



Blogging to Share, Exchange, and Collaborate

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Abstract

*There is much debate in the United States about how to improve education, and language teachers are often excluded from the discussion. However, many language teachers seek to enhance their students' educational experience in innovative ways that teach skills that are valuable not only in their own classrooms but in those of other subjects. In *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*, Carl Nagin addresses the importance of writing as a tool for learning. Nagin explores the reading/writing connection throughout the text and also examines the role of writing in language acquisition and in solidifying one's understanding of their own language.*

While Nagin is primarily concerned with the role of writing for English Language Learners in the United States, his research and conclusions hold true for any student learning a second language. Of particular relevance is the idea that "learning a new language, in addition to being a grammatical task, also asks the student to take on a new identity" [1]. Also relevant is the role technology can play in language acquisition. Nagin writes that technology can enhance "student-student relationships, as students [use technology to] talk to each other." He also adds that technology can aid the writing process, making "response, revision and editing eminently more agreeable" [1].

This workshop will demonstrate how two teachers from the United States, Amy Nocton and Colette Bennett, have used blogging technology as a tool for language instruction with their students. Ms. Nocton and Mrs. Bennett will discuss their personal stories of blogging with their students, will share research on how reading and writing in a target language can be made more effective with the use of digital media, will outline what platforms they have used for blogging with their students, will demonstrate how blogging can provide students with a larger, more international audience, and will review the pitfalls and successes they have had along the way. In short, teachers attending this workshop will develop an understanding of how to use blogging to enhance their students' reading and writing skills in the target language. Ms. Nocton and Mrs. Bennett will discuss how blogging has inspired their students to write creatively and academically in the process of acquiring a second language.

*Mrs. Bennett, an English teacher, has been blogging with her students for five years. Ms. Nocton started blogging with her advanced Spanish students during the 2013-2014 academic year after consulting with Mrs. Bennett and learning of her success with this medium for teaching writing. During the course of the year, Ms. Nocton and her students blogged on *El Quijote*, Romanticism and photography, and open response topics using one word lenses as frames for academic inquiry. During the 2014-2015 academic year, Ms. Nocton will be blogging with her Spanish students and a colleague's students in Spain.*

This past summer (2014), Amy Nocton researched the reading/writing connection and language acquisition through blogging as a participant in the Connecticut Writing Project's Summer Institute.

The plethora of information and digital resources available to teachers these days is often overwhelming. As such, in an effort to focus on improving students' reading and writing skills by engaging them in a broader, online community, we chose to focus on blogging as a means to connect our students to a greater audience and thereby provide the students with a purpose and an audience for their writing. Though blogging is not original to us, many talented students and teachers blog, and we found the results of our efforts inspiring. We discovered that blogging with our students improved both the quality of our instruction and the learning for our students.

Where did we find the inspiration to use this particular platform for working with our students? Both of us were granted Fellowships to participate in Invitational Summer Institutes by local sites of the Connecticut Writing Project, affiliates of the National Writing Project. In its mission statement, the United States' National Writing Project dedicates itself to focusing "the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of our nation's educators on sustained efforts to improve writing and learning for all learners" [2]. Furthermore, the National Writing Project believes that "writing is essential to communication, learning, and citizenship. It is the currency of the new workplace and global economy. Writing helps us convey ideas, solve



problems, and understand our changing world. Writing is a bridge to the future” [2]. Equipped with an enhanced appreciation of the theories surrounding writing instruction and our own enthusiasm and intuition for how to reach students, we chose to implement routine blogging assignments in the classroom to provide our students with a real life audience and the opportunity to read and respond to the work of others.

There are three National Writing Project sites in Connecticut. Amy Nocton attended the Connecticut Writing Project-Storrs at the University of Connecticut in 2014 while Colette Bennett attended the Connecticut Writing Project-Fairfield at Fairfield University in 2011. Amy Nocton was introduced to Colette Bennett by the Jason Courtmanche, the director of the UConn site, and it was in this way that this collaboration began. Colette Bennett had been blogging with her students for several years, and offered to mentor Amy Nocton as she embarked on this educational experiment. In the remainder of this paper, Amy Nocton will elaborate on how she has put Colette Bennett’s wisdom into practice in one of her Spanish classes.

Since the 2013-2014 academic year was my first experience with blogging, I chose to work with my most advanced students. These students are in their last year of high school and had been studying Spanish for five years. The students are at a level where they are reading literature in Spanish and perfecting their grammar skills through reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In any given year, most, if not all, of the students receive six credits from the University of Connecticut’s Early College Experience program for the work completed in my high school classroom. I was proud of my students last year for being a creative group that was willing to participate in this endeavor. I am grateful to them for improving my learning, too. My students chose word-concepts from ideas they brainstormed as a class after having read an abridged version of *El Quijote*. The words the students focused on for the 2013-2014 academic year were truth, doubt, insanity, violence, honor, time, chivalry, women, power, religion, vision, imagination, identity, and humor. Student chose their words in the fall and subsequently these words became the lenses through which they used writing to explore literature and the world. Each post was drafted and revised using writing response groups before posting.

It is important to note that I blogged with my students. In this, I demonstrated my belief that writing is essential to language acquisition. My writing was reviewed by both students and colleagues, and in this way I improved my non-native language skills along with my students. Too often, students and teachers forget that most second language instructors were once novice language learners and that many of the challenges the students face were faced by their teachers, too. Moreover, teachers often stress to our students the importance of developing certain skills without practicing or modeling those skills ourselves. This past year, I was determined to make time for writing and participating in the writing process with my students. As such, I was delighted when one student, Victoria Randazzo, noted that, “In [her] opinion, writing for the blog blurred the lines between the student and teacher. We acted as one. Knowing that other professionals around the world would be reading my work made me more determined to produce something that would have a lasting impression” [3].

