

four seasons in one day –

literacies in changing climates

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Weblogs and blackboards - developing an online community

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This is a summary of our paper. We have also provided some references which may be useful to others, as well as brief instructions on trying 'Blackboard' and in using a weblog as a group discussion board in ESL or literacy classes. Our presentation was interactive, and we include below the site of the weblog we set up in response to requests from everyone who participated. We hope to encourage others to try online discussion, and to enjoy it as we and our students have done.

weblogs and blackboards - developing an online community

Jane Westworth and Elizabeth McKenzie from the Learning Skills Unit, RMIT University, have been experimenting and working with teaching and learning online. Both presenters have a special interest in the design and development of teaching materials in new contexts, and in challenging the boundaries of traditional classrooms and their discourses.

Our joint exploratory research examines the development and negotiation of discourse in two different online learning environments. One, using a group 'blog' as a discussion board and chat room, was created to encourage adult NESB learners to continue the classroom dialogue outside the classroom parameters; the other, using the more structured format of Blackboard, was the main classroom and meeting place in a post graduate course. We compared the two very different discussion boards in order to address some of the advantages and drawbacks of working with each, to attempt to evaluate their success and usefulness, to determine the role of the teacher or moderator, and to assess the development of an online community.

Today, although many teachers are confident in their ability to use online courses and confident about their students' success in adapting to them, there are many others who feel apprehensive. We know that the number of people who use the internet both at work and in their studies has increased rapidly: in Australia, the amount of information downloaded from the internet nearly doubled in one year (source: The Australian Bureau of Statistics). There is therefore a very real need for teachers to develop online teaching skills, and to learn how to blend these with their face to face teaching. Britton (1970) pointed out that language learning is most successful when it is a form of play. Adult learners find it difficult to 'play' – they are afraid of looking awkward – but if they are involved in an online discussion, they become engaged in the process, and the computer itself becomes subservient to the needs of the students and to the immediacy of the debate within the online classroom.

The two discussion boards which provided the data for this study offered contrasting opportunities for 'play.' Each discussion board formed part of a whole, far larger curriculum, and the focus of each program – or course – was obviously very different. In TALON the online discussion formed but one aspect of an entire online course which also addressed collaborative learning, the theory and practice of online teaching and learning and the creation, trialling and evaluation of online teaching materials. The course was designed for teachers and trainers who had some experience in writing traditional learning materials and were experienced computer users who wanted to examine the issues involved in putting learning materials on the web. Because the course was conducted wholly online, the discussion forum was the main 'meeting place' for participants – and, although serious concerns were raised here, it was also possible to enjoy challenging different viewpoints in a context that was often informal. The weblog discussion board was used with a class of Language Frameworks students, and was originally intended to give students a meaningful way of understanding computer literacy

and using the internet. This particular group of students was perhaps unusually diverse in terms of language acquisition, age, educational background, perceived ability, and academic and social acculturation. They came to the blog with no expectations other than that it must be fun, and in that spirit they began experimenting with different language forms immediately.

Because of the academic nature of TALON, it soon became obvious that the most successful discussions were those with a particular focus and which were related to course assessment. A guest speaker was invited into the classroom as moderator to lead a discussion over a limited period of one week. The students responded to the immediacy of the task. For preparation, they were asked to find any online courses that they felt were 'good examples of online learning' and to bring them to the discussion. The time frame created an additional novelty since the guest speaker was writing from England while participants slept, and they awoke each day to his new messages.

Hi everyone. It's the end of my working day, Tuesday 4:20 pm. I figure if I post a message now, I will get the first word. So here goes.

Can I say to begin with that I'm very pleased to be able to engage in conversations like the one we are about to start. I should say also that, although I am suggesting some areas to think about below, I don't want to limit the agenda in any way. Feel free to raise what you want to raise. But please take pity on me. These 'guest speaker' gigs are difficult for the guest. There's many of you and just one of me. So I may not be able to respond to everyone, or I may be tardy.

OK, here're some thoughts to get the ball rolling. I believe that you have all been searching for some good examples of online learning. I'm really looking forward to seeing them. I want to raise some general issues.

I should state my ...

The guest speaker set up the 'rules' for the discussion and for the relationship he would have with the participants. In this way he revealed 'strategic thinking about his role as a tutor.' (McConnell 2003) The pattern he suggested at the beginning he adhered to for the duration of the discussion. He stated his prejudices and his preferences and proceeded to cite Crook (2002) and Breen (2002) to illustrate his points about 'blended learning'. This theoretical underpinning provided the focus the participants sought. They were stimulated by his ease with the medium and his obvious wealth of knowledge, and were prompted to pose academic questions, and to seek answers for their own projects.

