

# Blogs: web journals in language education

Mario Camilleri, Peter Ford, Helena Leja, Valerie Sollars



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Web journals in language education



European Centre for Modern Languages  
Centre européen pour les langues vivantes



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## Introduction

This publication is the outcome of an ECML project which, over the course of three years, investigated the design of educational blogging platforms and their use in the language classroom. The accompanying CD-Rom includes the entire corpus of blogs produced during the project – the good, the bad, the ugly and the indifferent. Mining this heap of verbiage turns up many fascinating gems.

This booklet describes our experiences of working with language teachers and students taking their first steps in blogging, and should be of interest primarily to teacher trainers and language teachers who wish to harness the educational power of the “writable Web”. There are many excellent free blogging hosting services available to the adventurous teacher – Blogger, WordPress and Class Blogmeister all welcome educational users.

If the teacher can rely on technical help and the school has access to its own Web server or has shared server space, then the blogging platform included on the CD-Rom can be freely installed for use by any number of teachers and students. The software runs on an IIS-based server (IIS 5 or above with ASP, MS Access and certain other optional modules that are documented on the CD-Rom). Since the installation itself is not just a point-and-click affair, some degree of configuration is necessary to suite the server set-up, and therefore some technical expertise in Web server administration and scripting is required. Once set-up, of course, the platform is accessible using any Web browser and should require little or no maintenance.

Although fully functional (it has in fact been in use for over a year by more than 600 teachers and students), the platform is still in the early stages of development. It is released under a GNU General Public License<sup>1</sup> to encourage software developers to extend and enhance it. Foremost in the development road map for this platform is the design of a proper data abstraction layer, integration with a variety of popular DBMS back-ends (especially MySQL), implementation of a proper blogging API, and porting the platform over to PHP.

Finally, thanks are due to all the teachers and hundreds of students, both in Europe and Brazil, who bravely struggled with the idiosyncrasies of the software as it underwent one revision after another. Thanks are also due to the ECML for their support throughout the project, and especially all the staff at the ECML for always making us look forward to our next visit to the wonderful city of Graz.

*Mario Camilleri  
Project co-ordinator  
University of Malta*

*March 2007*

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1 See <http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/gpl.html>





# Reflections on the effective use of blogs in the classroom

**Peter Ford**

Using blogs and other new collaborative technologies can be immensely rewarding as summed up by one teacher in the ECML Blogs project:

As far as I am concerned, as a blogger teacher, I have had a wonderful time. I have enjoyed this experience very much, and I wish it would go on. I have met many teachers and people around Europe, and I have made some good friends. I have even found an old friend's son from whom I haven't heard for ages! I have read a lot of interesting things, and most importantly, I have seen that my students have improved their writing a lot.

<http://blogs.ecml.at//article.asp?post=4807>

Contrast that with the blogging experience of a student from another class in another country. Same technology, same project but a very different experience:

Boredom, all the students in class always have the same project topic. I'm not surprised, that other students don't read our blogs. They're all 'bout the same!

A coherent review at the conclusion of the ECML Blogs project, which spanned 30 teachers and 600 students across 23 nations, was always going to present a challenge. The 4 000 posts and 9 000 comments that made up the project are certainly a crude, quantitative measure of its success. However, this sheer volume of material flows from a range of educational and cultural contexts that reflect the diversity of the participating countries. Add to this mix the vision, views and methodologies of individual language teachers, and the task of attempting to identify qualitative trends and draw general conclusions about the general effectiveness of blogs in foreign language literacy becomes all the more taxing.

Nevertheless, it appears clear that the ECML Blogs platform, like other blogging software, was flexible and simple enough to be used successfully across a range of cultural and educational settings. Like a mirror though, it also reflected the individual pedagogical preferences of teachers using it with their students. The platform was, in effect, neutral. The vision of the teachers for teaching and learning, together with its application with students, appears to govern the wide range of differing yet seemingly successful outcomes of the implementation of blogs. In short, what the teachers modelled, encouraged and invested in terms of the use of blogs in their teaching is often reflected in the writing experiences of their students.

This chapter seeks to provide general insight into the corpus of ECML blogging posts in the light of definitions of blogging as both an activity and as an emerging genre. Furthermore, a selection of the ways in which blogs were used by teachers and students across the Blogs project will be highlighted. It will not be an exhaustive description but

aims rather, to give a flavour of the flexibility and versatility of the blogging medium in supporting varying approaches to foreign language teaching and learning. It will hopefully encourage teachers not only to browse the ECML blogs for themselves but also to explore whether blogging could enhance their own classroom practice.

## **Blogging as activity or genre?**

The traditional definition of a blog is of a special kind of website consisting of regular entries or posts arranged in reverse chronological order – that is with the most recent post at the top of the main page. Typically, each post is a short piece of text, though images are often included, and generally entries contain links to other websites. It is this feature that sets blogging apart from traditional journal writing.

If we apply this definition of blogging to the ECML Blogs project posts as a whole, we would expect to find approximately the same number of hyperlinks as posts within the body of material under scrutiny. However, as we can see in Table 1 the occurrence of hyperlinking occurs relatively less frequently in the ECML blogs as whole compared to the blogging norm.

Total number of posts	4 250
Posts containing at least one hyperlink	786
Percentage of posts containing hyperlinks	Approximately 18%

*Table 1: Hyperlinks within all ECML Blogs project posts (as of 30 June 2006)*

The same trend is exhibited in Tables 2 and 3, in which the body of posts is broken down into those written by students and those by teachers. The teachers tended to use hyperlinks more regularly than their students, often to point to posts that they wanted their class to read or engage with. The students were, however, at least statistically-speaking, indifferent to the concept of regularly using hyperlinks in their writing. In this respect, the ECML blogs do not seem to conform to the traditional model of what defines a blog.

Total number of posts by students	3 462
Posts containing at least one hyperlink	444
Percentage of posts containing hyperlinks	Approximately 13%

*Table 2: Hyperlinks within ECML Blogs project student posts (as of 30 June 2006)*

Total number of posts by teachers	788
Posts containing at least one hyperlink	342
Percentage of posts containing hyperlinks	Approximately 43%

*Table 3: Hyperlinks within the ECML Blogs project teacher posts (as of 30 June 2006)*

Although the writing within the project is analysed in detail elsewhere in this publication, it is worthwhile noting that blogging can be viewed not merely as an activity with certain characteristics but as an emerging writing genre in its own right. Richardson explains how blogging extends beyond the process of keeping a journal.

Blogging is not just writing in a blog. I don't think journaling is blogging because it's, well, journaling. Blogging is much more than that. To me the process starts with reading what other people have written and editing that content for depth and relevance and accuracy. It's making connections about that content to other ideas to clarify what's important about it. It's adding personal reflection to give it context because only in knowing how the blogger experiences what she is writing about can I as a reader decide whether her ideas are worth my time. And, finally, it's linking back to that content so that the ideas can be traced to their genesis.

