Blogging in the Language Classroom

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Background

Computers are now a one stop shop for students, which they use for shopping, talking to friends, creating their own web space with photos and video clips, finding out information and listening to music. In fact most students would find it hard to be without a computer. At the Communicate.06 conference I attended a variety of workshops on new technology such as blogging and podcasting, which have revolutionised how I use computers in my classroom. So, how can we use computers to enhance teaching and learning which embrace these new forms of communication?

Computers are common tools of teaching and learning and can be used in a multitude of ways. In my school there are two computer suites each with 25 computers, which I use most weeks with my classes. Sometimes I design lessons around a particular authentic French website for reading comprehension, use language learning websites for vocabulary acquisition through games and interactive activities or use webquests where students have to use websites to find out information. Computers enable students to work at their own pace, organise their own learning and motivate learners, as they enjoy using websites.

What is a blog?

A blog is a web page that I can easily update myself. It is a space to be creative and share thoughts and ideas with others on the web. You simply write something, which is published immediately on your blog page. Anyone reading your blog can then write a comment about your text and you can respond. This is one of the best things about a blog, as they are instantly interactive. Blogs are also very versatile and can be made up of text, pictures, and sound or video files, making them a perfect way to share all kinds of work. Nor do you need much equipment – just a computer, and access to the web for the most basic functions, and for sound or video files an MP3 player with a voice recorder, a digital camera and a digital camcorder.

Setting up a blog

There are many different blog providers, but I find that Typepad[1] is the easiest to use. I set up a Grantown Grammar School French blog[2] for all

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[1] Typepad – http://www.typepad.com/

my classes which I am in charge of and update as often as possible. Some teachers might choose to set up a blog for an individual class to keep the content specific and relevant, like an S4 blog[3]. Others have set up a blog with a particular theme, such as the French Resistance for a module in the French Higher course[4], or homework with sound files for vocabulary learning[5]. Another possibility is to set up a blog for each student using a provider such as learnerblogs[6]. In this way students can write up written work or record spoken work, which can then be read and commented on by the teacher.[7] Whatever style of blog is used, it is important to consider its audience, its purpose and its intended use. Otherwise it can become onerous and lose its value.

Publication of work on the blog

Perhaps the most rewarding use of a blog is as a gallery to display the work of students. I have taken photos of students' work and posted them on the blog for parents, other students and staff to admire. This was particularly successful when I asked my S1 students to make monsters from plasticene to practice description words. The models were destroyed after the lesson but the photos are still on the blog. The class were excited to receive a comment from Ewan McIntosh who suggested we animate the photos. It was great to have feedback from someone outside the school and a new idea to develop my own teaching.

Speaking & listening activities

Blogs offer an excellent opportunity for students to listen to spoken French. I teamed up with Lynn Horne from Tobermory Academy this past year to carry out a joint blog project, after having seen her blog[8] on the Modern Foreign Languages Environment (MFLE) website[9]. We asked our S2 students to create and perform short doctor dialogues, which were then recorded using MP3 players and uploaded to our respective blogs. We then gave the students the opportunity to listen to the dialogues at a computer and asked them to comment on the work encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning by involving them in the assessment process. Students wrote their comments on the blog using the '*2 stars and a wish*' technique, giving

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[2] Grantown Grammar School French blog – www.mfle.typepad.com/ggs_french

[3] Eva Forbes S4 blog - http://mfle.typepad.com/pacad_s4

[4] Dornoch Academy French Resistance blog - http://mfle.typepad.com/dornoch_resistance

[5] The Gordon Schools Homework blog - http://mfle.typepad.com/tgs2

[6] Learner blogs - http://learnerblogs.org

[7] Student blog - http://woohoo1111.learnerblogs.org

[8] Tobermory Blog - http://mfle.typepad.com/tobermoryfrench

[9] Modern Foreign Languages Environment (MFLE) – http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/mfle

two positive comments and one idea for improvement.[10] Finally students had the chance to read the comments from other people and discussed their thoughts. This was an excellent project as it enabled my students to communicate with students from another part of Scotland (most of my students did not know where Tobermory was!), gave the students a real audience for their work. This definitely improved the quality of French work produced as it was done much more carefully and thoughtfully. Students find it easier to give feedback to one another through the computer rather than verbally or on paper. It is as though the computer is their private space and they feel more secure. Of course comments need to be monitored to begin with to ensure they are appropriate, and there is a function on Typepad to do this. Once the students are used to commenting, they do so very positively so I was able to lift the monitoring function very quickly.

The blog has been particularly useful for speaking assessments in S3 & S4. To help students prepare for the role-play speaking assessment, I recorded a model hotel dialogue with a student and uploaded this to the blog. I then recorded myself playing the role of the receptionist with pauses between statements to enable students to say their phrase when they were practicing for the test. In this way students knew what to expect and also knew what they had to aim for.

To challenge more able S1 students, I asked them to record themselves saying a list of French words which I have uploaded to the blog for other students to listen to in order to help them with their vocabulary learning homework. Students often find pronunciation difficult, so having them on the blog helps overcome this problem. The Languages Department at The Gordon Schools have uploaded sound files of vocabulary for students to learn for their vocabulary tests throughout the year, which is an impressive feat.[11]

S5/6 helpers have recorded themselves for students to listen for extra listening practice at home.

Reading Activities

Blogs can also be used as reading material as there are authentic language blogs on every topic. This is easily done by typing in the topic area plus 'blog' into language search engines. The French are the most prolific bloggers – they even have a specific Google blog search engine[12]. These authentic blogs can be used in a variety of ways with students – reading comprehensions, translation activities, summary writing or stimulus for speaking presentations. Blogs tend to be more

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[10] Viz. *Assessment is for Learning* (AIFL) - http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/assess

[11] The Gordon Schools Homework blog - http://mfle.typepad.com/tgs2

[12] French Google blog search engine - http://blogsearch.google.fr

personal and express opinions and ideas, making them very useful for language learning. Students could even send comments to the authentic blog if appropriate.

Trip Diary

Blogs can also be used as journals. For instance I created a specific blog for a school trip to China last summer[13]. This blog was a reflective diary written every day by the students and included photos, sound files and video clips. In this way the students have a journal of their trip for life, and recent developments mean that any blog can now be printed. The best thing about this blog was the communication with the parents back in Scotland who could follow our adventures and send us messages so that they felt like they were there with us. I used the blog again when I visited Xinying Middle School in Kunming in southwest China earlier this year to set up a link with Grantown Grammar School. I updated the blog on a daily basis so the students at school could learn about my trip whilst I was there. Some teachers used these updates as a teaching tool and asked students to find out what was happening and think of things they might want me to find out during my visit.

Future developments

These are just a few ideas to get you started. I am constantly experimenting and trying out different ideas and find blogs can be used in so many different ways. My next project will be to video the students performing a role-play (nothing new) but then to upload the video to the blog to be appreciated by all. But now it's over to you… By the way, once you've got the hang of blogging why not try podcasting! But that is another whole article…

Feel free to get in touch with me if you have any questions on blogging, want to share ideas or try out a collaborative project.

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Links

There are many blog sites, but here are the ones mentioned in my article:

Assessment is for Learning - http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/assess

Dornoch Academy French Resistance blog - http://mfle.typepad.com/dornoch_resistance

Eva Forbes S4 blog - http://mfle.typepad.com/pacad_s4

French Google blog search engine - http://blogsearch.google.fr

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[13] Grantown Grammar School Chinese blog - www.mfle.typepad.com/ggs

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