Practice View
Blogs for Language Learning
by Barbara Dieu

Of the content management tools I have used with high school students, very few are as simple and allow for as many different pedagogical uses as Web logs (blogs) do. Besides having the potential to increase students' language competence and electronic literacy, blogs are egalitarian learning and teaching tools par excellence.

In blogging, teachers and students become partners beyond the classroom walls (see Stevens, 2004). If you are already familiar with online tools for teaching, blogging will be a natural addition to your repertoire. If you are new to technology in language teaching, you can learn about blogging along with your students.

<1>Blogging Basics

Most blogs are free, and you do not need to depend on anyone's expertise or moderation to start publishing one. Even if you have little technical know-how, you can be posting online, editing and linking your blog, reading other people's blogs, and having your blog read within minutes of setting up an account.

<2>What Is a Web Log?
An online search reveals a variety of ways to define *Web log* or *blog* (see, e.g., the definitions at *OneLook Dictionary Search,* http://www.onelook.com/; *World Wide Words,* http://www.worldwidewords.org/; and the discussion in "Weblog Definitions," 2004).

Of the many definitions I have found, I fancy Good's (2003):
A blog is a form of journalistic expression … a form of personal expression that is characterized by a list of dated news items, listed in reverse chronological order, authored by one or more individuals. The tone is informal and the blogger speaks generally in her own natural voice and tone. (n.p.)

I often have students investigate various definitions of blog as a warm-up activity, using the definitions on the sites above as examples. Advanced students might research blog layout and content using a list of blogging sites I have selected and a grid to fill in. They recognize, classify and justify their choices based on the definitions they worked with in the warm-up activity.

Features that most blogs share are

• automatic date-stamping for each post
• an archive of past posts by date or theme
• a way for readers to comment on each post
• a link area

I also have students compare different writing techniques they find in the blogs (e.g., and discuss what a good blog post or comment should be like.

<2>Setting Up a Blog

Many hosting platforms are available for blogs (see Dieu, 2004). Each provider offers myriad features, and choosing one is a matter of taste. Try out different providers: Follow the online

instructions, create blogs, and experiment with them to assess the possibilities.

When blogging with a class, having all the students use the same provider--and therefore work on a similar interface--avoids a host of practical problems. Because I favor a clean, intuitive interface, I usually have my students set up accounts with *Blogger* (http://www.blogger.com/).

The great amount of language in the instructions for starting a blog is a wonderful opportunity for task-based learning. I prepare simplified instructions for students at intermediate levels but let advanced students fend for themselves using the instructions on the site. I sometimes give younger students a checklist of important steps to master in setting up a blog, with key words identified. Before setting up the blog, the students must learn the key words well enough to teach them to someone else.

To enhance the appearance of their blogs, I suggest that students personalize them with skins (different graphical interfaces) or templates. Most blog providers offer built-in templates to choose from, and, in my experience, some of the students usually know where to find these and other add-ons elsewhere on the Web. These students are usually glad to share their expertise with others using the target language. This additional activity usually stimulates discussion among the students.

<1>Blogging to Learn

Before blogging with your students, you might investigate blogs used by other language teachers. Especially useful for novice bloggers are *Weblogs for Use With EFL Classes* (Campbell, 2003), *Blogs for Learning English + Teaching English or ESL + EFL Friendly Blogs* (http://www.eslgo.net/), and *BLOG-EFL* (http://blog-efl.blogspot.com/).

In my experience, blogs work best if you see them as long-term assignments that help students improve their overall fluency and competency, not just as a standalone activity. Try to forget teaching about the language while blogging. Instead, see yourself as making students use the language while you observe and monitor.

<2>Unleash the Potential

A blog can be a record of students' progress in language skills--a portfolio that helps you see what students can and cannot do and organize individual feedback. To capitalize on blogging's learning and teaching potential, simply unleash your imagination.

• Use a blog as a teacher-student journal in which you post comments, reactions, and reflections on what was done in class, calling the students' attention to the learning process.
• Ask the students to use the blog to document their contact with the target language outside class.
• Have the students discuss topical issues by posting reactions to a reading or answers to thought-provoking questions.
• Document their personal research.
• Use the blog to organize collaborative writing and peer review among the students.
• Invite guests--teachers or content-area experts--to add comments and interact with the students in the blog.
• Use the blog as an exchange plaza during interclass intercultural projects. Have the students chronicle reflections on their culture and interactions with students from other cultures.

• Use the blog as a platform on which students use the language freely as the main actors, networking without constraints or barriers.
• Develop the blog into an online community of practice in which diverse teachers and students help and learn from one another.

<2>Evolution of a Class Blog

Initially, I had each of the students set up a personal blog and write weekly (using a rubric; see Dieu, n.d.) about their exposure to English. I hoped that observing and recording their contact with English inside and outside the classroom would improve their retention rate and make them focus on their learning.

Gradually, I expanded the blogging assignments to include other writing tasks, such as reacting to and summarizing readings and describing Web sites students had visited. Students also inserted images and links to external content they found interesting. By doing so, they practiced extracting key information as well as using new vocabulary. Their personal narratives revealed their preferences, areas for revision, and possible topics for future classes.

Subsequently, I noticed that the students needed a way to express themselves more freely in writing than my blogging assignments allowed for. In response, I transformed my initial blog into a meeting place beyond the classroom (see *Bee Online,* *h*ttp://beeonline.blogspot.com/), where students can discuss any topic they feel like bringing up I invited students to become members so they could post in the main area. From time to time, I have invited mystery guests--teachers or native English speakers –to post so that students can interact in English with individuals from outside the classroom context.
In addition, foreign students have shared their narratives and photos in the blogs as part of cultural exchanges between classes.

Two new developments in blogging are Rich Site Summary (RSS) and voice-enabling. With RSS, also known as *Really Simple Syndication,* I receive new content students have added to their blogs without manually checking each one, and students can receive my new content immediately after I publish it. This is done by means of a news aggregator (a free one is *Bloglines,* http://www.bloglines.com/), which checks the blogs, collects the new content, and informs me as soon as it is created. *Audblog* (http://www.audblog.com/) allows users to record an audio file over the telephone and have the recording automatically inserted into a blog or e-mailed to them.

<1>Online, but Still Human, Interaction

If you see language as a means to understanding and communicating meaning through significant interaction and content production, think of the time spent on a blog as moments during which you maximize focused exposure to language in new situations, peer collaboration, and contact with experts.

However, do not expect miracles. The human element, fortunately, still plays an essential role. When a teacher "hosts, supports, facilitates and gives meaning and scope to personal publishing, things happen" (Farmer, 2003).

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