Second medium-term programme of activities 2004-2007

Project D1 – BLOGS

Web journals in language education

Report of Central Workshop 7/2005

(Graz, Austria, 23-26 November 2005)

Project team:

Co-ordinator:

Mario Camilleri, Malta

Project team members:

Peter Ford, United Kingdom

Helena Leja, Poland

Valerie Sollars Camilleri**,** Malta

The report is accessible in English and in French on the ECML website: **http://www.ecml.at**

The Executive Director of the ECML should be informed about any full or partial translation of the report and a copy of the translation should be sent to the ECML for information.

Contact address

The Executive Director
European Centre for Modern Languages
Council of Europe
Nikolaiplatz 4
A-8020 Graz
Austria
e-mail : information@ecml.at

Introduction

Weblogs (or blogs for short) are a cross between a personal web site and an online diary or journal organised either chronologically or thematically. A weblog platform is software which enables anyone to maintain a blog with minimal technical expertise and update it from any computer supporting a web browser.

The principal aims of this project are to:

1. Investigate and promote the use of blogs in language education;

2. Investigates the use of blogs to promote collaborative, intercultural writing by secondary school-aged students of English and of French;

3. Investigate principles of design and implementation of weblog platforms suitable for use in the context of language education.

Since the start of the project, a prototype weblog platform has been developed and piloted in four classrooms with around 70 students of English and French. The main aims of this workshop were to:

1. discuss methodological issues regarding the use of blogs in language education;

2. train the participating teachers in the use of the blog platform developed specifically for this project;

3. discuss the logistics of the implementation phase of this project.

Two of the four teachers who took part in the pilot phase were invited to the workshop as resource persons to relate their experiences with using blogs in their classes.

This report touches on some of the issues raised during formal presentations by the project team and the two resource persons as well as the participants' discussion during the assigned tasks. Thanks are due to one of the participants, Ewan McIntosh, for keeping a detailed account of proceedings which he posted on his personal blog.

Use of blogs in the language classroom

The use of blogs in the language classroom is all about cross-cultural communication, learner participation and collaborative learning. The weblog platform provides an audience for the students' writings and creates opportunities for interaction and collaboration between students who may be geographically and culturally distant.

But the software can at best provide support for community building and collaboration – in the end it is what the teacher makes of it. It was generally agreed early on in the workshop that the main issues we had to consider were pedagogic, not technical – in fact, it is a principle of good design that technology should fade into the background and let the teachers and learners get on with their jobs.

Audience and community

Audience empowers learners – students need and love having an audience and blogs give them just that for their writing. Blogs also give students a degree of anonymity, and this may encourage the quieter and more withdrawn student who may not otherwise participate. The experience of the teachers who took part in the pilot phase was that their students got a lot out of their 3-month experience working on their blogs, although it may not be easy to quantify progress over such a short period. The opportunity blogs give students to engage in dialogue and respond to each others' thoughts and opinions means that students' writing has a focus – they might have read something on someone else's blog or on the web, and feel they have something to say in response. Teachers frequently find it difficult to focus the students' creative writing because of the relative sterility of the typical classroom environment. On the web, there is no shortage of inspiration.

In the classroom, the average audience for a students' writing is two – the teacher and the student him/herself. But with an audience numbering in the hundreds, and potentially in the tens of thousands, students must learn to not just write, but write purposefully and succinctly – they must learn to attract and retain an audience. The ECML blog platform provides students with the audience since they are writing within a closed-community of peers and teachers, but whether the audience pays attention to a student's work depends entirely on the quality of the work. With weblogs students also need to acquire wider communications skills – how to use graphics and visuals effectively, how to develop an online identity, how to be constructively critical of one's own and others' writing, to recognize and accept cultural differences, and so on.

