

From Learning Logs to Learning Blogs

Ewan McIntosh
Development Officer, Scottish CILT
Formerly Musselburgh Grammar School
edu.blogs.com

Abstract

Can old and new techniques in ICT and teaching stretch stronger pupils' abilities in language? For many years ICT use has been concentrated on providing resources for weaker learners. Differentiation has tended to be differentiation 'downwards'. This action research project experimented with techniques in ICT and teaching to provide more extension for stronger pupils, to stretch their abilities in language. The aim was to find out if a balance of hardware, software, traditional teaching and 'imported' teaching ideas could lead to better written work, particularly in modern foreign languages. The thrust of the project was to encourage more complex use of French in groups of beginners (P7/S1/S2). In some initial practice in the classroom it was found that a judicious marriage between traditional resources and cutting-edge ICT provided the best results. This research project is therefore not solely about the technology but also about the pedagogy behind the technology.

From Learning Logs to Learning Blogs, which is based around the technology of weblogging (or blogging for short), is the second article arising from an action research project funded by the John Dickie ICT Action Research Award from Learning and Teaching Scotland. It follows the examination of the needs of learners in the age of emerging technologies in **The 3rd Millennial Modern Linguist: Developing New Pedagogies** (McIntosh 2005). The original research report is entitled "Using ICT as a Means of Supporting the Gifted in Language", and shows how several new "social technologies" can improve writing and reading skills, as well as encouraging higher order thinking skills.

While social technology is amongst the fastest growing in the world, the education community has not tapped into its potential for helping increase reflective skills, collaborative work and creative writing. If we don't educate pupils in how to use these interactive technologies in a safe and constructive way, who will? As these technologies increasingly become the way that business communicates this section is particularly relevant to Modern Foreign Languages teachers as we prepare our students for the global workplace.

1. Social software to change the script: What is a weblog?

What is a weblog and what makes it different from a regular website, email exchange or discussion on an online discussion forum or notice board? Historically, a weblog, or 'blog' for short, is recognised 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 posts 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.

However, in recent years the technology has been exploited in new ways to expand its possible uses, including in education.¹ Firstly, where blogs were once written by one person, many are now written by several contributors. With the increased use of mobile phones the inclusion of mobile phone photographs posted directly from the mobile phone via text message, has added a visual element to the previously text-only format. This mobile posting is called moblogging (**mobile web logging**). The addition of audio files (normally MP3 type files) gave birth to audioblogging, and video files posted to blogs result in the vlog (**video log**).

The content of the blog, whether textual, audio, visual, photographic or a mixture of these, is what is termed 'dynamic': it changes on a frequent basis and can be used in more than one way. The dynamic content of a blog has been compared to the 'Send to All' email, while its 'Add Comment' feature, which allows the reader to respond, resembles the online discussion board. So why spend time learning a new technology if two existing and relatively successful technologies resemble it so closely? There are several reasons for exercising a preference for the use of a blog in an educational context.

A blog looks like a website rather than an email correspondence and as such is not intrusive in the same way as 'reply to all' emails can be: a blog has its own space online and readers can choose to visit it. The discussions that take place between the original posting and the comments that follow below it do resemble online discussion forums, but as the blog is administered by one individual (or a selected group of contributors), the direction and pace of discussion is controlled. Here the advantage over the discussion board is similar to the advantage of having a chair at a meeting: there is someone to direct discussion and make decisions rather than allowing participants to ramble with no conclusion ever being made.

A blog, then, has not been designed for education but provides an ideal tool to facilitate collaborative learning and discourse between students and teachers. On a technical level no changes to the software are required. However, some consideration has to be given to the roles of audience, purpose and voice. I will illustrate these roles with examples from a research project in a secondary school setting.

