

EMERGING PEDAGOGIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST: ENHANCING STUDENT AUTONOMY USING WEBLOGS (BLOGS)

John Raven and Cindy Gunn***

ABSTRACT

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within the set curriculum for teachers to enrich their students' learning experience. However, especially in the UAE, reforms are being implemented to change the way English is being taught. This paper illustrates how student autonomy can be fostered through the use of an on-line web application. The authors argue that weblogs (blogs), which allow students to publish their work on-line and allow for others to comment on the published work, support a new approach to teaching writing. Feedback from a group of students involved in a small study at the Higher Colleges of Technology support the authors' claims.

RESPONDING TO THE CALL FOR CHANGE

The culture of learning, particularly of the English language, in the Gulf region of the Middle East is under pressure to change. The prevalent culture of learning is being challenged to move forward towards more modern techniques (see Al Suwaidi, 1999, Al-Hazmi, 2003). Syed points out some of the challenges as follows:

EFL teachers in this region have identified student motivation, literacy, underachievement, reliance on rote learning and memorization, and dependence on high-stakes testing. These issues, coupled with outdated curricula and methodologies, insufficient support systems, and not enough qualified teachers, paint a very unflattering picture of education in the region. (2003, p. 337)

* Dr. John Michael Raven. PhD, Faculty, Higher Colleges of Technology
john.raven@hct.ac.ae , www.hct.ac.ae

** Dr. Cindy L. Gunn, PhD, Associate Professor in the Department of English, The American University of Sharjah, cgunn@aus.edu, www.aus.edu.

Correspondence address: Dr. Cindy Gunn, P.O. Box 26 666, Sharjah, UAE, Phone: 971-6-515-2724, Fax: 971-6-515-2720

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Student centered, or non-traditional approaches to teaching and learning that focus on helping students become more autonomous often support the negotiation of meaning by learners collaboratively through discourse rather than relying on “more authoritative” teachers providing static information (Cazden, 2001, p. 111). Indeed, Breen and Mann believe that for teachers who wish to foster learner autonomy “an essential precondition ... is an explicit awareness of the teacher’s own self *as a learner*” (1997: 145, emphasis in original). In addition teachers need to believe in the learner’s ability and trust the learner to assert his / her own autonomy. And finally teachers must truly have a desire to “foster the development of learner autonomy in the classroom and be prepared to live through the consequences” (Breen & Mann, 1997, p. 146).

When introducing the concept of becoming more autonomous learners in the United Arab Emirates, it is imperative to remain cognizant of cultural considerations. Students’ willingness or lack of willingness can be related back to their cultural beliefs. Pennycook believes we must look at the cultural and political side of this issue and he suggests it would behoove us to remember that, “promoting autonomy in language learning, therefore, needs to take into account the cultural contexts of the language learners, to open up spaces for those learners to deal differently with the world, to become authors of their own worlds” (1997, p. 53). Modern Technology may be able to help.

The use of computers in ESL contexts can be viewed as a new direction in education in that “technical skills” are often added to the learning mixture (Healey & Klinghammer, 2002, p. 3). However, simply introducing technology is not a quick solution, or “panacea” for educational problems (Draper, 1998, p. 5). Salaberry, for example, concluded following a review of the use of computers with English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, that:

whereas most ‘new technologies’ (radio, television, VCR, computers) may have been revolutionary in the overall context of human interaction, it is not clear that they have achieved equal degrees of pedagogical benefit in the realm of second language teaching. (2001, p. 39).

Critics highlight the misuses of technology to simply entertain, or occupy, students. This has been referred to as the ‘filmstrip’ approach to education (Oppenheimer, 1997; McMahon, 1989). So, technology must be done right. One of Salaberry’s key concerns is with the “efficient use of human and material resources” (2001, p. 39). The type of assistance, or mediation, provided by a computer is clearly very different from that provided by other people (see Cazden, 2001, p. 109). They can add further complexity and distraction, not less, to learning activities particularly within ESL learning

contexts that, after all, are centred upon building communicative competence. It is the mediational aspects of technology as a physical tool that is of primary importance (see Berge, 1995 and Saljo, 1999). Regarding the communicative capabilities of computer technology Saljo states that:

The creation of knowledge is essentially a matter of learning to argue, and no technology will ever replace the need for learners to participate in ongoing conversations with partners sharing interests and commitments. Technology should not be seen as replacing such communication but rather as providing a resource for supporting it (1999, p. 159).