Accuracy and editorial control

The question of linguistic accuracy was frequently raised during the workshop and appeared to be a common concern among participants, especially since the students' postings will be publicly viewable on the web. Attitudes towards this issue seem to vary greatly from culture to culture – in some countries the students' productions are considered to be snapshots of their current state of language development and are accepted as such, in others any errors in what students write are considered to reflect badly on the image of their school and the competence of their teacher. To cater for this diversity, the ECML blogs platform lets teachers decide whether they wish to moderate their students' postings on a per-student basis. Moderation lets the teacher edit the students' posts before they are published, possibly even refusing to publish posts.

Using weblogs to support writing

Making mistakes however is a vital step in the learning process, and a well-designed blogging platform should do more than simply allow the teacher to exert editorial control. It should actively support learning. This was something we learned from the pilot phase of the project, and which we have tried to implement in this version of the platform in the shape of private communication channels between teachers and learners which facilitate the type of pedagogic dialogue which takes place during the drafting stage in the writing process. The writing model supported by the current version of the blogs platform thus takes into account the role of the teacher primarily as a facilitator, and only secondarily as an arbiter and assessor.

Blogging and teaching

Most of the workshop was devoted to helping participants devise ways of using blogs in the classroom. The key is for teachers to lead the way by modelling what they wish their students to imitate. Teachers should use their own blogs to promote what they consider desirable practice – they may post challenges for their students, raise topics for discussion and fuel debate, point out particularly praiseworthy efforts, and so on. Most teachers do this anyway in their classrooms – it's just a matter of translating these practices to the world of blogs. Some teachers' blogs are simply lists of links to postings, websites, etc, which serves to guide their class to interesting and challenging content which students are encouraged to comment upon. Many participants had heard horror stories regarding the dangers of exposing students to Internet publishing and were understandably concerned. The ECML blogs platform lets teachers create protected accounts for their students, which simply means that the students' email is not published on theirs blogs and that commenting is restricted to members of the project community.

Protected accounts offer a minimum level of safety, but it was generally agreed that education, not technology, should be the answer to these concerns. Blocking or limiting students' access to what is considered harmful technology may allay the legitimate concerns of parents and the school authorities, but does nothing to ensure that students will learn to cope with a technology they must live with.

Similarly, issues of copyright, plagiarism and ethics, which are bound to crop up in the context of a public dialogue within a multi-cultural community such as this, should be viewed as educational opportunities rather than traps to be avoided. The general opinion amongst participants was that language teachers are first and foremost teachers, and should be concerned with more than linguistic correctness.

Technical issues

The technical sessions dealt with the use of the weblog platform. Participants were shown the various features incorporated in the platform and which are described in a handbook circulated during the workshop and available online. By the end of the workshop participants had the opportunity to post a couple of messages to their own blog with links to postings put up by the other participants, and upload at least one image to their blog. Participants also had to create and manage two student blogs each – it was agreed that all participants would have created blogs for all their students by the end of December so that the main project phase can start immediately school resumes following the Christmas recess.

It was emphasised that the ECML weblog platform is very much a "work in progress", and that one of the objectives of this project is to involve teachers and students in the design of a weblog platform for use in the language classroom. Well-designed technology should fade into the background and let the user get on with his/her job, but this is only possible if the technology has been designed in collaboration with the users and closely models the users' work patterns. One of the aims of this project is to deconstruct weblog platforms into their essential constituent parts and rebuild them to teachers' specifications.

The next step

The next phase of the project will last till mid-April, when evaluation forms will be distributed to all participants. It is hoped that the evaluations will be in by mid-May in time for the team meeting in June. Students can continue blogging as long as the ECML is willing to host the weblog platform. Some participants were concerned that if at some point in the future the ECML decides to shut down the site, their students would lose all their work. As a protection against such an eventuality, an export feature will be implemented in the ECML blogs platform allowing bloggers to download all their postings in a form which can be imported by other bloging software.

And finally …

The team would like to thank the ECML for its support throughout the project, but especially during this workshop.

Mario Camilleri
Project coordinator
15th December 2005