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## Using Secret Blog Groups in the Classroom

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## Using Secret Blog Groups in the Classroom

Fergus Michael Hann

### Abstract

This study describes a semester-long Secret Blog Group task undertaken by sixty university students in three writing classes. Twenty groups (three students from different classes in each group) were matched up according to interests. Their true identities were kept from each other. Each student developed a secret identity and created a blog. Students made one weekly blog posting on an assigned topic or a topic of their choosing. Students read and commented on the blogs of their secret group members, and responded to comments made on their own blog posts. A twenty-item pre-task questionnaire on past writing experiences showed that students 1) had previously completed journal assignments; 2) felt that feedback was not helpful; 3) were unwilling to show their writing to their peers; 4) did not enjoy writing in English or Japanese. The same twenty-item questionnaire administered at the end of the semester showed that students felt that 1) the feedback they received was helpful; 2) they were willing to have their partners read their blogs; 3) they were less reluctant to share their journals with peers; 4) writing was more enjoyable. Open-ended comments were grouped into the following topics and discussed: fluency; feedback; secret partner identity; number of secret partners; different abilities; rolling topics; workload; and over-personal writing.

**Keywords:** Writing, Journal, Partner, Blog, ESL

### Introduction:

*"I enjoy reading and writing blog very much. I experienced it for the first time; and I want to continue it in the future. I like reading my secret partners blogs. I'm interested in what they think or like. Sometimes, I wanted to see them, but I liked the secret relationship. So I shouldn't see them to keep the secret. Having secrets makes me exciting. I trust my partners."*

The comment above was received from a student following a semester-long secret partner

blog project. Countless teachers have undertaken writing journals or more recently blog tasks with their writing classes. These journal and blogging tasks ask a variety of bigger questions about language education. Do students find blogs to be an enjoyable way of writing? Does writing under a secret identity allow students to more fully express themselves, without fear of what their peers are thinking? How do students react to having their writing regularly read and commented on by their peers? Does a mutual trust develop between regular “secret” writing partners, allowing students to write more honestly and personally? Does this trust encourage students to write more fluently and not worry so much about grammar? Do peer comments lead to the development of related topics for future blogs? Finally, do secret partner blogging tasks motivate students to write more? Curiosity about the answers to these questions led to the creation of a semester-long secret partner blog project.

## Background

Work on topics such as Dialogue Journal Writing, Journaling with Blogs and Emails and Secret Partners has been well-documented in the past. Song (1997) found that dialogue journal writing reduced writing apprehension in EFL college students in South Korea. Song also reported that dialogue journal writing can be “a valuable tool in improving the quality of students’ writing.” Peyton (1996) found that dialogue journal writing was a great way “to manage classes with learners of varying language ability and interests”. Peyton added that journal writing promoted students’ written acquisition of a second language.

Wang (1996) noted that “Email provides an ideal environment for journaling outside the classroom. It eliminates the problem of having to coordinate a communication time.” West (2004) found that “blogging allowed students to work with, and learn from each other in an appealing and creative way.”

Green and Green (1993) found that secret friend journals give writing activities “a game-like air of mystery which is highly motivating.” Stewart (2006) found that notebook and email journals with secret partners “allowed students to learn about peers, build up English writing fluency and have fun doing it.” He noted that secret partner journals are a good way to increase motivation for writing activities.

Following a semester of informal blogging assignments with two University-level reading and writing classes, the experiences were summarized, and a list of the advantages and challenges was generated (see table 1).

Advantages	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• feedback doesn't have to be grammar-based or from the teacher.</li> <li>• students seem more engaged when they were writing to someone other than me!</li> <li>• there is a strong satisfaction when students' blogs are commented on</li> <li>• students seem to be motivated to write more than is required.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students are still reserved about their writing, depending on who is reading it</li> <li>• some students are a little overwhelmed by the technology, and the English terminology</li> <li>• deciding whether to assign a weekly topic or not is somewhat of an issue</li> <li>• the logistics of scheduling computer rooms can be challenging at first</li> </ul>

Table 1: Advantages and Challenges of Student Blogging Tasks

### The Blogging Task

Based on these experiences, a semester-long secret partner blog task was designed for three university writing classes. The classes had twenty students each, and had three hours of instruction per week. Two of the three classes were at a low-intermediate level and the remaining class was at an intermediate level.

A twenty-item pre-task questionnaire (see appendix 1) was administered to the sixty students, asking about attitudes towards any past journal-writing experiences, writing in general, and computer skills. A five-point Likert scale was used for each item (5 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree, and NA = not applicable). The questionnaire also included a small introduction section where students noted their background, interests and likes and dislikes.

A pre-task reading on blogging introduced terms such as “user name”, “blog entry”, “save as draft”, “publish” and other relevant vocabulary. The aim of this reading was to give students an overview of blogging and also to reduce apprehension about the project.

