CLASSROOMS WITHOUT WALLS: STUDENT BLOGGING FOR ENHANCING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Compared with other Web 2.0 applications, blogs have sparked interest among educators for their authentic, interesting and communicative nature. Pedagogical blogging has been increasingly embraced by language educators as a platform that enhances student-student interaction, whereby students make posts and follow-up by making comments on their classmates' posts and receiving comments on their own.

However, as Wang (2009) states, " … there has been little research investigating student writers' editing behaviours and writing comments to support the practicality of weblogs in second language writing."

The current research study aims at 1) documenting the general patterns of such blog-based comments with regard to their social interaction value in two distinct communication – study based "communities of practice," or CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991); 2) studying how such patterns reflect that a community of practice is being created/enhanced by the blogging activity; and 3) finding out if there is any commonality between the two different classroom groups.

In the first CoP, 10 undergraduate students enrolled in a pre-intermediate Vietnamese language course participated in a blog project for 10 weeks. In the second, 16 undergraduate students enrolled in a "professional" communication skills module in English participated in a 12-week blogging activity. In both contexts, the students set up their own blogs, posted a number of entries on assigned themes, and made comments on their classmates' blog posts. Data were collected from these students' posts and the follow-up peer comments.

Qualitative discourse analysis was the main methodology adopted to analyse the data. A preliminary coding scheme was adopted from the literature, and then adjusted and revised to analyse the data.

This presentation reports on the characteristics of students' comments on their peers' blog posts and on how such commentary demonstrates that the social interaction in these online "CoP" enhances learning. Findings suggest that blogging is a valuable resource for social

interaction, which enhances students' motivation, skills development and their learning experience in general.

KEYWORDS

Blog commentary, community of practice, motivation, social interaction, peer learning

INTRODUCTION

When educators began to view the Internet for pedagogical purposes, Warschauer (1997) provided a conceptual framework for computer-mediated communication (CMC) in language-oriented classrooms based upon theories of input and output and on sociocultural learning theory. Citing Vygotsky, he noted the importance of collaborative learning, i.e. learning within a social and cultural context. Then invoking Lotman as well as Wertsch and Bivens, he expounded on how the "text-mediational interpretation" of Vygotsky's views had positioned texts as "'thinking devices' to generate new meanings collaboratively". In detailing how such texts could be shared for "cognitive amplification," Warschauer also mentioned the description of learning by Wells and Chang -Wells as "a semiotic apprenticeship based on the creation of a collaborative community of practice…." (p.471). Building upon the importance of a community of practice in language education, Hall & Beggs (1998) stated that the critical goal of any teaching activity is to facilitate students becoming "legitimate producers of language within social groups both inside and outside the classroom" (p. 37). It was toward that end that the authors of this paper each instituted a regime of content-rich, communication-oriented blogging activities in their respective university courses.

PEDAGOGICAL BLOGGING AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

A blog is an easy-to-create website where a person with a computer and an Internet connection can create, present and archive content, written or otherwise, and receive feedback from site visitors. Blogging can provide learners with opportunities for preparing written texts and then receiving feedback on those texts from their classmates and teacher. For that reason, it has been viewed as an activity that encourages meaningful interaction within any given blogging group, ultimately helping group members to forge the sort of sense of community that can lead to an increase in learner motivation and broader opportunities for learning. This is a major reason why blogs have become popular teaching-learning platforms among educators (Barrios, 2003; Blackstone, Spiri & Naganuma, 2007; Cottle, 2009; Trammel & Ferdig, 2004).

In such communities, learners and teachers alike can share opinions, stories, ideas, advice, and insights as well as various media and files, reflecting the exchanges that occur between members of physical educational communities. When members of such pedagogical blogging communities also hold common values, interests and goals, they constitute what Lave and Wenger (1991) have termed a "community of practice" (CoP). The "communities" described herein are two distinct university modules, one being a 10-week pre-intermediate Vietnamese language course, and the other a 12-week professional communication course for upper-level engineering and science students, most of whom have native English language fluency.

THE RESEARCH

While blogging regimes that have been implemented in widely varying educational settings have been described in the literature (Blackstone, 2009; Blackstone & Wilkinson, 2011; Harwood, 2010; Ho, 2009; Shifflet, 2008), the actual interaction that takes place between student bloggers, as blog posters become commentators on classmates' posts, has not been well documented. For that reason, the studies of two classroom groups described in this paper fill a critical research gap.

The two groups and their task focus in blogging can be described as follows:

1) 10 undergraduate students enrolled in a university's pre-intermediate Vietnamese as a foreign language module with two main goals in blogging: a) to communicate in Vietnamese, and b) to have opportunities to learn more about Vietnam. The students were required to create an account and blog on a popular Vietnamese blogging site www.cyworld.vn. The students' main tasks were to set up individual blogs where they could share a number of articles about Vietnam and write their personal reflections on the content of those articles; share some links to videos and songs that they found interesting and useful and comment on those; and to comment on their classmates' blogs and respond to their comments.

2) 16 upper-level undergraduate students enrolled in a university's professional communication module in English with three main goals in blogging: a) to further explore in concise but detailed expository writing the communication principles they had been learning and applying these principles to authentic communication scenarios, b) to further develop and refine their written communication skills, and c) to read and comment on what their classmates had written on the same blog topics.

Throughout the processes used in both modules, there was ample opportunity for student-student interaction.

Three questions that guided the research are as follows:

1. What are the general patterns of blog-based comments made by students in the two different groups?
2. Might these patterns demonstrate that a community of practice is being created/ enhanced by the blogging activity?
3. Is there any commonality between the two different classroom groups?

In both studies, data were collected from the students' blog posts and from the follow-up peer comments. However, the main focus was on the peer comments. Qualitative discourse analysis was the main methodology adopted to analyse the data. A preliminary coding scheme was adopted from the literature for comment types, and then adjusted and revised to analyse the data from both groups, with the typological focus as follows:

1. Elaborating on the same theme
2. Sharing a related experience
3. Posing a question

4. Teasing/ joking
5. Building rapport
6. Showing agreement/ common opinions
7. Praising/ complimenting
8. Giving advice/ suggestion
9. Showing emotional support
10. Contradicting the author

The trends in the types of blog comments made by learner respondents in both groups were reviewed in detail. A discussion follows in which connections were made between the frequency of said comments and their part in an evolving community of practice.

CONCLUSION

This paper overviews the value of pedagogical blogging and its place in two classroom communities; it defines the study groups involved and reviews the nature of the tasks assigned; it discusses the posts made and the types and frequency of comments shared by classmates with the original post writers; and it analyses the trends demonstrated by the comments made in both groups; it discusses the manner in which students from these different groups show common tendencies in the way that they respond to classmates' writing. Finally, it reflects on the manner in which the two groups' comments show similarity, and how this reflects students' sense of an evolving community of practice.

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