The weblog discussion board formed an interesting contrast: the teacher's introduction was brief, chatty and invited the students to their own site:

This is your chat page - all of you from Language Frameworks!
I thought I'd set it up so that on Friday you can start chatting. It's pretty late at night so I'm going to log-off now. Speak to you Friday! Jane.

There were sixteen students in the group, from twelve different countries, and their ages ranged from 20 to 67. Two had been in Australia for over twenty years; two had been here for only a few months. Three were overseas-qualified professionals with a fairly sophisticated command of English, while at least five other members of the group had completed no formal education, and initially had difficulty in writing more than four or five sentences unaided; their reading was hesitant and their comprehension skills were uncertain.

These students were enrolled in a 'Language Frameworks' course which has the explicit aims of improving English listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. This course is deliberately flexible in design, enabling teachers to reach the needs of the students and not to be confined to rigid learning outcomes. This very flexibility lent itself especially well to the use of the blog. There was a perceived need for continued contact with other students outside the classroom, for extended and ongoing 'whole language' learning, as well as an expressed student need for increased time using computers. The blog provided an opportunity for extending language and literacy skills, for practising new computer skills, for learning to read and write on a website, and for exploring the internet, through completing 'real' tasks with a definite and work-based focus. The students felt they were 'doing real work', and that these tasks were valuable. More importantly, the blog provided a very important social meeting place: students shared moments of sadness and of elation; they discovered ways to address individuals and groups; they developed friendships and continued conversations outside the actual classroom and into their virtual one. The blog generated its own momentum, and the student discourse was lively and dynamic. The blog was student centred in the simplest of ways: the students owned it.

In our conference presentation, we showed extracts from both discussion boards. We introduced the different formats, and discussed the way each board functions. We selected entries which demonstrated the ways in which the participants interact, both with the moderator and with each other. We looked at the personal styles that developed; the way in which some participants 'lurked' and watched for a while before entering; the growing sense of an online community, and the changing and evolving discourse. We would like to encourage other teachers to gain as much pleasure as we have done from introducing students to the concept of 'talking with their fingers' (Hawkrigde, Morgan and Jelfs, 1997).

We had hoped that our presentation would be interactive – and it was. We were asked to set up a blog – and were delighted that so many people wanted to trial what we had been discussing. Please visit it at <http://www.ACAL2004.blogspot.com> and, if you would like to join those of us who are already 'blogging', send us an email, and we will be delighted to invite you. You can contact us at: jane.westworth@rmit.edu.au or elizabeth.mckenzie@rmit.edu.au

Some useful references

Blood, R (2002) *We've got blog: How Weblogs are Changing our Culture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Perseus Publishing

Breen, R (2002) *Brookes Virtual Evaluation Phase 3: Student Attitudes towards the use of WebCT in teaching and learning*, OCSLD, Oxford

Britton, J (1970) *Language and Learning*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, England

Crook, C (2002) 'The Campus Experience of Networked Learning' in Steeples C & Jones C (Eds), *Networked Learning: Perspectives and Issues*, Springer-Verlag, London

Huffaker, D (2004) *The educated blogger: Using Weblogs to promote literacy in the classroom* accessed 19.7.2004
http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue9_6/huffaker/index.html Accessed 19.7.2004

Leu, D (2003) 'Thinking about adult literacy from a new literacies perspective: promises to keep and challenges to face', paper from the 26th National Adult Literacy Conference

McConnell, D and Lally, V (2002) 'Developing, sustaining and researching e-learning groups and communities', Presented at SCUTREA, July 2002, University of Stirling

Salmon, G (2000) *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online*, Kogan Page Limited, London

Salmon, G (2001) 'It's teaching, Jim ... but not as we know it!' paper from the *Changing Learning Environments Conference*, Edinburgh September 11th -13th, 2001

Stauffer, T (2002) *Blog On: Building Online Communities with Weblogs*, Berkeley, California, McGraw-Hill/Osborne

Richardson, W (2004) *Using weblogs and rss in education*, The Educational Weblog Page www.weblogg-ed.com (accessed 13.8.2004)

Wrede, O (2003) 'Weblogs and discourse', paper from *The Blogtalk Conference*, Vienna, 23rd - 24th August 2003

Further information about the Blackboard online classroom

The Blackboard online classroom enables the teacher/administrator to easily design an online course with asynchronous and synchronous discussion areas. It is a password-protected learning environment, but it can be accessed by any Web browser.

A free trial can be downloaded from: www.blackboard.com

The Blackboard classroom makes it fairly easy for the teacher to create and manipulate their online classroom. A little knowledge of HTML allows real control of appearance and information presentation. Teachers can view reports showing the number of times students access course content and discussion forums. It is possible to track the frequency with which students access particular components, which means it is possible to evaluate student involvement.