Each of the sixty students registered a separate blog at [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com). Each student picked a secret identity, and a register of each student's name, secret identity and password was kept secret from other students.

In the second week, one student from each class was assigned into one secret group of three partners, based on similar interests and experiences identified

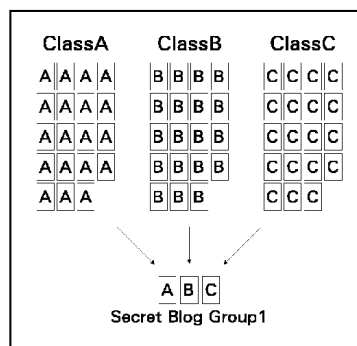


Figure 1: Partnering the secret blog groups

from the questionnaire (see figure 1). The entire blog project consisted of twenty groups of three students each, who did not know each other. The students were not aware that their partners were from other writing classes.

Each week, the blog task consisted of three parts. Each student was required to: 1) write a blog entry of at least ten sentences on an assigned topic or a topic of their choosing; 2) visit their secret partners' blog websites and make five-sentence comments on their weekly blog entries; and 3) read the comments made on their blog by their secret partners. Students were encouraged to respond to these comments.

Two in-class computer room sessions were required for a number of reasons. The sessions allowed time to ensure that all students' blogs had been properly set up. They also helped to facilitate the grouping process of the secret partners, and allowed the teacher to assist with any individual problems in the classes. Finally, it allowed time for the teacher to gauge how much further assistance was needed with the task. It was felt that after the first two in-class sessions, the classes were comfortable with the task, and that the remaining blog entries could be done for homework over the semester, freeing up valuable time for other classwork.

A tracking sheet was updated each week to ensure that students were keeping up to date with their weekly blog assignments. The tracking sheet showed the students both in their class numbers (vertically) and in their secret partner groups (horizontally). Although students commented each week on each other's blogs, the teacher commented on each blog every two weeks, over the fourteen-week blogging project.

As a post-task assignment, the same twenty-item questionnaire was administered with an additional open-ended area for any further comments that students wished to make. The questionnaire was anonymous, and it was made clear to students that any comments would not affect their grades.

Assessment of the blogs focused on the project's goal of fluency, rather than accuracy. Students were made aware at the beginning of the semester that the blogs would be worth 15% of their final grade. Students had to fully complete each of the blogs and comments on their secret partner's blogs. As long as this was done on time and a decent effort was made, 10 marks out of 10 would be given for their work. The remaining 5% was given for the overall quality of the blogs and comments, and how engaged the students were in the project.

## Findings

The preliminary results of the pre-task questionnaire showed that the majority of students: 1) had written journals for school assignments, but not on their own time; 2) felt that any feedback received was generally on grammar points rather than ideas, and that this feedback was moderately helpful; 3) were unwilling to have other students read their journals; 4) did not enjoy writing in English or Japanese and; 5) were not confident in their computer skills.

The preliminary results of the post-task questionnaire showed that the majority of students: 1) felt that the feedback received from their secret partners and the teacher was generally about their ideas and that this feedback was helpful; 2) were more willing to have secret group partners read their blogs; 3) were less reluctant to share their blogs with peers; 4) enjoyed writing slightly more and 5) felt their typing and computer skills had increased slightly.

The above findings are preliminary and based only on means of each item on the questionnaire. A more detailed statistical analysis will be conducted at a later date.

Equally important were the responses in the open-ended anonymous comment section of the questionnaire. These comments supported the preliminary results of the questionnaire items, and raised some interesting points about students' attitudes towards the blogging task and writing in general. The comments were grouped into various topics including Fluency, Feedback, Secret Partner Identity, Number of Secret Partners, Different Abilities in English, Homework versus In-class, Rolling Topics, Workload and Minimum Requirements, and Overpersonal Writing.

### Fluency

*"I don't like writing essays, because it must use a perfect structure, but blogs are comfortable, just ideas."*

The informal writing style of the blog entries allowed many students to concentrate on fluency rather than accuracy. This fluency practice was in a relaxed atmosphere, where students did not have to worry about grammar, spelling or formal writing formats. It was felt that too much focus on grammar would break down the students' flow of information.

*"Writing quick is good for idea and finishing, but not for grammar. ... I want to use the dictionary too much."*

Conversely, some students were still concerned with grammar and relied too heavily on their dictionaries. Students were free to (but encouraged not to) use dictionaries during the blogging exercises. The goal of writing without interruption was stressed throughout the semester.

### Feedback

*“Once I tried to keep a diary in English, but I gave up soon because no one checked my diary ... My secret partner’s comments were very necessary for me.”*

Students commented throughout the project that they enjoyed having comments waiting for them each week, even if it was from someone they didn’t know. The comments encouraged them to explain things in more detail. The feedback also relieved a lot of the initial apprehension that students felt about opening up their writing to their peers, albeit anonymously.

