Making the Change From Essay Writing to Blogging

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This paper describes how teachers who have traditionally taught essay writing can focus on teaching blogging in order to bring dynamism and increased communication to the writing classroom. It details the steps necessary to create a blogging course, such as promoting blog literacy, constructing blog genre rubrics, establishing teacher course blogs and student practice blogs, and using the blog comment function and presentations for communication.

本論文は、伝統的な方法でライティングを教えてきた教員が、ライティングの授業に活力をもたらしたりコミュニケーションを増やしたりするために、どのようにブログの書き方を教えることに焦点を当てたらよいかを述べたものである。ブログ技能の向上、ブログ評価法の構築、教員用ブログや学生用練習ブログの作成、コミュニケーション活動に役立つブログ・コメント機能の使用法からプレゼンテーションまで、ブログ・コースを創設するために必要な手順を詳細に解説する。

Jeremy Harmer wrote in *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (2007) that "one of the most potent ways of telling people what we are thinking . . . is the weblog or blog" (p. 193). The statement is still true, but it sounds a bit quaint just a short 8 years later. Nowadays, social networking services have achieved dominance on the Internet, the blog (which we seldom refer to as a "weblog") has lost its cutting edge, and in 2016 it is perhaps unlikely to spring to mind as the most obvious platform for the teaching of ESL writing. But although blogging has evolved into new forms, it remains a potent tool and can bring a strong sense of purpose to the learner of ESL writing. This paper will describe a means for teachers who have traditionally focused on composition or essay writing to enhance their writing courses by utilizing the potency and inherent advantages of blogging to create a dynamic, communicative writing course.

Essay Writing

Experienced ESL teachers have likely encountered in curriculums, or been asked to teach, a course called English Composition, or Essay Writing. Strategies for teaching such courses typically require an understanding of the pedagogical concepts of *product* and *process*. Many decades ago, the emphasis was foremost on product and what an essay written in the predetermined rhetorical style (descriptive, comparison-contrast, persuasive, narrative, opinion, etc.) should look like when completed. The focus on product gave way in the latter half of the 20th century to an emphasis on process, in which students were taught strategies for prewriting, writing, and revising, with importance given to feedback from teachers and peers to create meaningful essays that better responded to students' need for creative involvement while aiming for an acceptable finished product (Brown, 2007). Indeed, many current composition textbooks written for both native and nonnative English writers attempt to support the need for balance between process and product in their methodology. *From Great Paragraphs to Great Essays* (Folse, Solomon, & Clabeaux, 2010) is one example.

The existence and need for these types of courses will no doubt endure in academic writing programs, but some ESL teachers, particularly those who teach low proficiency writers, may find themselves looking for alternatives that better meet the practical needs of their students. One of the drawbacks of the essay writing model is that such writing lacks authenticity and is done primarily to display a student's understanding of a rhetorical style to the teacher alone. Even publishing the essays in a printed pamphlet or posting them to a class website cannot mask the fact that there is no legitimate audience for a rhetorical essay other than the teacher and perhaps a parent or a few classmates with an exceptional degree of curiosity. One may argue that a legitimate audience is unnecessary and perhaps unattainable for most student writing. However, blogging, by virtue of its online accessibility, can be presented as having a real, or virtually real, audience and the presence of such readers can have a powerful effect on writers to produce more writing—and more meaningful writing—than might otherwise be possible (Levy, 2008).

Blogging

Blogging has been described as a kind of online journal, alluding to the often subjective nature of the content and to the fact that entries are added at intervals. The many benefits of using blogs in education were summarized by Duffy and Bruns (2006). Researchers who have written about blogging for ESL have cited the advantages of higher motivation (Blackmore-Squires, 2010; Montero-Fleta & Pérez-Sabater, 2010; Nepomuceno, 2011), increased learner autonomy (Foroutan, Noordin, & Gani bin Hamzah, 2013; Iida, 2009), and greater writing fluency (Fellner & Apple, 2006). One can also point to increased hands-on experience with technology and webpage development as well as greater classroom interaction through the comment function available with blogging. Finally, blogging is done in a blended learning environment that encourages greater media literacy and rewards online research.