¹ The first Scottish examples of educational blogging are from Musselburgh Grammar School (www.mgsonline.org.uk/chatzone.htm) and Sandaig Primary School (<http://www.sandaigprimary.co.uk/pivot/index.php>). Other educational blogs can be found at sites such as Will Richardson's weblogg-ed (<http://www.weblogg-ed.com/>).

2. Purpose, audience and voice in the school setting

2.1 Purpose – setting a context for classroom work

In education, the purposes for blogs are under-explored, as practical examples are still thin on the ground. However, by borrowing from the world of the media, which has grasped blogging as an effective means of communicating with its audience, educators can find new ways of communicating with their students, parents and the wider educational community. Likewise, students have the power to publish their thoughts, ideas and work in the knowledge that there is a critical audience reading it. As there is so little groundwork in this area some of my experimentations were successful, some were not. Let us take a look at some successful purposes established during this action research project in a Modern Foreign Languages context.

2.2 Methodology

As a blogger, a writer of a blog, I had started out by writing posts on behalf of students on one school trip. It was a great success with interest from the local community, the press and the blogging world. However, I was keen that in the next school session the students, not their teacher, would start writing their own posts. I was not sure if they would actually take to “writing to the world” or if the pen and paper would be the preferred means of communication. The session therefore started with no distinct plans for introducing blogging to the heart of my teaching and learning.

Student journal

I had seen that keeping a log of work is an effective way for pupils to reflect on what they have learned, and can be reinforced within a wider AifL context (Ward, 2005). I encouraged one class of S1 pupils to write a paper journal to record what they had learned how to do in each set of lessons. But this was met with the frustration. Pupils did not see the point of writing down their problems when they believed that the reader of their log – the teacher – already knew where the problems lay. It was difficult to find the time to let pupils exchange journals, a process which would have allowed them to see shared areas of difficulty and maybe even help each other out. Also, some wanted ideas on what they could write, others were nervous about expressing their difficulties with the subject at hand, believing they were the only ones with these difficulties.

I decided to try a group blog where students could post their reflections now and then. They could post and read each other’s posts from home, from the school library or the one classroom computer if they finished their work early. Peers and teachers (not just the class’s teacher) could leave comments for improvements, advice and help or just say “well done”. For the period that this ‘experiment’ was able to run there were no negative comments and many maintained their paper logs more consistently.

Best work blog

Encouraged by the success of the learning blog, I decided to help pupils in other classes share their good work with their classmates. One blog was set up for an entire S2 class on which pupils were asked to post their best work from that week. Strong pupils were able to post on their own after some initial support. Some posted from the classroom computer at the end of a set of work while others posted from home. In other words, it did not take up any additional amount of lesson or preparation time on behalf of the teacher. Pupils worked a lot harder knowing that their work would be truly public. It was not just for the classroom wall or the school reception but available to the whole world – and their mum and dad.

A similar process with a weaker class in S3 involved the pupils creating material with the teacher posting it in the last five minutes of class. This was a closed blog for the class, but senior managers were encouraged to browse this of blog and leave positive comments for students.

School trip blog

A school trip blog is a foreign trip online journal written while students are away. Traditionally, pupils on school trips have written a daily diary with a pen and paper and this has been seen as a chore. However, we ran two online daily diaries in the form of a blog, one on a History and Language trip to Auschwitz, Poland, and another on a French Trip to France. Pre-trip, the blog – written wholly by the teacher – prepared pupils for their experiences with hyperlinks to third party sites, photos and pupil experiences from previous trips. During the trip pupils wrote up their own reflections in text with accompanying photos. By recording and publishing some audio, they were also encouraged to speak about their experiences. The blog daily diary was far more popular than the pen and paper version for several reasons. Firstly, students were aware of the audience reading their work back home and around the world. Secondly, they expected feedback on their experiences and therefore felt obliged to write as regularly as possible. Thirdly, the ability to use multimedia (text, photo, audio) provided extra inspiration to get them started on each post.