*Will Richardson – [www.eschoolnews.com/eti/2004/12/000414.php](http://www.eschoolnews.com/eti/2004/12/000414.php)*

In this sense, blogging requires higher-order thinking skills such as the ability to evaluate and synthesise.

There was not much evidence in the Blogs project of either students or teachers making sustained connections to the ideas, content and conversation of others and synthesising these using higher-order thinking skills in the way described by Richardson. However, some teachers did try to elicit higher-order skills from their students, through a skilful combination of modelling, guidelines, encouragement and questioning.

The foreign language levels and experience of the majority of student participants would make these higher-order skills difficult to deliver in any context. Teachers often need to concentrate on developing and consolidating basic linguistic skills before their students have the necessary tools to express higher-order thinking in a foreign language. In a comment on a post about the possibility of addressing controversial issues with language students as well as normal everyday events, a teacher writes:

Unfortunately, my 7th grade students with only a couple of years of language study under their belts do not possess the language skills necessary to deal with subject matter you described above in a meaningful way. I'm afraid that we need to deal with cats and dogs and other trivialities before we move on to the "real" stuff ...

*<http://blogs.ecml.at//article.asp?post=2706>*

That is not to say that the blogs were not valuable in the reading, writing and thinking process. Placing the ECML blogs outside the strict definitions of both blogging as an activity or as a genre is not a criticism, merely a reflection that it is possible to use a blog without actually blogging. Furthermore, the ECML Blogs project is testament to

the flexibility of the blogging platform that it can be put in the hands of educators and used effectively to impact teaching and learning in positive ways. It is to these areas that we now turn our attention.

From the student evaluations of the ECML project it is clear that the use of blogs in their foreign language lessons was, on the whole, perceived as a positive and motivating factor. However, it should be remembered that this was a relatively short-term project and simply using the “out-of-the-ordinary” blogs may have been enough to initially motivate students to read, write and start to make connections. However, the key challenge for the teacher would be to sustain that desire beyond the “novelty factor” and into the medium- and long-term.

A number of approaches and techniques used during the Blogs project appeared to lend themselves in particular to encouraging a sense of community and motivation and may be important pointers for any longer-term implementation of blogs.

## **Building community – The first steps**

Having, as a teacher, a clear idea how the blogging platform could be implemented within one’s own community is important in setting the project off in a clear direction. Sharing and negotiating this vision with students builds a stronger feeling of shared ownership of the project and an overall sense of purpose.

Offering students clear guidelines and blogging strategies, alongside linguistic help, will help them make sense of the blogging medium and place it within their own framework of online experience. Finding out the students’ past and present experiences of blogging and other online environments will not only help to provide an assessment of their technical skills but will also identify student expertise that could be helpful in the project. Many students will already have experience of online collaborative and communicative environments and it is quite possible that students may have more “technical” ability than the teacher. Harnessing these abilities and dovetailing them with language teaching and learning goals can release and motivate, whereas trying to stifle them can prove counterproductive.

Exploring and valuing the students’ online experience will also give an insight into their “default” style of conversation and connection in online environments. This is important in deciding if that default style of conversation needs to simply be given free rein or further developed when using blogs. The “comments” feature of the ECML blogs is a case in point.

## **Explicit building**

The relative lack of hyperlinks by students in the project is in contrast to the many thousands of comments posted on student blogs. Many of the comments by students were short, informal snippets of one-way communication or unanswered questions. It seems that without specific guidance as to the purpose and technique of commenting, the “default” language posture and style of student interaction becomes that reminiscent of chatrooms or instant messaging environments. Not necessarily a negative phenomenon, the ease and familiarity of such communication might prove reassuring for students, particularly in the initial stages of a project. However, if the goal is more meaningful and sustained communication through the commenting process, they also need to be explicitly equipped with a wider range of commenting techniques.

The teachers commented with evidently clear purpose in mind. They used comments to discuss and connect effectively with fellow teachers, providing an audience and informal “support network”. Students from their own classes and those from within the wider ECML blogging community were offered feedback by teachers, as well as encouragement and stimulus for further discussion through commentary and questioning. Very often though the questions remained unanswered by the students and the opportunity to connect and further converse was missed. Explicitly unpacking their own successful experience in using comments may have been a way for teachers to allow students a glimpse of the potential and practicalities of connecting with others through commenting.

Curricular time constraints, as well as Internet access issues at home, may have meant that there was little “official” time for students to read and respond to the comments they received. Students who perceived their blogs as only a classroom task, rather than a platform for free expression and communication would also be unlikely to use their leisure time to manage and respond to comments.

## **Building techniques**

After the launch of the blogging community, teachers can use a number of effective approaches to maintain interest and encourage reading, writing and independent learning:

- choosing subject material for lessons using blogs that is varied and engaging for students keeps interest high. It is easy to use a blog to set tasks rather like an online worksheet. This type of task can provide a “scaffold” for students to complete their own work but the downside of an over-reliance on this approach is highlighted by the student’s comment at the beginning of this piece. Everyone

covering the same topic in the same way can become boring – not only for the students themselves but also for their audience;

- using subject material that originated in blogs in the wider blogging community is an effective way of modelling and encouraging collaboration.

Dolors brings up an interesting subject in her blog about the educational system in her country as well as other European countries and the PISA survey results. Your assignment this week will be to write a post about the positive sides of going to school in Finland and what, in your opinion, makes schools in Finland so successful.

*<http://blogs.ecml.at//article.asp?post=4216>*

- regular writing by teachers on their blogs models both the process of writing and the innate value of communicating in another language. This is particularly important if teachers want to encourage students to write freely on their own blogs outside of planned lesson times;
- highlighting and hyperlinking by teachers of writing from students within their own class community serves to provide students with an audience for their writing and encourages them that their work is valued. It also models the important process of connecting ideas among students;

A l'occasion de la semaine de la langue française, Diana et Klara ont écrit des poèmes. Allez les lire, ils sont très beaux. Daein nous donne, lui, des secrets d'internautes. Barbora demande si, comme elle, vous aimez les bienfaits du vélo.