Suggested Steps for Creating a Blogging Course in a Computer Classroom

Create a Course Blog

The teacher should first establish a course blog, or a course website with a blog as one of its pages, for presenting new material and providing links. Being familiar with the blogging process is essential for being able to explain or demonstrate it. Links on the course blog will be to relevant websites, such as online reference sites, as well as blogs to be used as models and ultimately, to student blogs. Several free blogging platforms are available for creating a course blog, but I use Google's Blogger (*https://www.blogger.com/*) for blogging, and Weebly (http://education.weebly.com/) for the course website. Both platforms are optimized for smartphone use. Blogger menus can be set to the student's native language for easy accessibility or the teacher can require English menus if an all-English blog environment is deemed paramount. Weebly is an all-English platform, but the interface is somewhat less intuitive than that of Blogger. It utilizes a drag and drop procedure as opposed to Blogger's interface that resembles a standard word processor. Also, the Weebly "Help" instructions are only in English, whereas Blogger "Help" is available in Japanese and other languages.

Work to Achieve Blog Literacy

The National Council of Teachers of English (2004) may have stated the obvious when they wrote, "If one is going to write in a genre, it is very helpful to have read in that genre first." Unfortunately, in the age of Facebook, Twitter, and Line, many students do not actually read blogs and some may have only a minimal understanding of what a blog is. For many, a blog and a website are the same, and in fairness, the distinction has never been less clear, as blogging platforms offer *pages* and website builders offer *blogs*. However, if a teacher expects a student to blog multiple times, the first steps for the student are to understand what a blog looks like, how to navigate a blog, and how to identify features of a blog. Important blog features include the title of the blog, the description of the blog (usually under the blog title), the blog URL, the titles of individual blog posts, the blogger's name or sponsor, the blog's purpose and intended audience, links, permalinks, archives, embedded videos, favicons, RSS feeds, sidebars, fonts, background images, and color schemes, among others. Many of these features and more are explained in Duffy and Bruns (2006).

As useful as blog terminology is, even more important is the actual reading of selected blogs that will provide the mental outline for students of how a blog should be written. Students need to access many blogs, in both English and their native language, to see the range of blog themes that are being created and to understand how each of these themes is developed through the writing of organized paragraphs. The teacher should prepare in advance a large number of links that access model blogs on a variety of topics to give students templates for what they are expected to produce using their own words. To increase communication in the blogging classroom, students may be assigned blogs to view and present to others, identify some or all of the features listed above, and summarize one or more blog posts. I spend at least one third of the course time in my Blogging in English Seminar (http://blogzemi.weebly.com/) on developing blog literacy and on having students view already established blogs and presenting them to the class. Students are told many times at this stage to think about which blog themes they find compelling and about which they can write multiple posts when it is time to create their own blog.

Have Students Create a Practice Blog With No Apparent Theme

Choosing a blog theme is very important for the success of a blog, so students should not be pushed to choose a theme too quickly. Students need time to view many blogs on various themes (such as restaurant, movie, and music reviews) and should be encouraged to try writing blog posts on several topics before settling on their own blog theme. A practice blog is good for this purpose, as students can experiment with blog templates and get familiar with the workings of the blogging system without worrying about the long-term success or failure of their blog. On the other hand, if they are happy with their practice blog, they can designate it as their real blog later on. With the practice blog in place, they should write and post a restaurant review and one or more movie, book, or

manga reviews to get a taste of what writing in each of those genres is like. After students have posted their practice blog, activities should be created that have students read each other's posts (such as information search activities), and provide feedback, either orally or by using the blog's comment function.

Have Students Choose a "Real" Blog Theme

In the world of blogging, there are numerous approaches to blog themes, ranging from the focused (nail art) to the varied (reviews of the latest Japanese products of any type) to the "anything goes" model (random rants and shower thoughts about any topic that comes to mind). One measure of the success of a blog is when the blog has many followers or subscribers. In general, successful blogs are not only well written, but also focus on a niche area that the blog viewing public is apt to be interested in and that can be found with a keyword search. Students should try to narrow their blog theme in an effort to target an actual audience interested in reading what they have to say. As teachers, we may not care how many followers a student actually has, but by aiming for the largest virtual audience possible, we begin to harness the power of blogging as a motivator.

In general, students often have success with the restaurant or cafe review-type blog theme, which gives advice on dining venues in a limited geographical area. Students need to have a budget for dining, but on the positive side, restaurant reviews offer useful information and make use of the blogger's original photos. There is never a lack of subjects to blog about. Also, an actual readership can be generated from a well-written restaurant review blog.

