

## **THIS IS YOUR CLASS ON WEBLOGS**

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### **Introduction**

Weblogs have come into their own as an educational tool (Downes, 2004), and are beginning to be used more often in ESL/EFL settings in a variety of ways. The Southern Illinois University Center for ESL program (<http://www.siu.edu/~cesl>), which caters to students of diverse nationalities, backgrounds, and technological experience, began using weblogs with its students in August 2004. Now, though technological skills are not thoroughly integrated into the syllabi of the program, every student who passes through the program leaves it with a minimal standard of technological competence, thanks in part to their work with weblogs. For these students, the most profound change in their learning is simply that they are opening themselves up to public scrutiny at the same time they are learning English and learning the skills of finding sources of supporting material to link to and making the links appropriately.

It has been said that weblogs straddle a line between personal journal and public forum. They can in fact be used for other purposes as well. At CESL, each class has its own weblog, each student is asked to start his/her own, and teachers can ask students to put posts on either or both in presenting formal writing on the Web at the higher levels. Now they are used for many purposes, including displaying student research papers in online portfolios, providing venues for student announcements, contests, poetry and photography, and collecting student work for our online newsletter, *CESL Today* (<http://www.siu.edu/~cesl/students/cesltoday/csldty.html>).

It's a major undertaking to put a program, or even a class, on the Web, but there are a number of good reasons to do it. In this paper I will discuss three reasons, and show how I have used weblogs in teaching at different levels and for different purposes.

### **Three reasons for using weblogs**

#### ***Better integration into the target language community***

The primary reason that I expect my students to publish their work is the value of that work in ultimately integrating them into their target English-speaking community. Kern and Warschauer (2000), in their discussion of sociocognitive approaches to CALL, say that

A pedagogy of networked computers must...take a broad view, not only examining the role of information technology in language learning, but also the role of language learning in the information technology society. If our goal is to help students enter into

new authentic discourse communities, and if those discourse communities are increasingly located online, then it seems appropriate to incorporate online activities for their social utility as well as for their perceived particular pedagogical value.

A crucial difference between students' publishing work on weblogs and preparing paper copies of finished work (they do that also) is that anyone can read the weblogs at any time, and people do. While most writing teachers hold the English-speaking world as the ideal, if abstract, audience of essays and research papers, those who publish on weblogs experience this audience first hand. If our ultimate goal is integration into an English-speaking discourse community, we have at least shown them one, and begun the process, in marked contrast to the private-exchange model, where a student's paper is seen primarily by one teacher (a private reader) - who may, by virtue of knowing the student, be more tolerant of his/her writing weaknesses than the typical English-speaking reader, or their academic teacher.

### ***Integration into a new world of inter-connected media***

Second, it is important for students to become familiar with a weblog environment, both as a user and as a creator, learning the processes of searching for information and opinion on the Web, reading as much as is necessary to grasp a point, and making personal comments about what they've read. They become part of the new media in English, and blogging assignments start that process. Siemens, in his notion of connectivism (2004), argues that in the modern world being connected and knowing how to find information, is even more important than what we actually know:

Connectivism is driven by the understanding that decisions are based on rapidly altering foundations. New information is continually being acquired. The ability to draw distinctions between important and unimportant information is vital. The ability to recognize when new information alters the landscape based on decisions made yesterday is also critical.

In many ways our students are ahead of us in this regard, as they recognize the place these new media are coming to have in their world, and they are for the most part eager to get started in using them. They are increasingly willing to explore and accept the sometimes subtle changes that these new media can bring to the way we see and are seen.

### ***Lowering affective filters through forming collaborative relationships with language learning facilitators***

Finally, orienting a class toward the public, as opposed to orienting individual students toward a teacher or toward a grade, has a profound effect on the teacher's relationship with the student, which can otherwise become adversarial in a subtle way. Whenever a teacher can be on the

student's side in facing the hostile world, this helps to lower the affective filter within the class, and serves to help us keep the big picture in focus. Introducing the real world to the classroom from the start thus clarifies the target better than setting up a falsely comforting environment that is so different from the real world that the student can't transfer skills upon leaving.

### **Approaches to using weblogs**

A wide variety of uses of weblogs has emerged in our program. In some cases, they serve to display students' writing, or their group or collaborative efforts, playing a minor role in a much larger effort, but nevertheless changing the nature of the assignment by virtue of making the result results published and public. In one class, for example, groups of students collaborated to make weblogs for their projects, one of which explored a series of violent deer incidents on campus (<http://violentdeer.blogspot.com>). The weblog itself played a minor role in the preparation of the project, which included reading, writing, and extensive interviews, but became important as a display venue for their finished work, and changed the orientation of the project toward that public display. While I am sure that more innovative approaches exist, I include two of the approaches I use with different levels of student writers in order to show some of the practical consequences of integrating weblogs into an ESL curriculum.