Webquests

Webquests, or internet challenges, are online tasks that require the pupil to move through an authentic site or sites and achieve a goal (buy a train ticket, work out a metro journey, book a hotel room). Challenges should normally last 10-40 minutes; any longer and the pupils lose interest. The challenge comes in the form of a set of questions, or challenges, printed out and given to pupils. Pupils then go onto an authentic website to solve the challenge.

See an opportunity to try something new, and having extensively used blogs, I set about creating a time-lapsed internet challenge. The blogging tool that we used in the school (Typepad) permits time-lapsed posts. The internet challenge could now take place over a number of weeks and, importantly, change to suit the needs of the learners. This meant that I could 'push' certain websites that contained certain grammatical features or vocabulary, and change these as students worked slower or quicker.

Each week's 'episode' lasted a short amount of time and left a cliffhanger to keep the pupils guessing. They could even leave their comments on the challenge question to say what they thought they would have to do next. This gave me as the teacher a good indication of the kind of task that would go down well.

Considering a challenge could last anything from 10-40 minutes, the preparation required was relatively low-cost in terms of time – ten minutes a week was enough to set up the challenge for as many as classes as I would have wanted to take part.

2.3 Audience and voice: chicken and egg

Blogs are often aimed at a broader readership than the blogger's own friends and family because they communicate with the blogging community as a whole. In the Modern Foreign Languages examples given previously there was success because they were borne out of a need: there was a problem and the solution clearly involved either a worldwide audience (for confident pupils) or a closed community audience (for pupils wanting to learn from each other only).

The former requires the creation of an audience if students are to feel that their work is valued beyond the four walls of the classroom. If they do not feel this, then there is no point in publishing the work at all. Normally, a feature of good blogs, in a bid to expand their audience, is the inclusion of a "Blogroll". This is part of the blogger's page where (s)he includes a selection of links to blogs written by other people who (s)he respects or finds interesting. Often, these same people refer back on their own blogs and, through this "virtual word of mouth", the audience of both blogs grows. However, in the education community a slightly different approach to attracting audiences is necessary. Time is short, too short to build an audience over months and years. The teacher is therefore the one who must go and get an audience: partner schools, parents, colleagues, other classes in the school and so on. However, once an audience has been gained, students still need further guidance to keep their audience engaged.

Take the example of a blog project with limited success in the area of Modern Studies. Four senior students had to undertake a major piece of research based on comparisons between the UK and the USA. They needed to carry out primary research, which led me to advise the Modern Studies teacher and students to use blogs. However, timescales in schools being limited by the constraints of deadlines, which most bloggers do not have to stem their steady build-up of audience, the students experienced great difficulty in gaining sufficient audience to get the information they wished. They did, however, gain more 'Comments' than the number of posts they had written. This is a healthy situation for a blog to be in. The reason for this large ratio of comments per post was down to some backroom work by the teachers involved to reach out into the virtual community and pull the audience into these blogs. A link was made with a US high school teacher who got some of her former students, who were now of voting age, to interact with the Scottish students. In terms of motivation in the Scottish pupils, there was an improvement that helped them move on in this large-scale research project. However, the motivation of the audience was less: they were being asked for information but were not being given any information back in subsequent posts. Therefore, when posts were infrequent, the audience began to fall off. Also, the voices of the blogs were not inviting to users: questions were asked in the first posts, but in subsequent posts the conversation with Scottish students was halted by 'Thank you' statements that drew a close to discourse.

The reasons for the failure in this example are partly to do with an intrinsic lack of interest in the subject matter from the American students, i.e. the audience. However, this lack of interest was compounded by the difficulties the Scottish students had in communicating their ideas and requests for information, i.e. the trouble they had finding their voice. This is therefore not a natural skill but one which needs taught.