One of the most difficult themes for sustaining a blog is professional sports news. Student writers have difficulty staying current with the news and have no access to original information or photos, so the posts are often out of date by the time the students compose them, and they are usually mere copies or translations of articles written by professional sports writers. Writing about club sports is often a better option, as original content with original photos can be displayed.

Blogs focusing on movie, book, and manga reviews are of medium difficulty, and their success depends greatly on the skill and originality of the blogger. Teachers should be wary, for example, of the student tendency to merely summarize the story line, including telling the ending of a book or movie, rather than to develop other aspects of a review, such as describing writer or director characteristics, analyzing character development, or making actual criticisms of the media item being reviewed.

The absolute best blog themes are ones that offer totally original content. Students who have a hobby, such as photography, cooking, art, or songwriting, can really create blogs that have the potential to reach a much wider audience. As an example, a student in my seminar, who recorded himself playing guitar and making cover versions of popular songs, wrote about the recording process and embedded YouTube videos of himself on his blog. He succeeded in attracting followers from other countries, which led to some authentic written communication through the comments.

Develop Rubrics

Teachers should develop a rubric for the blog as a whole, showing the features that all blogs should have. Additionally, rubrics for blog posts and various blog genres should be used that show the minimum features that posts, such as restaurant reviews or movie reviews, should include. Blog posts that meet and exceed the minimum requirements for a genre should be pointed out and praised to harness the power of the near peer role model (Murphey, 1998) in bolstering student motivation. Over time, a list of model blog posts written by students can be assembled for prereading so students can have a mental image of what they should be trying to produce. However, students must be aware that being creative and going beyond what others have done is important as well. Sample blog rubrics are available at <http://blogzemi.weebly.com/rubrics.html> and in the Appendix. Post rubrics are scored after each blog post and passed back to students with hard copies of post corrections to be made. Blog rubrics are scored and distributed to students at monthly intervals during the semester.

Create One or More Course Blogs for Posting of Writing That Falls Outside a Student's Chosen Blog Theme

When students have a blog theme, such as movie reviews, and have already posted a number of movie reviews on their blog, they may reach a point where they are unable to make a post on the same theme within the teacher's required posting time. For example, they may be unable to view a movie in time for the next posting deadline, or they may be tired of writing repeatedly on their chosen theme. However, to suddenly post a restaurant review, for example, on a blog whose title is "My Favorite Movies" would likely confuse the blogger's audience. If the teacher maintains a separate restaurant review blog or a general review blog for movie, book, and manga reviews, students have alternative places for posting so they do not disturb the integrity of their own blog theme. However, when posting on the course blogs, the writing should go to the teacher via email or via

the class network or cloud sharing system for the teacher to post. I maintain two course blogs for this purpose: *Tsurumi Eats!* (http://tsurumieats.blogspot.jp/) and *Tsurumi Recommends!* (http://tsurumirecommends.blogspot.jp/).

Use Class Time for Writing and Grammar Exercises and for Oral Presentations of Blog Posts

As in any writing class, a teacher is likely to identify common issues, errors, or writing points that need revision. Typically, students need help maintaining the integrity of paragraphs and should do exercises on punctuation, grammar, conjunctions, transition words, vocabulary choice, and sentence combining. As blogging is usually done outside of class, a portion of class time should be spent on paragraph and sentence level writing improvement. Unlike essay writing, a structure consisting of introduction, body, and conclusion is not the aim.

If the course is not strictly a writing course, class time may also be well spent on the oral presentation of blog information. In a classroom with a projector, the blog can be shown as a kind of scrolling slideshow while the speaker presents. Presenting a blog post provides good speaking practice that reinforces vocabulary and expressions the students have found and used in their writing. The class members provide a human face to the notion of *audience* as they focus on each student's blog during the presentation. Presenting makes the writing classroom more dynamic and communicative, and weekly or biweekly presentations encourage students to stay up-to-date on blog postings. However, students should not be permitted to merely read their blogs to the class, as this defeats the idea of presenting for communication. Lively presentations with continuous eye contact should be the aim, with tolerance for the omission of some of the details presented in the written blog. On the other hand, if a writing teacher does not have time in class for oral presentations, the comment function of blogs can be used to enhance communication.

