linking, behaviours that show technical adventurousness, and those that support language study, such as posts about vocabulary or assignments in other language classes. Another possibility we are exploring is the use of non-arithmetic scales, such that it is comparatively easy to reach a WAI of 60 (a grade of C at most universities) but more effort is required to exceed 70 (B), and more still to exceed 80 (A).

Table1: An Example Weblog Assessment Index (WAI)

Item no.	Behaviour	Occurrences	Multiplier	Total
1.	Number of words	4238	1	4238
2.	Number of posts	57	20	1140
3.	Number of incoming comments	26	8	208
4.	Number of comments	18	30	540
5.	Number of posts with links to outside	41	20	820
6.	Number of posts with links to other class blogs	6	100	600
7.	Number of book posts	5	50	250
8.	Number of reviews on Amazon linked to from blog	1	30	30
9.	Number of posts with poems	1	20	20
10.	Number of vocabulary posts	4	50	200
11.	Number of posts with pictures and at least two sentences	28	30	840
12.	Number of posts reflecting on your blogging or study (these should link to your earlier posts)	2	100	200
13.	Number of complex posts	1	20	20
14.	Lowest number of monthly posts	17	100	1700
15.	The longest period you didn't blog (in days)	6	-20	-120
Total				10658
Divide by 100				10658/100
Weblog Assessment Index (WAI)				106.58