The Discussion Board is an asynchronous place to exchange ideas and to develop concepts. It is a 'threaded' discussion using forums which make possible further comments and development of a topic to be added to a specific thread at any stage. Different topics or new 'threads' can be opened up by any member of the discussion and the development of the discussion is always easy to see.

Further information on weblogs

A 'blog' – short for 'weblog' – is just that: a log on the web. Most blogs now are made on free, easy to use sites such as www.blogger.com. Using a tool such as this, it takes only a few minutes to get your own website launched. You name your own site, choose your own template, and you receive an internet address (referred to as a URL) for your site. You can then access your site at any time, from any computer and from anywhere in the world.

Weblogs have been around since the inception of the World Wide Web, although all the early ones had to be created painstakingly by their owners. The majority of blogs may appear to be to be diaries – because it's a very quick and accessible way of jotting down thoughts. The blog is, however, constantly evolving, and has developed from its origins as a personal web site. It is probably now better defined as an online journal, distinguished by its mixture of comment, reflection and a network of links. All blogs share some specific characteristics: the entries (or 'posts') are short, informal and regularly updated; contents are displayed in a reverse-chronological order so that the most recent entry, the latest information, is at the top of the page; each 'post' is time-and-date stamped; each blog contains links to other blogs - these form a network of information, connecting bloggers to other bloggers, or to other pertinent sites. Blogs are increasingly used by journalists, researchers and educators. Blogging is fast, it's fun, it's a "no frills" way to introduce technology into the reading and writing classroom, and to gain

maximum benefit from it. Blogging integrates reading, writing, listening and speaking skills; it quietly assists the learning process: the technology does not dominate it.

It is the development of a blog as a group 'discussion board' which was addressed in this presentation. The face-to-face teaching of the physical classroom can be extended into the online environment. The students learn to build upon each other's comments and observations, to respond appropriately, and to extend an argument. In many ways, the time delay between reading each other's ideas and writing a response encourages increased reflection - and can be especially re-assuring for ESL students. Students who are shy of speaking in the face-to-face classroom will often enjoy conversation online. At RMIT, we also trialled a blog with a group of teachers who had similar interests in language and learning development. In this blog, we were able to discuss issues which were of interest and importance to all of us - and we made use of the more recent 'comments' facility in order to create a threaded discussion on points of particular interest.

More highly developed, yet still free, software means that more complex web pages, previously available only to skilled web page designers, can be set up and used by anyone. In 2002, the page on which bloggers created a post consisted of a split screen: the draft version above; the published one below. In fact, for ESL learners, this was ideal: students liked the safety and security of being able to rework their ideas and to check their spelling and expression, draft against draft. The split screen enabled the writer to choose between drafts - seeing both at the same time. Two years later and a host of new features have been added: the blogger can now use different fonts, different font sizes, and different colours; can choose how to align posts; can use short cuts which alleviate the need for any knowledge of HTML, and can upload photographs. We are entering an age of different concepts of literacies, and accepting and being prepared for change is of the utmost importance. If the new literacies demand faster reading, faster writing, and more highly developed critical thinking skills (Leu, 2003) the blog is one very simple way for any teacher to address the new curriculum.

The blog has become legitimate; it has forged for itself an identity whose strength lies in its versatility.

Tips on running a blog as a discussion board:

- Make it chatty: students need to hear the familiarity of your voice. Try to write just as you speak.
- Re-assure and encourage your students - just as you would in the face-to-face classroom
- Model what you want your students to do: chat about what you did at the weekend - only then can you invite them to tell you what they did, too
- Respond to all students' comments - just as you would in the classroom
- Respect what they have to say (one way to do this is to quote them accurately by cutting and pasting a phrase of their actual words - and then responding to their ideas)
- Provide links to other sites you want them to look at - but be specific about what you want them to do when they get there
- Link the blog to the classroom - talk about the blog in the classroom, and the content of a particular lesson on the blog
- Try to have some time in a computer room or library with your students - so that you can sit beside each student and consolidate the link between face-to-face teaching and the online dimension
- Your discussion board is an extension board of the work you do in the classroom. It works because you are combining the skills you use every day as a classroom teacher with the flexible access of the online environment

Try exploring: - these are some of our favourite 'educational' blogs:

<http://www.weblogg-ed.com>

<http://www.edublognews.com/>

<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/>

<http://www.schoolblogs.com/>

<http://www.ebn.weblogger.com/>

<http://faculty.deanza.fhda.edu/jocalo/2004/06/25>