In a Modern Languages context, the motivation from having a real audience was clear when one looks at the statistics for the pages of pupil experiences during a school trip to France. In seven days 400 comments were left for the students, which acted as a great signal of parental and peer support for the activities of the trip. Many of these comments were questions that the pupils had to set out to answer through interview with locals or journal writing at the end of each day. Motivation to carry out more 'school-like' tasks of writing the blog and creating audio reports was, as a result, much higher. The audio reports attracted particular attention from the pupils: many were desperate to speak French for the 8000 subscribers to their podcast radio show. It is rare to see such enthusiasm to speak in public in the classroom atmosphere. If the blogroll had included links from and to fellow peers' blogs – people the students actually knew and could visualize – the motivation to write regularly and write well might have been even higher.

2.4 Blogs as an online filing cabinet

The blog is usually motivated solely by the need for self-expression, and nearly always communicates something about the personality behind the blog, through the style of writing and the choice of topics. A blog is not just a collection of links, therefore, as many thought in the early days of the medium (Blood, 2000), it is a recommendation, certainly, but also a method of constructing knowledge and critically appraising one's sources. For more advanced classes, e.g. Advanced Higher, this use of blogs might help organise thoughts for course projects, such as Background Topic, literature study and a learning log on grammar and vocabulary. Students would be able to borrow each other's links and suggest better ones that they had found. For less advanced classes the personal nature of writing a blog lends itself well to the personal writing they are expected to produce in the course of their 5-14, Standard Grade or National Qualifications study. Thanks to the public voice and different writing style and persona students would be more likely to give thought-out reasons for their thoughts. In the short period of blogging with a mixed ability S3 class, for example, I noticed that rather than just using simple constructions (*parce que c'est cool*) students were trying to push their language to express their full feelings on a matter (*je pense que..., à mon avis...*).

2.5 Blogging – a collaborative barrier-breaker

As the aforementioned examples show, with the advent of “push-button publishing”, in the shape of the blog, language teachers now have a new way to get students writing for a purpose and reading authentic material. Blogging opens up the possibility of regular peer assessment and breaks down the barriers of the four-walled classroom, helping achieve the aims of the 3rd millennial classroom: collaboration, inclusiveness, flexibility and bringing more relevance to learners (Felix, 2005). Blogs encourage regular writing, using a questioning tone. By having pupils ask the questions instead of the teacher we have the beginning of real meta-cognition and construction of knowledge.

3. Summary

The research had started out by looking at the possibilities of students carrying out self and peer assessment on each other's work after it had been published on a blog. Towards the end of the research period it became clear that this was in line with the principles of Assessment is for Learning.² The students had been used to keeping a learning log - a summary of what they had achieved in a lesson - in paper format on a regular basis, but this format did not lend itself to regular peer assessment. So, at the end of the research period senior pupils were asked to begin writing their learning logs as a learning blog. The pupils designed their own blog looks and linked to each other's learning blogs. Students commented on each other's work and left motivational messages for each other. These learning blogs have also become a place for the classroom teacher and other teachers invited onto the projects from abroad to leave constructive comments on student posts. It is envisaged that teachers could provide links they believe the students should be consulting. This is an advanced version of the learning log. Dörnyei (2005) has shown the advantages of publishing a learning log. He recalls an experiment where the publication of students' learning logs increased the motivation of the students when they saw that their peers had experienced the same highs and lows during the course of study. The same has been true of written work that has been published online, either on a

² See McIntosh (2006a) The 3rd Millennial Modern Linguist: Developing New Pedagogies in *Scottish Languages Review*, Issue 12.

traditional web page³ but more recently with the immediacy of blogs' "one-click publishing".⁴ Often this represented the best work produced by a smaller number of pupils, but a wide number of their peers were reading their work and leaving comments.

4. Next steps

So far, blogging in the classroom in this project has just scratched the surface; it is a project that has started but is yet to finish. How could we take forward the principles of AifL, collaborative learning, peer assessment, provision of audience and learning to write with a public voice through the medium of the blog? There are three main goals that are achievable with today's classroom technology and which would make logical next steps in edublogging practice: furthering creative writing through blogs, using more of pupils' own handheld technology and getting students to write more and better by blogging more.