Conceptualizing the various electronic means of communicating in terms of establishing speech communities, is perhaps the best way forwards towards understanding how computers can help in ESL contexts. Murray (2000) once observed that ESL students, given the choice, often change methods for electronically communicating based on personal preferences. For example, they may move from synchronous on-line chatting to asynchronous email because they wish to think further about what they wish to say and also when they want to keep a record of the transaction. Similarly, they may switch from the computer to using a telephone, or to meeting face-to-face because of the preferred immediacy, or preferences for verbal rather than written communication, a vast difference, as Yates once commented (1996). This phenomenon reflects contexts in which students are able to make choices like these, which is not always the case, of course, especially in cases of necessarily constrained learning contexts. However, speech communities are natural havens for the development of communicative competence and can use a multitude of modalities depending upon function. As Michaildos & Rada pointed out, following a comparative study of five possible modalities including face-to-face and electronic means, “each mode serves a function in supporting communication” (1997, p. 469). This is where technology can help learning: by building and supporting virtual speech communities. The question now remains how to best do this. Chang and Chen argue that:

If generic network tools are to be used for learning, the teacher should participate in the discussion and assign roles, notify students, enforce schedules, guide students to what he/ she should do, and accumulate information to understand the performance of students (1997, p. 3).

Good design of online tools that encourage participation is, therefore, critical. Studies of online learning using electronic conferencing, for example, a technology that allows participant discussion in real time, usually via a text

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interface, reveal typically disappointing results. (see, for example, Baker & Lund, 1997; Davis & Ralph, 2001; Salmon, 2000; Vincent, 2000). Salmon cites technical, learning and moderating issues related to conferencing technology, with induction and training taking too much time, despite much reported enthusiasm (2000, p. 498-9). In this case the design was cumbersome for participants to learn. Lack of participation was reported by other studies, with Davis and Ralph commenting, for example, that, “quite simply, students can choose not to participate and their absence can absolve them of any responsibility to the community” (2001, p. 221). The findings suggest the importance, as Chang and Chen (1997) pointed out, of designing on-line systems to support and require, rather than invite, participation.

One technology of specific interest in this paper is the use of weblogs or blogs. Weblogs are dynamic websites in which the creator of the site (either an individual or group) can post messages that a targeted audience can view and respond to. They are an easy to use, one-to-many “broadcasting tool” that can operate almost in real time at “web speed” (Wagner and Bolloju, 2005, p. 2). They are used widely on the Internet for a variety of purposes but typically as a form of “personal communication and expression” (Nardi et al, 2004, p. 41). Simply put they are public on-line interactive diaries. As an educational tool, Quible declares that blogs, “are a perfect fit for use in business communication courses because of the ease with which writing example illustrating various components of business messages can be made easily and readily accessible on the Internet” (2005, p. 327) Other education benefits of blogging, according to Wagner, include “ease of publication, sharing of ideas, and instructor monitoring” (2003, p. 131). Blogs are ideally suited to distance education courses where the students are often part time and where “distance poses a problem for effective informal student-to-student communication outside classbased situations” (Reinhart et al, 2005, p. 23). Blog sites enable multiple layers of communication between students and facilitators in a course setting. They can be informative, motivational and collaborative (see Clyde, 2005, p. 43). In the field of education they are emerging as a useful tool that both teachers and students can use for creative knowledge sharing.

The value of blogs has been shown in a variety of contexts but will the use of blogs in the UAE will help the young local women HCT students become more autonomous learners? Exploratory Practice is a reflective approach to practitioner research and was employed in this case to investigate the puzzle area mentioned above. Exploratory Practice, as developed and outlined by Allwright (2003), encourages teachers to include the students’ voices in the research process and to use regular classroom pedagogical activities to explore whatever is puzzling them about their classroom practice. The rest of this paper illustrates one practitioner’s attempt to assess the value of blogging within one particular instance of an online course by working closely with the

students, collecting feedback on the project and finally, reflecting on the feedback and the students' move towards learner autonomy as shown in their blogs.