### **Weblogging at the lower levels**

The lower to intermediate level reading/listening course seeks to develop students' conversational fluency and develop their ability to recognize and relate to basic English on the Web and in their environment. One goal of the class is for them to be able to use any appropriate medium: speaking, writing, reading, or browsing the Web, to get information that they need. Ideally they should be able to evaluate what they see or hear on the Web: i.e to make inferences about the people who make the pages and their purpose for creating them. Students should also be able to not just repeat what they've read, but also describe it, add to the discussion, and state and support an opinion.

In the more traditional part of the class, the reading-listening syllabus utilizes a variety of interesting discussion-starting topics. A good textbook, of course, can do this, but I also bring in side readings when I suspect that a tangent might be fruitful. Sometimes these are from the Web (I lead the topic toward the Web if I can). I try to stimulate interest; specifically, interest in the changing world. I then assign a weblog project that involves students' investigating a topic and reporting to the class, on the weblog, what they've found. They choose their own topics, and based on these I put them into two or three groups. I suggest where to start looking and I use the class weblog to point them to some possibilities.

Nelson (1991) argued that learners are more likely to acquire grammatical structures at the point at which they actually need them to communicate in real-life situations. Thus the effort

that the teacher puts in to ensure that students are invested in a topic and want to communicate something about it is rewarded in the process of helping them communicate successfully with the online community. I would argue that line-editing (correcting the grammar) in this context is both appropriate and necessary. I also orient students toward evaluating the sites they have chosen, as opposed to just gathering information and regurgitating it. They are asked to tell me about the page itself, what its purpose is, and whose side it might be on in any particular controversy.

Since the nature of weblogs is to systematically link to what the writer is referring to, I teach students how to link not only within the paragraphs that they write in their posts but in the templates of their weblogs as well. This entails learning some HTML, but this is usually not a problem for students, even if they come to the program with no prior experience. Projects produced to date have covered topics that the students have shown interest in, including

- "Paparazzi" ([http://ceslae2.blogspot.com/2005\\_11\\_01\\_ceslae2\\_archive.html](http://ceslae2.blogspot.com/2005_11_01_ceslae2_archive.html))
- "Carbondale Halloween and its accompanying violence" ([http://ceslae2.blogspot.com/2005\\_10\\_01\\_ceslae2\\_archive.html](http://ceslae2.blogspot.com/2005_10_01_ceslae2_archive.html))

The program newsletter which now appears online appeared in print form for many years. It was produced so that close friends, relatives back home, and those in the academic environment could read about students' lives and interests. Newsletters are attempts at authentic communication with a real community; however, the online version brings a number of changes to the traditional format. Though both formats utilize the same set of steps to ensure that students write about what they are invested in, what is put on the Web tends to stay there and is accessed more frequently than ink-and-paper issues. Accordingly, our assignments have become livelier, since students' writing is usually linked to their own weblogs as well as to sites they are discussing. Furthermore the prevailing awareness of "connectedness" is paramount when the articles themselves are linked to by readers, thus giving the newsletter more exposure. We've found it easier to track community interest in the online world than in the ink-and-paper world, though "interest" has to be inferred from "visits" - nobody knows how much is actually read (nor by recipients of a print newsletter for that matter).

### **Portfolios and higher level writing**

In the higher-level writing class, goals include researching topics related to what a high-level content-based reading-writing class is studying; writing a number of essays and a six-page research paper, learning how to cite and refer to sources in an academic context, and refining academic writing style, grammar and usage so that entry into academic fields is mitigated.

Putting the academic essays, the research papers, and a variety of other work on the Web has brought numerous changes to the processes of the class.

The publication of the work on the weblogs is the last step of the process, and is generally done after all organizational changes have been made and grammar has been edited. The online essays must have spaces between paragraphs (or use an HTML workaround, if the blog host has eliminated the indentation, as Blogger does), must have references linked, and must be clearly marked as a paper that is part of our class. Abstracts for the research paper appear in the class weblog and are linked to the paper itself, so that, given a single subject (for example, Wal-Mart as a social issue, the subject of research papers in the January-March 2006 term), one can read all the abstracts together and find the papers themselves, one click away. Students who have passed the high level have, by definition, learned how to present formal academic work online, though their weblogs themselves may include earlier work, links to their home countries or favorite music, or pictures of themselves, their friends, or their pets. The presentation of their papers on weblogs makes those written works part of a larger presentation. Thus one side benefit of the use of weblogs is that participants develop a greater sense of community through this aspect of personal expression.

