

Weblogs; an Alternative Solution in Improving High School Students' Writing Skill

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Among the four skills in English teaching and learning, writing has a rather limited portion in high school classes. Requires several steps, writing has been given less time than what it actually deserves. As the result, it takes a longer period of time for the student to submit their writing products. What we often forget is that the process of teaching and learning does not end when the students step out of the class. The process of learning, especially language learning, should be a continuum process. The absence of teacher is not a reason for the learning to be paused.

Due to the facts above, using a 'weblog' might be an effective way in improving high school students' writing skill.

What is meant by 'weblogs'?

A blog originally came from the word 'weblog' or a 'web- log'. The term 'log' here refers to a personal journal where people keep record of what they are doing. A ship's captain has a logbook where he keeps record on his ship's performance. A restaurant captain uses logbook to record the day's events and activities. So, basically we can think of 'web-log' as an online journal or diary.

A blog has posts (or entries) on it, with the most recent entry shown first in a chronological order. It is typically updated frequently and regularly, just like a journal or diary. It also has an area for people to comment or respond to the blog post and other areas of content and links to other websites. McIntosh (2005) expands the definition of blog in the following way:

Historically, a weblog, or 'blog' for short, is recognized by its regularly updated, time and date stamped posts, running down the computer screen in chronologically reverse order (i.e. the most recent post comes first). Crucially, there is an "Add Comment" feature so that readers of post can leave their opinions, questions or thoughts. Finally, there is a writing style element: blogs are written by one individual who gives his or her thoughts in a generally relaxed, 'spoken' style.
(p.2)

The term blog, blogging, and bloggers represent the media (blog), the activity (blogging), and the subject (blogger). As is cited in Wikipedia:

*Although not a requirement, most good quality **blogs** are interactive, allowing visitors to leave comments and even message each other via GUI widgets on the blogs, and it is this interactivity that distinguishes them from other static websites.^[2] In that sense, **blogging** can be seen as a form of social networking. Indeed, **bloggers** do not only produce content to post on their blogs, but also build social relations with their readers and other bloggers.*

There are many different types of blogs, differing not only in the type of content, but also in the way that content is delivered or written. As for the kinds of blogs that might be used for students at Vocational High School, there are several alternatives:

1. The Tutor Blog

This is a type of weblog that is run by the tutor for the learners, in this case, the teacher. Here the teacher can post the tasks to be given to the students, the materials needed, or merely a comment - a pat in the back - towards the students' progress.

2. The Learner Blog

These are blogs that are administered by the students. The blogs might be either run by individual or by small collaborative groups of students. In Highschool classes, blogs may be best suited for reading and writing tasks. A writing task means posting a product on the blog. A common reading assignment can be followed by blog postings on the thoughts of each students / or group of students.

3. The Class Blog

This type of blog is the result of the collaborative effort of an entire class. In conversation-based classes it could be used like a free-form bulletin board for students to post messages, images, and links related to classroom discussion topics. It could also be a space for them to post thoughts on a common theme assigned for homework. Class blogs could also be used as a virtual space for a collaborative learning world-wide. The best works of a certain class, when they're posted in a blog, would then be transparent to all readers and could be followed and commented on by other learners, tutors, parents and friends. This will bring the sense of togetherness among the students and thus encourage them to learn more.

Why weblogs?

Students nowadays are considered 'digital natives'. These children will use digital aid easily as part of their daily activities. You see them everywhere: a girl with the iPod, sitting across from you on the bus; a boy typing messages into his cell phone; one of your student in your class who knows what to do when your e-mail crashes. The fifteen-year-old who can beat you at any online games—and types faster than you do, too. All of them are "Digital Natives." They were all born after 1980, when social digital technologies came online. They all have access to networked digital technologies. And they all have the skills to use those technologies. They study, work, write, and interact with each other in ways that are very different from the ways we were.

That is why it is not an impossible task for teachers of our time to use blogs in our classes. It's as easy as ABC for students of present time.

There are many reasons why you may choose to use blogs with students. One of the best reasons is to provide a real audience for student writing. Usually, the teacher is the only person who reads student writing, and the focus of this reading is usually on form, not content. With blogs, students can find themselves writing for a real audience that, apart from the teacher, may include their peers, students from other classes, or even other countries, their parents, and potentially anyone with access to the Internet.

It's so easy to create and update a blog, only basic access to the internet, and a minimum of technical know-how is required. Related to the availability of computer and internet connections was the fact that blogs are easy to create and maintain. There are a number of servers, which offer free, simple to set up and convenient to use blogs. Some of these are even specially designed for educational purposes. Here are some free blog that you might use for the class:

- **Wordpress.com**

Wordpress is one of the leading platforms that is used by most of bloggers around the world. It has plenty of themes, and is easy to navigate. Although Wordpress is free, it has the appearance not so different from those of the professional one.