IMPLEMENTING WEBLOGS: AN ILLUSTRATION

In semester two, 2005, seven Emirati women enrolled in a part time night course entitled: Information Sourcing and Manipulation (ITEC 415) at Sharjah Women's College, one of 12 colleges in the Higher Colleges of Technology system based throughout the United Arab Emirates. The course was part of their study towards a Bachelors degree in Information Management and centered upon developing the student's research writing skills to a professional level. The course description was as follows:

This module will provide an overview of information sources, and the research process. Students will gain practical and generic information retrieval skills and will analyze secondary research.

From CMS (<https://cms.hct.ac.ae/cms3.3/default.asp> accessed Sept 2005)

Most of the students in this small group held full time jobs and some had their own transport whilst others relied on others to bring them to the college for the scheduled night classes, some from remote locations. A non traditional approach was therefore called for with the suggested teaching and learning strategy being stated as follows:

This course has the characteristics of a project-based course in which students work independently, or in teams, to research and accomplish a proposal or project, utilizing skills gained through other courses in their curriculum. The instructor's role is one of a mentor or facilitator only

For this particular course the features of blog sites were seen as a good way of supporting independent study as the students could then publish messages regarding their progress on research projects and ask for help from other members of the course from remote locations. This functionality was achieved by setting up individual blog sites for each student as well as one central site for the facilitator. Open source code from wordpress.org was downloaded and installed onto a local web server. The software gave the functionality required and also encouraged personalization by each student with downloadable skins off the Internet. All of the student blog sites were linked to the master course blog site and to each others with the idea of

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creating an online community. The master blog site was managed by the course facilitator and was used for posting general notices about the course as well as learning resources that the students may use. The students were asked to write about their research projects and respond to other students' postings. This then enabled the stakeholders in the course to develop their research writing in an interactive, publically available form outside the classroom sessions.

To address the possibility of non-participation indicated in the research discussed previously (e.g.: Chang and Chen 1997), grades for blogging activities were integrated into with the two major research writing projects that the students completed for the course. In the context of this course it was believed that the students would take the blog sites more seriously if there was a grade attached to it. Marks were therefore allocated for both posting and responding to others posts.

Sample screen shots of some of the student blog sites are given below. These show examples of the personalization that the students used for their individual blog sites as well as an illustration of the type of content that the students posted in them.

Figure One: Students' blog site screen shots



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Internet Explorer
es Tools Help

home about archives links contact

Hanan M A

uncategorized 06 Dec 2005 02:28 pm

The Last First Draft . . .

Proposals . . . Drafts . . . Finals . . .
and once again
Proposals . . . Drafts . . . Finals . . .

here we go with the **First Draft** for the last project in the course . . . we are supposed to

write a 2000 word discriptive report with different topics..

I wonder how are you doing with your reports . . . am fine, but still have to write 1500 word [:

Regards,
Hanan

4 Comments -

uncategorized 22 Nov 2005 06:39 pm

ABOUT THE SITE:
Just another WordPress weblog

LINKS

Alya
Atfa
Dr. John
Manal
Maryam
Meera
Nuha
Salwa
Zalika

PAGES
Just for WGT Students...Click Here!

Internet Explorer
Favorites Tools Help

space for your links search

Meera

Categories
Uncategorized

Monthly Archives:
December 2005
November 2005
October 2005
September 2005
August 2005

Links
Alya
Atfa
Dr. John
Hanan
Manal
Nuha
Salwa
Zalika

Meta

presentation

Posted on: Tuesday 20 December 2005

Hi everybody
I think you are all busy with the second draft but you should also think about the presentation of this project. I want to give you some advices which I gained them from Dr. John class and the handout.

1. You have to think about the audience and discuss with them your point so you can keep them with the point.
2. You should be prepared very well about each point.
3. You can gain the audience attention by telling story.
4. You should keep the presentation simple which means -

- Short words.
- Short sentences.
- Short paragraphs.
- No more jargon than is appropriate.
- Clarity of explanation.

FEEDBACK

Feedback from the students about the value of the blogging activity was assessed at two points in the course. A post course questionnaire was given to

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the students by an external researcher at the end of the course and a topic was posted on the main course blog site asking students for feedback on blogging by the course facilitator. All the students posted messages that they benefited from the sharing of ideas, although for one student, blogging did not seem to be immediate enough. She asked the following in her post:

I mean i like the idea but it would be better if we have a discussion board in the blog site so that it would be just as the messenger were we can have real time blogging and chatting with the instructor and the students. What do you think girls??