Perhaps the single most profound change brought by the use of personal publication in this academic setting is the resulting accessibility of these essays and research papers by the public, as well as by other students and teachers in the program. In the case of the Wal-Mart research papers, the class papers covered diverse topics related to the retail giant's entry into a small rural area, and the controversy surrounding that. The collection of research papers now stands as a relatively balanced view of the controversy, since students took both sides on the issue and did their best to write sincere appraisals of how our community should respond to this situation. Again, their integration into the target community has been furthered both by their essays playing a real part in the community's ongoing dialogue about an important issue; but also by the fact that, having done research on a timely and important local issue, each student now has a perspective to bring to community interactions, particularly their weekly grocery trips to Wal-Mart with friends.

A risk for the teacher is the fact that publishing essays implies taking a public stand on what exactly the standard "summary-response" or "argumentative essay" should look like, not to mention taking a stand on which kind of essay is indeed more appropriate or valuable for the ESL student, which itself is controversial. In our program we gave up assignments like "cause-effect essay" and "compare-contrast essay" in favor of "summary-response" essays leading to a research paper. We put all of our serious work online, using APA (American Psychological Association) standards, and teachers hope that critical reaction will not prove their students unworthy in terms of meeting accepted standards of style, argument, or discourse conventions. But even regarding the APA regulations, some of which may be controversial, ambiguous or in flux, we often find that identifying correct "rules," in order to make things "correct" for

“publication,” can be a daunting task. The fact is that personal publishing has made all publishing more common, and has in fact changed the definition of the word “publishing.” APA regularly changes its standards for online reference and citation, but is hard pressed to keep up with the rapidly evolving styles and requirements of Web publishers.

The publication of all work has raised the stakes in the perennial battle against plagiarism, precisely because essays and research papers are published and remain online permanently. Even if we didn't publish, we would still make unique assignments, check sources, search out suspicious phrasing, or type such phrases into search engines. The publication of the work actually helps us reinforce the seriousness of the crime. In most cases that we see, the plagiarism was unintentional on the student's part, but nevertheless would have been published had we not caught it. We find that the student's link to the source used actually makes it easier for us to find this kind of plagiarism, since the link allows us to check the source fairly quickly, but even when the student has failed to cite the source used, copying the offending phrase into Google will often uncover its true identity. From the student's perspective, other students' online models of citation done properly are most useful in working out the way the successful paper should cite and refer to sources.

## **Conclusion**

The practice of putting papers up on weblogs has made students' writing better, in part because the best models for students are often the work of others who have gone before. Our students may feel sometimes that they have an added burden of learning obscure technological skills in order to transfer files successfully across platforms and into weblog format. But they also have the benefit of viewing the work of students who have gone before them; and from these examples they can pick the models they like, or those of their friends they most wish to emulate.

The public aspect of portfolios has been a benefit to our program as well. Even when the product is less than perfect; the student weblogs show what we do, what we talk about, and what we teach. Student writing is authentic, sincere and often powerful. I support making writing public because, in the end, the students' voices deserve to be heard, and they contribute well to the public discussion on any number of topics. The blogosphere, with its 24-hour spontaneity, its informality, its tolerance of youth and disrespect, and its developing social connectedness, is a good place for the work of ESL students and for their entry into the world of public discourse.

Students are free to delete their entire weblog the minute they leave the program, but they very rarely do. Once they get to academic classes, they usually struggle and are busy, and have very little time to do any traditional "journaling", let alone public journaling, but some do it anyway, using the skills learned in writing class to produce writing addressing less formal

ends. A surprising number of people, upon encountering the new media with its interconnected participation, find themselves right at home with it. In the end, pressing the "publish" button poses challenges for each of us, and for the CESL program itself, but its rewards have made the pioneering effort worthwhile.

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## Further reading

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## Program URL's

- <http://ceslstudents.blogspot.com> - students' weblog, from which all classes are linked.
- <http://www.siu.edu/~cesl/students/cesltoday/csldty.html> - CESL online newsletter, made entirely from weblogs
- <http://violentdeer.blogspot.com> - group weblog, showing collaborative project work
- [http://ceslae2.blogspot.com/2005\\_11\\_01\\_ceslae2\\_archive.html](http://ceslae2.blogspot.com/2005_11_01_ceslae2_archive.html) - Paparazzi student project
- [http://ceslae2.blogspot.com/2005\\_10\\_01\\_ceslae2\\_archive.html](http://ceslae2.blogspot.com/2005_10_01_ceslae2_archive.html) - Carbondale violence student project

- [http://eap2045.blogspot.com/2006\\_03\\_01\\_eap2045\\_archive.html](http://eap2045.blogspot.com/2006_03_01_eap2045_archive.html) - Wal-Mart research paper abstracts
- [http://eap2045.blogspot.com/2005\\_12\\_01\\_eap2045\\_archive.html](http://eap2045.blogspot.com/2005_12_01_eap2045_archive.html) - New York City environmental issues abstracts

**Editor's notes:**

This presentation was made as a regular session at the Webheads in Action Online Convergence on November 20, 2005. The original presentation materials can be found here:

<http://thisisyourbrainonweblogs.blogspot.com> .