4.1 Furthering creative writing

At the beginning of each academic year, I undertake creative writing with all my S1 classes with no use of technology and which is very much enjoyed by the pupils. The six-week long project uses most of the pedagogical ideas aired in this paper, but little technology beyond the word processor. The process of discussion, peer support and brainstorming is used in a face-to-face small group setting within the classroom. Discussion is limited due to time constraints and students within these groups have little "thinking time". However, having considered the great advantages of audience, purpose and voice of blogs, I believe that creative writing could be greatly enhanced if students record the ideas of their creative writing group on a blog. No idea is lost and by using the comments facility other groups in the class can suggest possible next steps to the stories or poems being created by their classmates. While this is the kind of blogging that would have to be done in class – groups would write each post – there are advantages of collaboration beyond the classroom walls where individuals are encouraged as part of a homework or library reading task to read the contributions of others. These contributions may be in the foreign language but would more likely be a mixture of mother tongue and foreign language (*franglais, spanglish...*). Above all, it offers the teacher the chance to provide links to websites, such as Lire & RéCréer, containing real French [fairytales](#) and [poems](#), or [calligrammes at UbuWeb](#) that match the ideas of the pupils and give them more food for thought. This is the kind of thoughtful interaction requiring further time for research by the teacher and by pupils that cannot be undertaken within the constraints of the 45-minute lesson.

4.2 Harnessing pupil technology

Moblogging is another option we would consider in the future, where a mobile telephone is used to write text, take photos and even record audio or video files before sending them to the blog as an e-mail. In very basic, small-scale experiments, pupils found the process easy once the teacher had input their mobile phone telephone number to the blogging service. The resultant motivation to write small notes in the foreign language was palpable; some pupils started to use more of the full capability of their mobile phones to record small audio snippets as MP3 files for publication as they traveled.

³ www.mgsOnline.org.uk

⁴ mgsOnline.blogs.com

4.3 Getting more students to blog

The Techlearning blog⁵ recently put forward a pertinent point: *If blogs are so easy to use and so invaluable for motivating student writing, then why aren't more students publishing online?* According to a principal proponent of blog writing, web log pioneer Pat Delaney, librarian at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Middle School in San Francisco, California, and associate director of technology for the Bay Area Writing Project, "The barriers are permission and server space. Most schools want to set up an intranet where a Webmaster can approve new content and then push some of it live." Increasingly, schools and Local Authorities (LAs) in Scotland, too, are banning blogs on their networks, without, perhaps, looking into the possibilities of blogging as a helpful learning tool.

It is the spontaneity of one-click publishing, the empowerment of pupil and teacher to post and to comment, the sense of real worldwide audience and the ability to collaborate beyond the barrier of the classroom (and therefore the school and LA) that makes writing and reading through blogs a more educationally interesting proposal than others. Furthermore, as students' home technology rivals that used in schools, we risk losing out on two things: technology that is universal and works on relatively poor hardware (blogs); secondly, students are doing this already. If students are not encouraged to write blogs in class then they will join the millions already blogging on services such as MSN Spaces: this blog service is mostly inhabited by teenagers and has grown by 957% in the past year. They will not have the positive involvement of their teacher, nor the guidance on safe internet and blog use. Students will not experience ownership and responsibility for their work in the same way as when it is published and criticized constructively by those in the classroom and, more importantly, those outside the classroom in the wider world. The teacher also loses out on a great opportunity to improve writing and reading skills. Above all, the whole education community loses out on the chance to motivate large numbers by using technology that is available and which increasingly forms part of teenagers' lives. If we don't show them how it can be used to learn then we will have a generation of highly competent monolingual technicians with nothing much to say.

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⁵ TechLearning Blog (<http://www.techlearning.com/>)

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