The other posts in this thread, however, were all in favour of new technology and blogging. One student, for example, listed exactly how blogs had helped. She wrote:

First of all, I learnt how to keep my topics interested and force the other colleagues to read such as information about proposal and are you ready by adding some images and pictures related to the topics. Then, I learnt communication and writing skills at the same time, because the weblog users need to be very accurate on communicational and writing skills. That shows the quality of the written subjects or the discussion topics. Additionally, it gave us a golden opportunity to work as a team group even using online technical features. So all of us could get benefits from each other discussion or assisting each others based on their required and needs. Finally, I learnt other technical skills such as changing the word press templates, because you need to do several technical steps to change the weblog templates and designs.

The responses to the post course questionnaire were similarly positive. The survey asked the students what the advantages and disadvantages were of blogging and whether or not they would recommend this activity to others. The main advantage mentioned highlighted the improved communication and sharing of ideas, something mentioned by all students. Most also wrote about their improved writing skills as a direct result of online discussion. The only disadvantage mentioned by the students reiterated the need for a real time discussion board or chatting facility in the blog site. That is, all of the students recommended non-traditional online activities via blogging but some wanted even faster interactivity to be added to the online tool.

From the feedback there is a sense that the students welcomed blogging in this particular course. The benefits of blogging mentioned included the ease of seeking help, the motivational (fun) aspects, the creative aspects and the

communicative aspects over distance, which reflects much of the literature discussed earlier. Littlewood proposes that tasks that set out to promote student autonomy should “help students develop the motivation, confidence, knowledge and skills that they require in order (a) to communicate more independently, (b) to learn more independently and (c) (by extension) to be more independent as individuals” (1997, p. 82). Comments from the students, and observations by the teacher suggest that the blogging activity described in this paper did just that.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

What activities should take place in a course with the primary goal of developing research writing skills? How can these skills be best developed in a part time night course format where some of the students have to travel inconvenient distances to attend classes? Using blogs in the place of traditional face to face classroom sessions has been illustrated by this small case study as one method for facilitating independent research and report writing activities but not replacing it. This is a key point.

Many pedagogical and practical benefits of blogging have been demonstrated in this small study that, of course, should be taken up by larger scale research. The primary purpose of including individual weblogs was to enhance student autonomy. That this support occurred has been reflected upon clearly by the students. Even though the blogging activity itself received minor assessment weighting, these interactive and asynchronous dialogues enabled the students to develop ideas for their own writing projects as well as encourage other students through their projects. In this sense the blog sites collectively created a speech community, that is, an online collaborative environment that the students helped construct together. This supports many of the ideas presented in the introduction. The fact that blog participation was assessed, for instance, was seen as a necessary catalyst for encouraging this activity and for avoiding issues of non participation that Davis and Ralph (2001) noticed earlier. In this case blogging was encouraged but not taken over by the assessment structure.

In a course that called for less direct instruction from the teacher and substantial independent, but guided research writing, the pedagogical benefits of putting much of the course online using a web application made sense. Not only did this make the course reportedly more interesting for the students, but it enabled them to work from home rather than travel distances to attend lectures. It was a practical solution to a practical problem. Instead, the class met initially primarily to receive guidelines and basic instructions in search techniques, plagiarism, and formatting reports. The class then met later to obtain formative feedback following the submissions of proposals and drafts.

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This basic process writing approach was supported by the virtual speech community created by the online environment, which also echoed the instructions and guidelines given in class in electronic format. The blogs then enabled the students to get on with their own research writing activities rather than waste time traveling to and attending formal lectures that, in this case, would pedagogically be of little use.

However, it is important to point out that blogging was used to supplement rather than replace the research report writing process. One on one feedback sessions between individual students and the teacher/ facilitator were also seen as a powerful pedagogical tool. In this small case study, both activities were used to enhance independent writing activities. The primary focus (and assessment structure) of the course remained upon the quality of the research reports that the students submitted. The new tool (weblogs) therefore, successfully supported, but did not alter, the overall goal of the course. As Kumaravadivelu notes, "a primary task of the teacher wishing to promote learner autonomy is to help learners take responsibility for their learning" (1994, p. 40). The weblogs provided this opportunity for students at HCT, who otherwise would possibly not get the chance to become autonomous learners.

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