- **Blogspot.com**

Just like Wordpress, Blogspot offers plenty of option. It's even easier to use and is often considered most suitable for Highschool students.

- **Blogger.com**

This is the most popular blogging platform that ‘newbies’ – those who are new in blogging- love the most. Even professional bloggers are using it. Blogger.com is owned by Google.

- **Livejournal. Com**

Livejournal.com was once very popular among other blogging platforms but due to the rather complicated registration it is now losing it’s fame.

- **Tumblr.com**

Tumblr.com is relatively new. Here bloggers can present more pictures than in any other platform.

- **More blogging platforms** : Blog.com , Blog.co.uk, Blogsom.com, Blogdrive.com, Blogster.com, Weebly.com, Freeblogit.com, Isanejournal.com, Thoughts.com, Blogigo.com, Blogtrue.com, Greasy.com, Tblog.com, Bravenet.com, Blogtext.com, Edublogs.com, Opendiary.com

In classes, writing assignment has been a special channel shared by only the student and the teacher. Even when there was an interaction, it would be limited to those two variables: teacher and student. But by using blogs, there will be a wider audience to enjoy the students’ presentation. Not only the teacher has the privilege to read -and score- the works. Anyone can easily access and give comments on the writing. Thus, the role of teachers as ‘score-giver’ is also shared worldwide.

The presence of blogs will also encourage shy students to participate. Students who are quiet in class might find their voice when given an opportunity to express themselves in a blog.

Because students are writing for publication, they are usually more concerned about getting things right, and usually understand the value of rewriting more than if the only audience for their written work is the teacher. In this way, students are encouraged to improve their ability in writing process. When the product of the writing is improved, they can be valued as an online portfolio. There is much to be gained from students keeping a portfolio of their work. One example is the ease at which students can return to their previous written work and evaluate the progress they have made during a semester.

The Methods

The cycle of blogging activities included students setting up blogs, collaborating with blogging buddies, making blog posts, then reading classmates’ post and commenting.

It’s doesn’t take a long time for anyone to set up blogs. What we need to do is to fill in a registration form and then the server will guide us though the whole steps of posting posts and comments. It’s easy enough that even the 11th grader can do it in a zip.

After the account is made, now we are ready to start our blogging activities. Teachers post tasks, supporting materials; students post the result of their writing as response. From then on, it'll be easier. When the posts are already online, everybody can view and re-view them.

Students developing skills in a non-native language need to be encouraged to write in that language as often as possible. Yet, the teacher generally does not have the time to comment extensively on every student's paper. In addition, writing for an audience of one person (the teacher) may cause students to feel unmotivated over time. The challenge to teachers who utilize blogs for instructional purposes, especially when they are creating assignments aimed at providing students with opportunities similar to fluency tasks, is how to increase production without compromising quality.

One way to address the issue of blog writing quality is with the blogging buddy system. The term "blogging buddy" refers to a student's editing partner, the person who checks and comments on his/her blog post before it is posted. The blogging buddy is the initial peer reviewer, the first or final-draft reader, the one who acts as both the writer's good conscience (useful for motivational purposes) and as his/her proofreader (in that way, also a surrogate teacher). Regarding the blogging buddy's role, there is no limit on how much or how little editing input or other commentary he/she provides for his/her partner. In this way, the blogging buddy system is simple: It requires each student to present a piece of writing to his/her blogging buddy before it is posted.

In addition to posting an assignment on his/her blog, each student is required to read and respond to a set number of classmates' posts. As this peer commentator reads those posts and responds with his/her own viewpoints, sometimes in accordance with a classmate, and sometimes not, a number of written dialogues are initiated. This step underlies the notion of the blogging activity as a student-centered process, one in which "active learning, student engagement, and student responsibility" are central (Darabi, 2006, p. 53).

There are three features of the blogging activities that seem to make them effective to improve High School students' writing ability: 1) their accessibility beyond the limits of the traditional classroom, 2) the personalized, student-centered nature of the interactions that they facilitate, and 3) their capacity for motivating students to work autonomously (whether alone, in pairs or small groups) to consider, produce and react to more content more frequently than a teacher might expect. These features combine to make blogging a highly productive, communicatively meaningful and effective approach to helping students refine and develop their language skills.

Although the implementation of blogging and associated activities in the classes is still lacks the quantitative data to provide empirical support for blogging activities as being either more or less

effective than traditional paper-based exercises in helping students to refine and develop their language skills, I believe it's about time for us to open up our mind and accept the fact that students nowadays belong to digital age, after all.

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