Revision of Blogs

Every writing teacher, whether teaching traditional composition, creative writing, academic writing, or blogging, faces the question of how much editing to do and how much writing revision to require. Teacher correction of student writing is arguably the most time consuming aspect of a teacher's job. Teachers have varying standards for the level of correctness they require from student writing, and many will argue over the effectiveness of teacher correction on student writing. These questions may be amplified with blogging, as teachers will likely be pulled in two directions. Some may argue that blogging is

by its nature more like free writing than composition, and therefore greater tolerance for error and for casual language are permitted. Others will argue that because blogging is written for a real audience (class members) and a virtual audience of potentially many, the writing must achieve the highest standard possible, as it serves as a model for others. I will not attempt to answer that question other than to say that I apply written corrections to printed copies of every student blog post and require that students make corrections to their blogs and republish. Sometimes multiple revisions are required. Peer editing is an alternative approach, but this is less likely to result in an error-free final product. To address grammar deficiencies that apply to some students but not others, I employ an e-learning system (*Manaba*) whereby students can be directed to work on exercises that deal with their specific problem areas and that give immediate feedback.

Optional Inclusion of Technology Tips and Practice

Although some teachers may wish to confine their teaching to blog writing or writing with a communication aspect, a blogging course also offers opportunities to develop computer and media skills at whatever level the teacher is comfortable with. Doing so can bring the added value of making the course a partial content and language integrated learning (CLIL) course, as students take on the challenge of learning HTML (hypertext markup language, the basic coding system for achieving effects on a webpage), webpage design, audio and video integration, and photo editing in English. At the simplest level, too, extra practice can be devoted to typing skills, as many students today, who access the Internet only through smartphones, can no longer be assumed to know how to type or use word processing functions.

On the Immediacy of Blogging and Its Effect on Organization

The process of writing a rhetorical form for an essay writing class is well established in composition textbooks, and an essay organization requiring an introduction, body, and conclusion is fairly standard. These, however, do not apply to blogging. There are countless models for blog post writing, many of them organizationally questionable from a teacher's point of view. Also, blogging in the day of smartphones and tweets seems to imply that blogging can be done anywhere and on the fly, which may result in poorly organized writing. Rather than work against that tendency, teachers are better advised to develop a little tolerance for questionable organization from beginning bloggers. Because blog posting is repeated many times, teachers can take the long view and work on improving blog organization over time, with rubrics that show how well a student has met the conditions a teacher deems important with each blog post, along with an expec-

tation of improvement during the course. Prewriting organization skills should not be abandoned, but some allowance for spontaneity and inspiration is recommended. On the other hand, paragraph and sentence-level writing in blogs and issues of grammar, word choice, and spelling need not differ greatly from the standards set in essay writing.

Conclusion

Extensive blogging in a writing class, especially one with an oral presentation component, has practical benefits for students writing for communication. Students become more blog and media literate, and they write more and with greater purpose as they exercise the productive skills of speaking and writing on topics of their own choosing. The presence of an audience, represented by other students in the classroom and by a potential virtual audience of thousands, is a powerful motivational force for many students, particularly those who succeed in capturing the attention of external viewers. Although there will always be a place for composition and essay writing courses, blogging is more dynamic, authentic, and communicative. Blogging can be an excellent writing alternative for teachers looking to motivate students of any proficiency level.

Bio Data

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Appendix A
Blog Rubric

(for the blog as a whole; not for individual blog posts; given 2 or 3 times a year)

Novice	Competent	Proficient	Master
Blog Title			
0 – 1 none / needs help	2 adequate	3 intriguing	4 special
Blog Description			
0 – 1 none / needs help	2 adequate	3 intriguing	

Miller: Making the Change From Essay Writing to Blogging

Novice	Competent	Proficient	Master
Visual Appeal			
0 – 1 none / needs help	2 adequate	3 talented	4 special
Customized			
0 no	1 a bit	2 yes	
Number of Posts			
0 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4	5 – 6	7 – 8	9 – 10+
Posted by Due Dates			
0 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 never / rarely	5 – 6 sometimes	7 – 8 usually	9 – 10+ almost always
Revisions Made			
0 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 never / rarely	5 – 6 sometimes	7 – 8 usually	9 – 10+ almost always

Total:

Appendix B
Post Rubric
(for each individual post)

Novice	Competent	Proficient	Master
Post Title			
0 – 1 none / needs help	2 adequate	3 intriguing	4 special
Post Organization / Planning			
0 – 1 none / needs help	2 adequate	3 competent	4 great
Paragraphs: Formatted Correctly (spacing & alignment)			
0 – 1 none / needs help	2 fair	3 good	
Use of Links			
0 – 1 none / needs help	2 fair	3 good	
Use of Media (images, video, audio)			
0 – 1 none / needs help	2 fair	3 good	4 excellent