*<http://blogs.ecml.at//article.asp?post=4405>*

- encouraging students to comment on each other's writing is most useful when guidelines are developed, in partnership with students, to lay down the purpose of commenting;
- posting references to useful websites on teacher blogs offers students concurrent learning opportunities outside the classroom context and encourages students to take ownership of their learning. Encouraging students to find and post their own online resources gives them opportunities to facilitate and teach others;
- teachers who ask interesting questions to engage language learners in discussion tend to get interesting answers;
- if the activity within the online or face-to-face community begins to wane, then the teacher can motivate the students by restating the purpose and vision of what they are aiming for;

Décidément, il y a des blogueurs parmi nous qui sont en hibernation apparemment: depuis un certain moment, ils ne donnent plus signe de vie! Ce qui est pire, c'est qu'ils ont juste créé la page d'accueil, rédigé un ou deux posts, et qu'ils se sont rendormis après. C'est vraiment dommage, car un blogueur est censé faire une contribution à la

blogosphère: il est membre d'une communauté virtuelle, avec laquelle il est censé rester en contact, en rédigeant des posts et en publiant des commentaires régulièrement.

<http://blogs.ecml.at//article.asp?post=3830>

- celebrating achievements and events on blogs are a good way of creating lasting memories for both teachers and students. For example, one teacher on a trip to Paris got students to take responsibility for posting updates on their trip. In another significant event, students from the Greek blogging class visited the Dutch bloggers' school in person. All parties blogged the episode from their own perspectives, creating a wonderful record of events.

Many of the ideas represented above are simply online adaptations of pedagogical principles and tools that many teachers already naturally possess in their teaching repertoire. Other teachers and students are already exploring the uses of blogs across the curriculum and will surely conjure up many other creative ways of impacting teaching and learning. A blog is another tool in the hands of creative teachers and students and the ECML Blogs project has simply confirmed that fact. One teacher labelled the project, "a never-ending spiral of connections" and another sums up the effect of the project on her class:

Je ne peux pas vous décrire l'atmosphère qu'il y avait en classe pendant ce dernier cours. Il y avait un silence imposant, rempli du bruit des claviers! C'est un projet bien réussi!

<http://blogs.ecml.at//article.asp?post=4219>

The ECML blogging platform gave teachers the freedom to express their online engagement with students in ways that were peculiar to their own educational setting and that reflected their own particular methodological and stylistic preferences. This should be quite reassuring for educators thinking of embarking on a blogging adventure with their students. Simply take the skills, techniques and methodology that serve you well in the classroom and employ them in the online blogging arena with students. The principles of what you consider to be good teaching should remain the same whether on- or offline. In short, the teacher sets the tone and agenda when using blogs. Why not explore them for yourself?





# **Writing experiences in a second/foreign language classroom: from theory to practice**

**Valerie Sollars**

## **Introduction**

This chapter is divided into two main parts: the first part focuses on an overview of approaches to writing which have been widely promoted in the traditional language classroom together with their characteristics and forms. In addition, more recent approaches that rely on technology and can therefore serve to motivate students further in their writing experiences will be referred to.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the writing experiences of a group of students and their teachers as they resorted to and utilised blogs as the writing tool to promote the use of English and French in the foreign language classroom.

Finally, the chapter concludes with some reflections and observations on the processes, products and results of the Blogs project.

## **Purposes and functions for writing**

Prior to considering writing approaches, it is worth gleaning over the reasons for which writing is used daily, beyond the classroom walls. As one of the major language skills, writing serves a number of purposes. Writing activities and products:

- provide a means of communication when the recipient and sender are not in close physical proximity;
- offer a way of maintaining social relationships and sharing personal information;
- allow individuals to record their emotions, feelings of happiness, fear or anxiety;
- are a means of disseminating information and news;
- provide a permanent record;
- can serve as a means of entertainment and amusement;
- assist participants to develop skills which make them persuasive, critical and analytical readers and writers.

Given this variety of functions, writing activities can naturally take on a broad range of forms and presentations as seen elsewhere in this chapter. The purpose of the writing exercise as well as the audience for whom it is intended are two major factors which need to be taken into consideration when setting writing assignments. Most of the writing tasks given to students have a rather limited audience, namely the teacher and other students. Yet potentially, writing assignments have an audience which extends beyond the classroom. The onus is on teachers to plan for and present students with challenging writing assignments which are relevant to and match the needs for which writing is engaged in outside school.

From a very young age, children growing up in a literate environment have quite a lot of evidence of why people engage in reading and writing. This evidence and knowledge should be highlighted in a language classroom in order to promote meaningful, relevant and purposeful writing experiences among students of all ages. Depending on how the teacher promotes a writing experience and assuming children's attempts are going to be valued and shared among peers, children can be convinced that there is value in writing which is not necessarily achieved in any other mode. For example, the permanence of what we write can help writers look back on their achievements and map out their maturation and development over time.

When considering writing experiences for children and students within formal, teaching contexts, a number of issues arise. How and when do children start writing? Where do they get ideas from? Is there such a thing as "the evolution of writing"? How do children progress in their writing skills and how is this progression translated from a first to a second or foreign language setting?

Graves (1983) argued that the purposes for which we engage in writing change over time. Between the ages of 4 and 7 writing is a time for experimentation: children should be encouraged to leave their marks on paper, utilising whatever means are available. Between the ages of 7 and 9, children can start learning about the conventions of writing, especially items related to punctuation. From the age of 9 onwards, children are writing to find a voice, to express themselves, to be critical of other work and share their own views.

In order to establish progression in writing, it seems appropriate to consider the development in the mastery of other language skills. Research in the 1980s has undoubtedly shown that development in listening, speaking, reading and writing is not a sequential process but all four skills develop simultaneously and in an interrelated manner (Sampson, 1986). This overall language development, including more refined literacy skills, is characterised by meaningful interaction where novices participate and collaborate with experts and opportunities for trial and error within supportive contexts are promoted by good models.

Home contexts provide the primary environment, which promote the onset of language and literacy development (Hannon, 2000). However, elements related to this early development should be extended to classroom situations. Although the latter can be characterised by formal teaching and the promotion of specific language skills, it is

imperative for children and students to have role models who value their reading and writing attempts, provide for hands-on and interactive approaches and guide students in their literacy development through insightful discussion and reflection on their production.

For children and young students to succeed in their writing attempts, the adults in the classroom have to be good models (Novelli). It is rather awkward to be in a situation where teachers' expect students to produce work they themselves have never tried out. This is especially important if writing is considered to be a process which needs planning, drafting, revising and editing before the final publication. It becomes much easier for the adults to show, support and help students overcome their writing difficulties assuming they have first-hand experience.

Another way in which children and students' participation in language experiences can be promoted is by having adults and peers show a genuine interest in what individual students have produced. Prompting an individual through asking questions is one way of showing such an interest and open-ended questions are highly recommended to initiate reactions and discussions with children and students about their work (Power). Such questioning assists students to look at their own work more critically.

**Traditional approaches to teaching writing**

In order to provide students with experiences which promote the various functions of writing, the teaching of writing has typically focused on presenting students with different genres. The table below summarises some of the writing genres more commonly taught in classrooms. The forms of presentation are only some examples and are not necessarily exclusive to a particular genre.