*“To read experiences written by other people of about the same age was good inspiration for me.”*

Students are very interested in the daily lives of their peers. It was felt that writing to a peer of about the same age was much more appealing to the students than writing to a middle-aged foreign teacher.

*“I hope for easier if we do the grammar in blog.”*

Although the value of grammar feedback is often argued, many students expect their grammar mistakes to be corrected. It was made clear to the students that the main focus of this task was to encourage “communicating ideas fluently”, not grammar perfection. For those students who were still interested in grammar correction of their blogs, they were welcome to see the teacher outside of class to review and discuss any grammar errors. Six or seven students regularly used this opportunity.

There is a very real fear of students picking up their partner’s grammatical mistakes, if these mistakes go unchecked. In the blogging project this semester, the teacher is paying more attention to modeling correct sentences in response to grammatical mistakes. Grammatical mistakes are also being collected from the blogs and being corrected together in separate class assignments.

### Secret Partner Identity

*“We don’t know each other so we do the blogs without constraint.”*

*“If we know partners, we didn’t write the honest true things”*

The secret identity was a major part of this project. The intention was to give students a way to escape the shyness and cultural constraints that can often be found in language learning classrooms in Japan. Students warmed to the idea quickly. Some began to construct quite elaborate fictional profiles that made the exercise even more entertaining. Writing in English for many of these students seemed to become a secondary task, while their main interest seemed to be to find out about the lives of their secret partners. It was clear that this privacy allowed students to say things that they would not be willing say to their peers, or in some cases, their friends.

### Number of Secret Partners

*“I had two secret partners, but sometimes has only one, because one have sometimes absented, in this semester. I would advice him to continue”.*

There were some clear advantages to having three secret partners in a group over the conventional secret partner pair. In a conventional secret pairing, if one partner was not participating, then both partners could not participate fully in the exercise. The partnership of three did not break down, if one of the partners was late, absent or otherwise disengaged from the group. Three secret partners in a group also seemed to make students less self-conscious about the task, and made for a much more relaxed atmosphere. The third partner added more opportunities for different perspectives on a topic, and made for a more dynamic interaction between the partners.

*“I can step up talking with partners every week. It is like another small family in university.”*

Similarly, it was felt that having regular partners over the semester was more beneficial than having students read and respond to different blogs each week. Retaining the same partners avoided students having to re-introduce themselves every week. Keeping the same secret partners over the semester allowed the groups to slowly build up a trust between the partners, reducing their anxiety about the project and motivating students to open up and write more honestly about their daily lives. The bond was built up in a very non-threatening way over the semester, allowing for a very comfortable interaction between the group partners.



### Students with Different Abilities in English

*“First, It depressing to read partner blogs because all partners could write correct English, and I often worry about my grammar was correct or not.”*

As one of the classes was at a slightly higher level, it was initially thought that this language level difference might increase students’ apprehension and decrease motivation. Students tended to notice if the language ability level of one of their secret partners was stronger than theirs, however it did not seem to be a major problem. Positive weekly comments showed that the students used these language level differences constructively.

### Homework versus In-class Exercise

*“I prefer doing my blog during classtime, because my classmates and teacher help me with my problems.”*

*“I do my best blog before I went to bed. This time is best for me. Then my speed typing is best ...I would like to consult about my blog with my pillow, so homework is better.”*

The students were split on whether it was best to complete the blogs during class time or as homework. While there are advantages to having fellow students and the teacher in the classroom for assistance, it was felt that after the first two computer room sessions, the blogs should be completed for homework. Completing the blog tasks as homework also alleviated many of the scheduling problems of the blogging classes. It was stressed to students that the blogs could be done anytime during the week, but that their blog entries should be completed regularly each week. The weekly tracking of the blogs assisted in keeping all groups up to date.

### Rolling Topic

*“My partner had an idea to write on “Mother’s Day, and it’s good idea, so I followed idea and I wrote it, too. She answered me again.”*

*“When my partner’s talking is on the same topic, then it’s like a conversation. What do you think?”*

Students mentioned that it was sometimes difficult to think of a weekly topic, and were not

always interested in the assigned weekly topic. One of the main aims was to encourage a “rolling topic”, where students would create their weekly topic from the comments that their secret partners made on the previous week, thus ensuring that both partners would have an interest in the topic, and could keep the “conversation” going over several weeks. This was only moderately successful.

The format of the blog website allows the users to view a blog entry and enter comments at the same time. It was noted that the students were very comfortable with this format, and it made following a rolling topic easier.