Initially, there were some hurdles to clear, and some of the obstacles are still being worked on. Though I am fortunate to work in a relatively new building, the technology infrastructure and support are not always available, and this left me searching for help. I had been told that Wordpress.com was a great place to start, so this is the venue I chose for the class blog. Even with well-meaning colleagues offering assistance, without any formal training, I made mistakes. In haste, I chose not to watch any of the instructional videos on how to use Word press and, as a result, errors were made that otherwise might have been avoided.

I sought administrative permission to blog, and we initially chose to keep the blog private. As of now, only people I invite are able to view and comment in the blog. One of the benefits of Wordpress.com is that the administrator of the site retains control of what is posted and is able to delete any material deemed unacceptable. Gradually, I hope to broaden the audience to the world.

That said, the students’ work is visible to a number of international professors and professionals who I have invited to follow my students’ work. More importantly, a colleague in Spain will be working with me this year, and, together, our students will be collaborating on the blog. This collaboration will be published in both Spanish and English to allow students to practice reading and writing in both their native and non-native languages. It is our hope that having international students exchange ideas through reading and writing in a semi-public forum will allow both groups to improve their skills in both languages as well as increase their cultural awareness.



In “Public Internet Forums: Can They Enhance Argumentative Writing Skills of Second Language Learners?”, Mathy Ritche and Catherine Black discuss a study that required university students learning French to participate in “computer-mediated communication” by posting comments to a variety of Francophone forums or blogs [4]. The results of this study support our belief that blogging with international peers will improve student learning. The study explains that students participating in public blogs were forced to analyze their written language skills and learn to adopt or mimic certain linguistic conventions. The professors also took the time to teach the students “netiquette” so that the students were prepared to read and write in ways that would not reveal that they were not native speakers [4]. In other words, not only did this exercise help students to develop better critical writing skills, but it also aided in the development of cultural awareness. I, too, have seen my students become more metacognitive in their reading and writing in both their native and non-native languages as a result of blogging. Repeatedly, my students’ comments demonstrate how the idea of writing for an audience beyond just the classroom teacher changed the way they thought about writing.

It merits mention, too, that the blog provided an outlet for students to work through some of their more personal struggles as we, as a school, had suffered a tragic year during which four students and one teacher died.

Following are various student comments on their experiences with blogging:

“I think the blog was a great way to display our classwork to more viewers than just our teacher. I was able to email it to my dad who showed his interested colleagues at work. Outside perspectives and easy access are just two of the many factors that make blogging a convenient facet in a classroom” [5].

“Overall, I enjoyed our attempt to blog because it gave me a different perspective on my writing. It gave us the opportunity to write for a different type of audience that we weren’t used to before. In a classroom setting, students typically think about addressing only their teacher through their writing because this is the person whom they know will be reading their papers and assigning them a grade. Through writing for the blog, we were challenged to write to a bigger audience which was a great opportunity to help us broaden our skills. We were challenged to reach out to a greater audience than we ever had before, helping us grow as writers” [6].

“I thought the blog was creative and imaginative, and given everything our class had already been through and continued to go through throughout the year, the blog provided an outlet for us. We could write as openly as we wanted, without pressure, and not worry so much about the grade we were going to receive. Therefore, we could take risks with our writing, and, for me, the lack of available outlets to take risks with writing in high school was one of the things that frustrated me most. It was an innovative way to bring together literature as old as *El Quijote*, current world events, and personal experience with an audience larger than simply a teacher reading the writing” [7].

In summary, I have discovered that blogging with my language students has offered them an authentic outlet for their reading and writing. Students found inspiration in knowing that an international audience would be hearing their voices and responding to their thoughts. Blogging allows for the opportunities for dialogue that we all look for as language educators. I will conclude with one final observation from another one of my students, as I feel she has captured the essence of what Colette Bennett and I hoped to achieve when we embarked on this project:

“The common practice of composing writing assignments for high school classes has had an interesting effect on me. While I believe that writing only for the eyes of the teacher has strengthened and broadened my knowledge of the ‘bare bones’ of writing technique (structure, tone, figurative language, and all manner of other rhetorical tools), it has also narrowed and weakened my ability to individualize and personalize my work. Before the blog, I essentially wrote for a grade. I wrote what I expected the teacher wanted me to write (be it in Spanish class or English or Social Studies). I altered my own personal style to match, to mold to my perception of ‘strong writing.’ Of course, my idea of strong writing was the standard five paragraphs with an introduction, a conclusion, and three main ideas, all garnished with heavy textual evidence. This blog, however, opened a new door for me. It was no longer the teacher passing sole judgment on my piece. I was no longer writing for a grade; my writing was no longer a stapled parcel of paper to be scribbled upon with red pen and moved to the bottom of the pile. It was now available for the viewing pleasure of anyone and everyone who wanted to read about my ideas, my feelings, my input on a book or a current event. Instead of writing to a rubric, I wrote what I wanted, how I wanted. I wrote about what interested me, because I firmly believed that whoever took the time to go on the blog (students, teachers, parents, friends), would love hearing what I had to say. And this was a good feeling. It was a



feeling of complete intellectual freedom, a feeling that I believe everyone should experience at least once” [8].

References

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