	Objective	Characteristics	Forms
Descriptive	An intensely vivid description of a place, person, object or event	Elaborate, detailed descriptions which may rely on sensory language to evoke sounds, smells, sight Figurative language Emphasis on accurate choice of words in order to provide precise illustrations	Character descriptions Places of interest Cities, country descriptions Memoirs Biographies

	Objective	Characteristics	Forms
Expository	Giving explanations or directions with a view to informing and/or instructing the reader	A clearly-stated and focused main idea presented. Can be supported by data from various sources. Is factual and as accurate as possible. Highly sequenced and logical organisation and presentation	Letters, newsletters, definitions, guidebooks and brochures
Persuasive	Such writing is aimed at being critical or having an effect on the reader	Stating a position; making a case/presenting an argument; supporting one's belief, even with statistics or established authorities; concluding with strong recommendation and appeal	Letters to the editor (criticism; suggestions; points of view), posters, brochures and advertisements
Poetry	Helps writers be creative and imaginative while being succinct and precise through the choice of words	Instructional emphasis given to rhyme and alliteration, though not compulsory; form – stanzas and verses; and diction – careful choice of words	Rhyming couplets, limericks, sonnets and haiku
Technical	Specific, focused information about a topic, problem or issue. Requires response from reader	Introduction; elaborate on issue by providing relevant background; discussion with reference to specific features and characteristics; and summary to explain and/or reinforce the usefulness of the product or its application	Usually associated with report writing; forms, questionnaires and evaluation

*Table 1: Genres of writing  
(adapted from the writing site website: <http://thewritingsite.org/>)*

One of the traditional ways in which the language classroom has focused on and promoted writing experiences among language learners of various ages has been through creative writing. According to Morrissey (2003), creative writing offers students opportunities to:

- express themselves and their own ideas. This promotes a more motivating and stimulating experience, as students would be drawing on their own personal interests while having a means to use their imagination;
- play around with language. In so doing, students as writers must pay attention to ensure that the desired effect is obtained;
- to practise and learn how to select vocabulary accurately and use figurative language, such as idioms, metaphors and expressions in order to improve their text.

Successful creative writing experiences emphasise writing as a process. For shy or reluctant writers, starting with a brainstorming or a discussion in a large or small group could be the key. Initially students could be encouraged to collaborate on a piece of writing. They also need to realise that their first attempt is not what goes for publication or circulation. Stepping back from the text and taking time to re-read and edit the draft to ensure the best choice of words, coherence within and across sections, appropriate and logical sequencing of ideas, correcting for conventions related to spelling and punctuation are all part of the drafting and editing processes before a final product can be circulated.

Journal writing has also been a widely used means of stimulating students to put their thoughts, feelings, views and ideas on paper. Journal writing can be considered to be a daily record of events or a private journal, usually referred to as a diary. Like creative writing, journals have been promoted as a medium to encourage writing as they are meant to appeal to the interests of the author/writer. They can be as personal or impersonal as the writer chooses them to be. The advantages of encouraging journal writing include:

- personal choice and therefore heightened interest in the topic;
- the “power” of the learner to determine what to write about.

## **Blogs**

The rapid development in technology has given rise to new forms of communication among people. Email, Internet access, sending messages via mobile phones, using chatrooms and fora have at least had an impact on how people communicate and write, the frequency with which they communicate and possibly the content. What is of particular relevance to the current work concerns blogs and blogging as a means of promoting writing among students. What do blogs offer which other more conventional, writing approaches do not have? How can blogs be utilised to encourage second and foreign language use?

Blogs have been compared to journals or online diaries, offering a way for students to engage in reflective writing on any topic. Through postings on blogs, students have a real, wider audience that transcends the classroom teacher and peer students within one's classroom, school or country. Indeed, the community of collaborators and supporters is innumerable.

As a result of the wider audience, students have to be sensitive to ways in which they are going to express themselves. Greater attention must be given to the content if the message is to be understood by an international audience. Difficulties with expressing oneself could give rise to misunderstandings, hence the careful choice of language to ensure that the intended message comes across. In addition, the receptive audience is now different. A piece of writing is open to feedback from a known as well as an unknown audience. The teacher and fellow students are no longer the only two sources from whom to acquire or seek knowledge, information or feedback. Peers and other members of the blogging community all have equal access, and feedback can therefore be received from familiar and not so familiar people.

Another way in which blogs can revolutionise the classroom is that responses to blog postings can be immediate. Teachers and colleagues can quickly respond to a student's blog, providing immediate feedback not feasible by traditional paper evaluation methods, and it takes less time to manage.

Another advantage of blogs is the communication afforded to parents enabling them to be connected to their child's classroom. They can see class assignments, as well as read their children's postings, perhaps gaining new insights about their offspring. The blog can serve as a natural writing portfolio, visibly displaying writing skill improvement as the year progresses.

Huffaker (2004) recommends blogs for classroom use because they promote "self-expression and highly personalized content". In a review of existing blogs, Huffaker summarises some advantages offered by the blogging medium, suggesting that bloggers:

- can collect news stories to write about and then edit/react to each other's work;
- can add comments or critiques to shared class readings.

In addition, blogs are also a useful writing tool for teachers as they can:

- use blogs to highlight selected writings and contributions of their students;
- focus on the content, collaboration and documentation of completed tasks;
- offer a medium of peer support where teachers themselves collaborate and share ideas.

Irrespective of the themes, looks and writing styles or genres chosen by the authors, good blogs appear to be characterised by three features: frequency, brevity and personality (Evans, as cited in Mortensen and Walker (2002)). It seems that these

ingredients are key to the successful maintaining of a blog that aims to attract responses.

With this overview of the advantages of blogs, as well as the range of writing possibilities students can be exposed to, it is worth referring to some postings of students and teachers who participated in the Blogs project. How did the students and teachers react to using blogs in their language classroom? Did it promote writing which was meaningful?

## **Blogs in practice**

To conclude, I would like to present some of the ways in which blogs were utilised by the participants in the current project.

### **The teachers' use of blogs:**

- To refine some technical skills in the use of blogs as a writing tool. Teachers gave explicit and sequential information:

3rd note to my pupils – Adding a link

This week we will all try to add a “link” to a new post. To do this you have to do the following:

1. Open your blog and login with your password.
2. Add a new post.
3. Write the post then mark the word (topic) you want to link to, e.g.  
Panathinaikos/Olympiakos/break dance/computer games/your favourite singer or whatever else you want to share with your readers.
4. Minimise your blog (-).
5. Open Internet Explorer (Mozilla Firefox on school computers).
6. Search for the Web page that interests you with the search engine.
7. Copy the URL (www, etc.) and close the page.
8. Maximise your blog (+).
9. Open the menu at the top left-hand corner of your post window and click on the chain link.
10. Paste your URL and close the window (click DONE) and return to your blog and save or publish the blog.