The teacher was able to encourage students to follow a rolling topic by asking questions or requesting more information from all partners about a certain topic. The intention was to create a natural flow to the “conversation”, where one topic gradually moved into another, without having to think of a new “weekly topic”.

#### Workload and Minimum Requirements

*“No number of sentences is best. When my topic ideas were short, I couldn’t write ten sentences. Other stories take more than 10 sentences for explaining.”*

*“At first 10 sentence are OK, but move up on every week to 11, 12 and so on to 20.”*

From their comments, it seemed that most of the students were happy with the workload of the blog assignments. While the idea of raising the number of weekly minimum sentences is appealing, some of the comments from the lower level classes suggested that ten sentences on one topic each week was challenging. Other comments suggested that there should be no minimum number of sentences per blog, and that some blog entries would be naturally longer or shorter depending on the interest of the writer on the topic. While most of the initial blogs had ten sentences, by the end of the semester, students averaged about fourteen sentences per blog entry, four more sentences than was required.

#### Over-personal writing

*“...another partner is a boy. He confused his girlfriend’s behavior and his sad feeling came out from his sentence painfully. I think he is an honest and pure man. I’m little embarrassed ... I don’t want to meet my partner now.”*

Teachers are constantly encouraging students to “open up and write from the heart”. There is always the possibility in journal and blog writing assignments, that students will include overly-personal content. For the teacher, this can become uncomfortable, and in a partner situation, it can also become uncomfortable for the student, thereby putting a strain on the relationship.

## Conclusions and Future Challenges

From the quality of the blogs, the responses on the questionnaires, and the assessment of how engaged the students were in this task, it was felt that the blogging task had a positive motivation on students’ feelings about writing in general. By the end of the semester, it was evident that students were engaged in classroom writing tasks much quicker than at the beginning of the semester. It was felt that the blogs had a beneficial overall effect on students’ writing.

There are many continuing challenges for any future blogging projects. These challenges this semester include: overcoming computer-related obstacles; learning how to motivate the lowest-level students, providing grammar feedback without interrupting the flow of the ideas being exchanged, and continuing to encourage students to express their ideas and respond to their partners’ ideas in a meaningful way.

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### Appendix 1 - Pre and Post-task Writing Survey

Remember not to put your name on this survey.

Answer the following questions by circling one of the options.

- |                                                                             |     |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| 1) Have you ever kept a Japanese or English journal or diary before?        | Yes | No |
| 2) Have you ever written a diary or journal for a school assignment before? | Yes | No |

My writing experiences:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable
3) The teacher usually reads and makes comments:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
4) The teacher comments on my ideas:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
5) The comments on my ideas are helpful:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
6) The teacher corrects my grammar:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
7) The comments on my grammar are helpful:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
8) Other students read what I have written:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
9) The students comment on my ideas:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
10) The students correct my grammar:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
11) I like having other students read my writing:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
12) I want my friends to read my writing:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
13) I like writing in English:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
14) I like writing in Japanese:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
15) I would like to improve my writing ability:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
My computer experiences:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable
16) I am confident in my computer skills:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
17) I can type faster than I can write:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
18) I use a computer more than three times a week:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
19) I enjoy using computers:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
20) I would like to improve my computer skills:	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA

## Appendix 2: Comparison of the Means of the Pre and Post-task Questionnaire

Item	Pre-task Questionnaire		Post-task Questionnaire	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
1) Have you ever kept a Japanese or English diary before?	43	13	54	0
2) Have you ever written a diary or a journal for a school assignment before?	39	17	54	0
In your journals/blogs:	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>
3) The teacher usually reads and makes comments	3.7	56	4.3	55
4) The teacher comments on my ideas	2.9	56	4.3	55
5) The comments on my ideas are helpful	2.7	56	3.9	55
6) The teacher corrects my grammar	3.9	56	2.6	55
7) The comments on my grammar are helpful	2.9	56	2.6	55
8) Other students read what I have written	1.7	55	4.9	55
9) The students comment on my ideas	1.1	55	4.8	55
10) The students correct my grammar	1.1	55	2.6	55
11) I like having other students read my writing	1.7	56	3.5	55
12) I want my friends to read my writing	1.7	56	3.5	55
13) I like writing in English	2.7	56	3.3	55
14) I like writing in Japanese	2.9	56	3.3	55
15) I would like to improve my writing ability	3.8	56	4.3	55
16) I am confident in my computer skills	2.8	56	3.9	55
17) I can type faster than I can write	2.7	55	2.9	55
18) I use a computer more than three times a week	2.7	55	3.6	55
19) I enjoy using computers	3.4	55	3.6	55
20) I would like to improve my computer skills	3.7	56	4.0	55

*M* = Mean

*n* = number of responses

Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1

Disagree (D) = 2

Neutral (N) = 3

Agree (A) = 4

Strongly Agree (SA) = 5

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