Miller: Making the Change From Essay Writing to Blogging

Novice	Competent	Proficient	Master
Post Writing			
Grammar			
0 – 1 poor / needs help	2 fair	3 good	4 excellent
Vocabulary / Transition Words			
0 – 1 poor / needs help	2 fair	3 good	4 excellent
Conjunctions / Sentence Complexity			
0 – 1 poor / needs help	2 fair	3 good	4 excellent
Spelling			
0 – 1 poor / needs help	2 fair	3 good	4 excellent
Punctuation			
0 – 1 poor / needs help	2 fair	3 good	
Paragraphs: Stick to One Idea			
0 – 1 none / needs help	2 fair	3 good	
Post Length			

Novice	Competent	Proficient	Master
0 – 1 too short: # _____	2 – 3 fair: # _____	4 – 5 good: # _____	6 – 7 long: # _____
Post Content			
0 – 1 – 3 poor / needs help	4 – 5 – 6 adequate	7 – 8 – 9 intriguing	10 – 11 – 12 special

Total:

Appendix C
Restaurant Review Rubric

Essential Information:	0	1	2	3	4
At the top:					
Post Title: name of the restaurant plus a catch phrase					
Near the top:					
Restaurant type: fine dining, family, casual, fast food, cafe, bar, buffet, etc.					
Type of food: Japanese, sushi, ramen, barbecue, pizza, Chinese, coffee, etc.					
At the bottom:					
Restaurant name in English and Japanese					
Address					
Phone number					
Hours & Holidays					
URL if available					

Miller: Making the Change From Essay Writing to Blogging

Essential Information:	0	1	2	3	4
Access					
Organization: overall					
Organization: individual paragraphs					
Information:					
•					
•					
•					
•					
Comments:		Total			

"Information" can be anything that answers the questions below. Not all questions have to be answered. Each review should be different. Don't just answer the questions in a list; give the most important and interesting information. Organize your paragraphs so related information is in the same paragraph.

- Is it expensive, mid-range, reasonable, or very cheap in price?
- What is the atmosphere like?
- How do the staff dress?
- About how many people can dine there at one time?
- How many tables are there?
- Are there candles on the table? What kind of lights are there?
- Can people eat at the counter?
- What are some menu categories? (appetizers, pasta, soup, main, etc.)
- What are the most popular menu items?
- Is there a course menu?

- Is it better to get the course or to choose a la carte?
- What is the average price range of items?
- How much are some particular items?
- How many locations does the restaurant have?
- Which location did you try?
- Is the restaurant popular?
- How long must you wait for a table?
- Does the restaurant take reservations?
- Do you need reservations?
- Are there any discounts or coupons available?
- Is there a takeout menu?
- Was the food better than similar foods you've had at other restaurants?
- Are there nice desserts available? Are they unique or special?
- Are vegetarian food options available?
- Does the restaurant offer special kinds of beer, like locally brewed beers?
- Does the restaurant offer any special kinds of wine or sake?
- Are there special kinds of coffee or tea? Fruit drinks?
- Is there a drinks bar?
- Does the restaurant serve seasonal foods?
- Does the food have some special spices?
- Can you choose the level of spiciness?
- Is the restaurant open early in the morning? Until late at night?
- Is it open for breakfast, lunch and dinner? Is it open in the afternoon?
- Can you reserve the restaurant for parties?
- Are there large tables for large groups?
- Is the place romantic? Bright and cheerful?
- Is it best for couples or families? Can single people be comfortable there?
- Is there free Wi-Fi available?
- What is the music like?
- Is there live music?

- Are the staff friendly? Do they check on you often?
- Do the staff refill your water glasses?
- Do they clear off the table quickly?
- Is there something unique or unusual about the restaurant?
- Is it noisy or quiet? Light or dark?
- Does the restaurant have parking?
- Is it easy to find?
- Do you recommend it? Why?
- Do you pay at the table or at the register?
- Is smoking allowed? Do they have a special smoking section?
- Can you pay with a credit card? Which cards are accepted?
- Did you meet the owner? What is he or she like?
- Does the restaurant give anything for free?
- Does the restaurant charge for an appetizer that you didn't order (*tsukidashi*)?