*(Teacher in Greece)*

- to direct and refer students to potential topics worth writing about;
- to instruct students to start a dialogue with others by responding to genuine queries;  
Your assignment this week will be to write a post about the positive sides of going to school in Finland and what, in your opinion, makes schools in Finland so successful. To get you started: 1. read Dolors' post, make sure you understand the text (see the word

list/Ping-instruction sheet). 2. Go to Dolors' blog (Spain) and read Arnau's post at the end of Dolors' text by clicking the link (ping). You may comment directly to him, but your main task is to answer his questions in your own post. You can write about only one or two main issues or answer in more general terms. For example, do you think that the Finnish pupils work hard to get good grades, do Finnish pupils like school, are Finnish teachers good, do Finnish people in general take school seriously, do the schools and parents have high expectations?

*(Teacher in Finland)*

- to invite students to elaborate upon topics by extending initial information;

It seems Rebecca's post on karate has caught the attention of some bloggers; so, Rebecca, tell us a bit more about karate's rules, characteristics, etc.

*(Teacher in Andorra)*

- to invite responses by ending a posting with a question. One teacher in particular had a very specific style of writing a short posting about a topic, concluding with a question in the hope of eliciting responses;

Everyone is unique. So are you. However old you are or whatever nationality you are, you possess the distinctive personal qualities which make you stand out from the crowd. ... What matters most is the genuinely positive attitude and good emotions down inside that make you feel you are one of a kind. In what way do you feel unique?

*(Teacher in Poland)*

- to involve students explicitly in grammatical work;

Your first task today is to go to the following website and do the exercise with have/have got. You click on Headway Pre-intermediate then on Grammar and finally on Unit 3. When finished, you write about somebody's character. You write a short description about somebody you know very well: your brother or sister, your mum or dad, your best friend. You add his/her photo as well.

*(Teacher in Slovenia)*

Have a look at Dolors' instructions to her students and write about all or at least some of the things she mentions and please try to use the present perfect tense.

*(Teacher in Iceland)*

- to react to and learn from the postings of other teachers;

Hi Dolors

I really like the way you instruct your students through your blogsite, you seem to be doing this so easily. I'm still learning from you, Barbara and others and hopefully I'll get the hang of this soon.

*(Teacher in Iceland)*

- as a noticeboard, to encourage each other and their students.

I also want to congratulate a student in the class for his/her blog. He/she has done all the things I have asked. He/she ...



- has put his/her photograph up (it's a pity we can't see his/her eyes)
- has sent all the posts
- has written a lot of comments to other students' posts
- has received a large number of comments
- has added some buddies
- has also used the "ping" function
- has inserted links in his/her posts
- has also "blogged" at home. In fact, he/she is the one who has blogged the most times!

Do you know the name of that student? If you know it write a comment with it.

*(Teacher in Spain)*

### **The students' use of blogs:**

- to find a voice and establish themselves. This was highly evident in the choice of topics;

Hi today I'd like to tell you about hobbies ...

Hi everybody. Today I'll tell you about my country ...

Hi all of you. Today I want to talk about books and reading. I like reading very much ...

*(Student in Armenia)*

Je suis bulgare et je suis une élève. Je suis née le 12 juillet 1990 à Vidin. Je voudrais être chanteuse aux Etats-Unis. J'adore écouter de la musique américaine – Eminem, Anastasia, 2Pac, Madonna. J'adore aussi acheter des vêtements, mais je voudrais des vêtements modernes. Je n'aime pas du tout lire.

*(Student in Bulgaria)*

- to introduce themselves, their likes, dislikes, preferences, favourite topics (singers, food, hobbies, etc.);

Je m'appelle Fabio, j'ai 17 ans. Je suis italien et éthiopien. J'habite à Rotterdam et j'étudie dans une école internationale. J'aime jouer au foot, écouter de la musique et aller en boîte.

*(Student in Holland)*

I will tell you something about my favourite Slovenian rock group called Siddharta.

*(Student in Slovenia)*

Lieu: Baranquilla, Colombie.

Née d'un père libanais et d'une mère colombienne, elle a grandi en Colombie, mais elle écoute Led Zeppelin, The Cure, Police, les Beatles et Nirvana. Elle adore aussi la musique arabe. Shakira écrit des chansons dès l'âge de huit ans! A treize ans, elle ...

*(Student in Cyprus)*

- to express opinions and beliefs;  
 Friends must be chosen carefully, in my opinion, especially close friends. Not everybody can be trusted but when a person has a friend he must trust him. Even though sometimes we might be betrayed I think we should still be capable of trusting others.  
 (Student in Malta)
- to respond to teachers' requests and questions. This was particularly apparent when students had posts about the same topic;  
 My dream house has to be big and near the sea. Inside the house could be a lot of rooms and beautiful kitchen. Outside the house could be a swimming pool ....  
 Our dream house ... It would be a huge white detached house with many windows. It would be located near to the sea.  
 (Students in Finland)
- to share news;  
 Aujourd'hui quelques élèves qui viennent de Roumanie sont arrivés à notre école. Nous avons eu une grande fête, qui nous a beaucoup plu. Une fille a chanté. Les élèves vont rester à Steyr une semaine. Quelques élèves de notre école ont été en Roumanie aussi l'année dernière.  
 (Student in Austria)

Blogs proved to be quite versatile for both teachers and students. There was still a strong didactic element by the teachers, who unavoidably found themselves in a situation where they had to support their students with managing the tool as well as promoting language teaching.

From the perspective of the participants, the vast majority enjoyed the blogging experience especially because of the networking and dialogue. Many looked forward to comments and in fact those who did not find any were rather disappointed ... a clear signal that a community of writers was definitely born.

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# Improving writing skills in foreign language classes

Helena Leja

Teachers and instructors, not to mention parents and learners themselves, often quite legitimately question the gap between oral and written skills among foreign language learners, particularly as the communicative approach to language teaching places the emphasis on the former. At school, more often than not, learners are encouraged to become speakers rather than writers. They are more frequently in a situation in which they have to process, understand and react appropriately to the message passed by the teacher or other learners, rather than produce a piece of writing. Generally speaking, oral performance is a spontaneous process, firmly fixed in the day-to-day reality of the class, with written performance taking second place. This differential between the two sets of skills becomes critical when learners have to put their ideas down in writing. Much will be crossed out, corrected and looked up before the text is finalised.

## The challenges inherent in producing a piece of writing

Writing is a skill that comprises additional difficulties such as spelling, formatting, lexical paradigms (choice of language register) and grammatical rules (agreements, for example). Nonetheless there are two principal dimensions underlying all writing activities: (i) what Henri Boyer refers to as “scription” in which writing conforms to and reproduces certain models (such as recipes, instructions, timetables, etc.) and (ii) creative writing,<sup>1</sup> where the writer is required to be present, setting out his/her personal opinions, feelings, value judgments, etc. In both cases, there is considerable discussion regarding the type of teaching that can help learners improve these skills.

The learning/teaching context is constantly changing, and has been for some time. New tools have emerged to help learners, including blogs which make the process of language learning more attractive and, most importantly, more effective, as they are directly linked to the learner’s interests and his/her day-to-day experience; these are information tools with which, moreover, learners are familiar. Computers and the Internet have become, as it were, a supplement to textbooks and exercise books, a medium in which learners’ productions are not only stored but also published. This has come about not as a result of educational research but rather from the needs of a computerised world, in which more and more often written information is being transmitted in electronic form, such as e-mails or websites with or without audio

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1 See Boyer, 1988, in which he further develops the concepts of “scription” and “écriture” introduced by Roland Barthes.

content. Consequently, people are obliged to change the way they make themselves understood and communicate at a distance.

However, “technology is of little interest unless it can be used for educational purposes”.<sup>1</sup> Our own project is based on this premise and offers teachers and learners a communication platform, which is both personalised and collective, a “non-dedicated”<sup>2</sup> tool to be experimented with.

Blogs, “a journal written online and accessible to users of the Internet”,<sup>3</sup> are now a learner’s means of individual expression allowing for interaction and exchanges (via the comment function) with people outside the classroom environment. It is an alternative way of acquiring certain skills, particularly writing skills, but still demands a logical approach to the posted content and a certain degree of form-related discipline (register, format) since what is accepted in speech is not necessarily accepted in writing. However, it does not mean obliging learners straight away to write in line with the strict rules of composition, but rather to train them little by little in the various ways of writing as opposed to speaking. Blogs, therefore, are restoring the kudos attached to writing ability. “They are important not only for communication, but also for their formative value in writing”.<sup>4</sup>

## **Blogs as a means of expression for learners**

“When pupils write, they become part of the discursive community of the classroom: they play their role as pupils, encountering difficulties (more easily identifiable than with reading, since the traces of writing are permanent), seeing those encountered by other pupils, and referring to texts which fall into the academic genres. At the same time they become part of the ‘literate’ community, much prized by society; lastly, they become part of the community of authors: they contribute through their writings and this moves the genre forward”.<sup>5</sup>

From the point of view of social construction, learners are applying the skills already acquired and at the same time are contributing to their own development through social interaction necessitating reflection, respect for the potential reader and the linguistic or formal research dictated by actual communication needs. In this respect, they are reactivating their formal “scription”-related skills by using the micro-systems of language enabling them to present themselves, share recipes and put forward objective descriptions and accounts of facts. They begin to write more spontaneously, using certain rules governing writing of this type. Subsequently, as a result of the comments

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1 Jacquinot, 1985.

2 As suggested by Virginie Trémion, 2006.

3 *Collins English Dictionary*, 2004.

4 Chantelauve, 1998.

5 Plane, 2002.

received, or the need to prove themselves, they are encouraged to move on to more subjective and personalised entries; this is linked to the communicative aspect of creative writing, creativity being the primary long-term objective.

Accordingly, writing – alongside reading – is a basic skill, being part and parcel of the natural and authentic context of social communication, and no longer seen as an activity *par excellence*. Learners have to write when they take notes, do exercises in class or at home, and in their preparations for individual or group presentations. They begin to write automatically and gradually are able to produce even very complex forms. Their motivation increases since what they produce is for a specific readership and what they write about relates to real situations.

## **Blogs as a response to psychological needs<sup>1</sup>**

By running their own blog, each blogger is seeking to express a particular need or needs. Some, by means of their postings and comments, wish to assert their ego, to feel valued and recognised. Others highlight the fact that they are part of the blogosphere, a community of bloggers all of whom have their own identity, character and uniqueness differentiating them from the others. There are also some who see blogs as a way of expressing themselves freely, incognito (being free to choose a pseudonym), remaining anonymous, working (reading or writing) at a time that suits them, in line with their own individual schedule and their own interests which they share with the other members of the community. Nonetheless, self-affirmation and/or self-assertion in the eyes of others requires appropriate ways and means and success is subject to a number of conditions.

## **Advantages of project participation vis-à-vis the challenge of writing**

A community of bloggers, unlike the publication of an individual blog on sites that offer this service, obliges learners to become a member, which means taking responsibility, taking a methodical approach to learning, respecting others and sharing in complete security.<sup>2</sup> All virtual exchanges take place in a threefold context:

- the class;
- the corresponding class;
- between teachers, guests and the public.

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1 According to the classification to be found on: [www.lesblogs.com/article.php3?id\\_article=45](http://www.lesblogs.com/article.php3?id_article=45).

2 For two reasons: the site is secure and the teacher is entitled to moderate messages.

Writing in the knowledge that what is written will be read by such a broad readership obliges learners to be creative and in control, writing in line with their own decisions as regards not only the choice of topic but also linguistic and form-related aspects, asking themselves questions such as “How am I going to write?” “What forms shall I use?” “What do I want to say?” Here, it would appear that the learner’s success depends on the application, in consultation with the teacher, of a number of basic principles, such as:

- awareness of the objective of the task;
- giving meaning to what is written;
- expressing oneself freely (even in the case of supervised work);
- practical application of previously learned linguistic and inter-disciplinary skills;
- bearing in mind the listener or reader;
- greater emphasis on creativity than on perfect grammar or spelling.

In order to ensure the learners’ success in the exercise, they must have been prepared for the tasks to be accomplished, assisted in the preparation of their text(s), given feedback following posting and encouraged to read and reply to the others.

Learners’ individual writing projects focused on two aspects: familiarity with IT tools and learning writing skills. These required considerable preparation work, carried out in two stages:

*I. Familiarisation with the tool in order to:*

- get to know and understand the IT context and environment;
- acquire the linguistic and technical skills to be able to navigate easily through the site and to make it aesthetically pleasing.

*II. Learning writing skills in order to:*

- acquire the linguistic and cultural skills necessary to communicate their own ideas and understand those of others;
- build on what had been learned through practice in the class, for example, orally;
- plan a written text (requiring a choice of form and content);
- manage and analyse the work accomplished;
- post the final product on the blog;
- read and react to comments from others.

Once the written work has been posted, the teacher steps in to moderate (or not) the messages posted and indicate the corrections to be made, the grammar points to be



revised, the vocabulary to be learned, etc. The same principles apply to the posting of comments, except that learners are given greater freedom in this case. Replies to others' comments, which help individual spontaneity, are firmly rooted in genuine communication and encourage people to progress further in the learning (and self-learning) process.

## Topics addressed

In addition to methodological aspects, teachers always have to consider the proposed choice of topics and written forms. An analysis of the blogs written during the project shows that there was a wide variety of both topics and forms, although mostly they tied in with the curricula. Such variety seems essential to avoid boredom. Blogs have therefore given an added dimension to the learners' writing exercises, enabling them to apply certain writing techniques hitherto rarely or never used in class.

Learners had two opportunities to practise – in the classroom,<sup>1</sup> supervised by the teacher, and at home<sup>2</sup> without any direct support – and had at their disposal the blog sites, the writing skills they had been taught and a good measure of freedom in their choice of subject and the partner/correspondent with whom they remained in contact, communicated and exchanged ideas in the form of comments.

Here are some examples of the type of texts and subjects seen in the posts:

Type of text written in the blog	Nature and content of the published text
Persuasive	Personal opinions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ criticism of Valentine's Day</li> <li>▪ opinion on friendship</li> <li>▪ relationships with parents</li> <li>▪ obesity</li> <li>▪ driving in Malta</li> </ul> Critiques of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ books</li> <li>▪ films</li> <li>▪ performances</li> </ul>

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1 Topics were mostly suggested by teachers, tying in with the curriculum.

2 Learners worked either on subjects studied in class, or on their own choice of subject, which represented more of a challenge for them.

Type of text written in the blog	Nature and content of the published text
Informational	<p>Travel accounts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ trip to Nepal</li> <li>▪ a Dutch class' visit to France</li> </ul> <p>Information about a website consulted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Referral to Wikipedia</li> </ul> <p>History of a country, place or event:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ brief overview of historic events in France</li> <li>▪ information on Ljubljana</li> <li>▪ information on the medieval fortress of “Baba Vida”</li> <li>▪ information on the town of St George in Bulgaria</li> <li>▪ overview of the history of the Olympic Games</li> </ul>
Narrative	<p>Travel diary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ diary kept by learners from the Netherlands during their stay in France</li> </ul>
Explanatory	<p>Biographies of singers/groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ much writing on musicians and groups in the blogs of most learners</li> </ul> <p>Report on an event:</p> <p><i>personal:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ weekends</li> <li>▪ trips: visits to the museum, radio station</li> </ul> <p><i>family:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ birthday</li> </ul> <p><i>public:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Festival of “La Francophonie”</li> <li>▪ carnivals in Malta and Slovenia</li> <li>▪ St Patrick’s Day in Ireland</li> </ul> <p>Traditions and customs in different countries:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Easter traditions</li> <li>▪ carnival costumes</li> </ul>
Descriptive	<p>Descriptions of towns and cities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prague (Czech Republic)</li> </ul>

Type of text written in the blog	Nature and content of the published text
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Vidin (Bulgaria)</li> </ul> Descriptions of people: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ friends (character traits)</li> </ul>
Volitive	Greetings for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Valentine’s Day</li> <li>▪ Women’s Day</li> <li>▪ Easter</li> <li>▪ Mother’s Day</li> <li>▪ Bulgarian wine festival</li> </ul>
Prospective	Dreams, plans: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ found mainly on the blogs of students thinking of their future</li> </ul>
Rhetorical or poetic	Poems: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ on experiences</li> <li>▪ feelings</li> </ul>
Instructional	Recipes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ gratin dauphinois</li> <li>▪ chicken soup</li> </ul>

## **Blogs and intercultural exchanges**

Teachers are faced with an additional challenge in co-operative projects where the participants are mainly from a range of different cultures. They are required not only to teach the language and culture with their own specific aspects, but they also have to consider the possible linkages between the culture of a native French speaker and the culture of those learning French. Contacts made via blogs have inevitably given rise to intercultural exchanges or a process of acculturation stimulated by the participants themselves, with teachers responsible for ensuring balance.

## So why write?

Everything written that is stored on an electronic medium (primarily blogs) in a given spatial and temporal context can help implement a teaching approach where the emphasis is on language acquisition through peer-group co-operation, where language is not merely an objective but a means of achieving an end, in particular communication, being part of a community, and asserting one's identity, difference and authenticity.

Accordingly, the reply to the question "why write?" is a combination of all the following:

- to communicate unhindered;
- to break down borders (the Internet does this impeccably);
- to convey each individual's personal experience (blogs are a sort of online diary), directed to another person, who will be enriched by it;
- to exercise one's critical thinking;
- to be able to stand back from the content, review it and reword it rationally.

Ultimately, the new means of storing information, such as blogs, make it possible to "extend communication beyond mere personal contact"<sup>1</sup> and make human relationships more open, leading to mutual understanding and awareness via the Internet. These can come about via co-operative learning using the new generation of digital tools, complementing the more "traditional" methods. The main concern will therefore be how best to accommodate them appropriately in the approach to teaching and learning.

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# A feature set for an educational blogging platform

**Mario Camilleri**

Our students have changed radically. Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach.

*(Prensky, 2001)*

Blogs were one of the first of the Web 2.0 applications to achieve widespread popularity. They were also the first to have had any impact on education, with educational blogging being possibly the best known Web 2.0 success story of the past few years.

Historically, the roles of Web media producers and consumers have been clearly demarcated, with consumers requiring minimal skills and resources and having little or no control over the content, and producers requiring production expertise and access to tools for creating, managing and presenting Web content (Lindahl and Blount, 2003).

## Blogging platforms

Blogging platforms have modified these roles in three principal ways:

- by simplifying the process of producing, presenting and publishing Web content through the use of WYSIWYG text editors and predefined presentation templates, blogging platforms have made it possible for anyone to publish to the Web;
- by providing content consumers with a subscription mechanism (usually through RSS or a similar syndication protocol), blogging platforms have enabled consumers to synthesise customised pages from content originating on various blogs of interest;
- by allowing content producers to cross reference content using mechanisms such as trackback and pingback, blogging platforms have made it possible to create and support online “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998).

Most educational blogs have used one of the many general purpose commercial or open-source blogging platforms or services around, such as Manila or the free-hosted Blogger and WordPress. These platforms were not specifically designed for education and do not necessarily model the sort of interactions which take place between teachers and pupils, and between pupils themselves in a traditional learning context. This is not

in itself a bad thing – indeed, it may provide just the opportunity to break out of the traditional teacher-centric mode and embrace a more open, peer-to-peer learning style.

The only blogging platform currently known to the project team which was specifically designed for classroom use is David Warlick's Class Blogmeister (<http://classblogmeister.com>). However, for the purpose of investigating educational blogging platform design issues in this project, it was decided to build one from the ground up, starting with a simple blogging kernel to which features could be added as teachers' and students' requirements and expectations grew with experience.

In a seminal paper, David Squires (1999) advocates the principle of "volatile design" for educational software – a type of design which allows learners sufficient freedom and flexibility to personalise and reconfigure their own virtual learning environment to "resonate with their own needs". Squires argues that since (according to the constructivist model) learning is essentially a subversive activity, educational software needs to be designed with "incorporated subversion". Within this framework, the designer's role is to come up with just the right set of features which can be recombined by the learner in a variety of ways to achieve personal aims. In designing the blogging platform for this project, the project team attempted to strike a balance between flexibility and ease of use.

## **Design brief**

The primary distinguishing design objectives of this blogging platform can be summarised as follows:

- to allow teachers to review their students' writings and control their publication;
- to provide students with a supportive environment in which they could develop their writing skills;
- to support a closed, safe community of language learners and teachers within which to experiment with the use of blogs in the class;
- to provide mechanisms to support networking between students, dialogue and cross-referencing between students' writing;
- to allow users to customise and personalise the platform.

The platform design brief called for a point-and-click interface which would not require the user to have to resort to any HTML scripting and would provide as near a word-processing environment as possible within the constraints of a Web-based, cross-platform application.

The front end had to run on as wide a range of platforms as possible, and was not to assume any features beyond what the majority of browsers support straight out of the



box, effectively ruling out a Java or a Flash implementation and limiting front-end functionality to Javascript. Moreover, the back-end was to run on IIS 5 with ASP and MS Access for the database back-end. MS Access turned out to be inadequate for a community in excess of 600 users – a more robust DBMS such as MySQL or MS SQL Server would have been a better choice.

## **Deconstructing weblogs**

A blog was defined as a sequence of textual postings (sometimes called articles by analogy with journalism), each having an optional title and at most one image, arranged in chronological order from most to least recently published and displayed on a number of pages, with the most recent postings on the first page. Fundamentally, blogs are a very simple technology – their power comes from the versatility and freedom this very simplicity permits.

The platform was required to enable users to manage such a list of postings – creating, editing and deleting postings. Ease of use was considered of primary importance, even at the cost of some decreased flexibility. Thus the text editor used to edit posts was required to work in WYSIWYG mode<sup>1</sup> and would not require users to compose their posts using raw HTML. Inevitably, some users felt this was too restrictive, particularly since some Web 2.0 services require blog owners to insert prescribed code snippets into their blogs (for example as proof of ownership when registering a blog with Technorati). Consequently, an HTML mode was later enabled in the editor to allow users to work directly in HTML if they so desired, although this introduced a potential security risk.

## **Blogspace navigation**

In addition, the software was required to support a largish, closed community of learners – without such a community, it was thought that students would not be guaranteed an audience for their writings. Because it was expected to have in excess of 600 users on the system (about 20 schools with an average of 30 students from each) it was considered necessary to somehow organise the blogs in a logical way to make it easier to navigate the blogspace. A hierarchical structure was adopted, with blog owners being responsible for creating and optionally moderating child blogs. Using this organisation, blogs were grouped into two language tracks, each with a number of teacher blogs and their respective student blogs. This structure was found to be

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<sup>1</sup> The open-source cross-platform editor FCKeditor by Frederico Caldeira Knabben was used for this platform. This editor is distributed under the GNU General Public License, and is available at: [www.fckeditor.net](http://www.fckeditor.net).

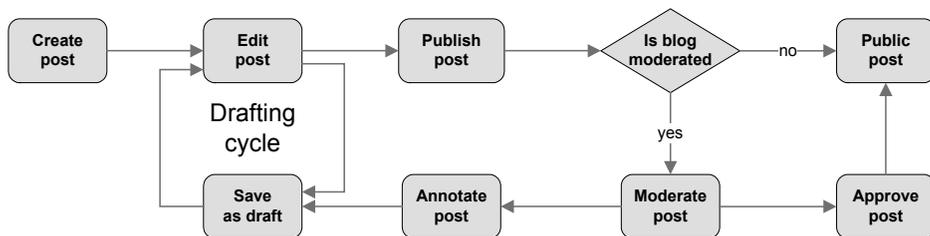
sufficiently flexible to allow a variety of configurations – for example, some schools preferred to have a school blog containing a number of teacher blogs, while teachers could create multiple class blogs if they so desired. The hierarchical organisation of blogs successfully mirrored the hierarchical way institutionalised education is usually organised.

However, it was considered desirable to allow navigating the blogspace in a less hierarchical fashion by following links between blogs which cut across the hierarchy and reflected better the social affinities between learners. Users could pick “blog buddies” from anywhere within the community, and shortcut links to these would appear in the blogger’s blogroll. A reciprocal function allowed users to list bloggers who had chosen them as their blog buddies. It was hoped that these features would go some way to promote networking between the different classes and countries.

Central to the platform design is a one-to-one correspondence between users and blogs – each user is permitted one blog, and each blog belongs to exactly one user. With hindsight, the decision to allow only one blog per user was found to be an unacceptable limitation. Time and again situations arose where it would have been desirable to allow a user to own multiple blogs, to allow multiple users to post to the same blog (a community blog), or even to allow users to have no blog (an authenticated observer role).

## Workflow model

The workflow model adopted is illustrated in the following diagram:



This model was meant to reflect the writing process in the language classroom, with students iterating through a number of revisions both privately and with help from their teachers before the work is considered publishable.

The drafting cycle permits learners to create a post and revise it any number of times before sending it off for review by the teacher. Because we knew from experience gained during a previous ECML project that in some cultures teachers are concerned about the correctness and appropriateness of what their students publish, a moderation facility was included so that teachers could optionally moderate what their students wrote before allowing it to become public. Teachers were free to turn off this

moderation feature for individual students since some argued for greater student freedom and responsibility, yet in practice almost all teachers chose to retain editorial control over their class' output.

## **Blog moderation**

This simple moderation mechanism proved inadequate in some cases – in retrospect, a more flexible system which allowed any teacher or even a group of teachers to assume editorial responsibility for a student's blog would have been preferable.

Two design decisions relating to moderation proved somewhat controversial:

- moderated students were not permitted to edit or delete their postings once the moderator had approved their publication. This was done to avoid having the teacher re-moderate posts every time students made the slightest modification. Students found this too limiting, although one can argue that it encourages students to take responsibility for what they choose to publish since realistically, once an article is published, it passes into the public domain and any clarifications or elaborations the author wishes to make should be done in a subsequent article or as addenda to the original article;
- comments were not moderated. This was done principally to encourage student dialogue by removing editorial latency from the commenting process.

The moderation facility was coupled with an annotation feature to facilitate private dialogue between teachers and pupils – a teacher could annotate a post presented by a student for moderation with a helpful comment before sending it back to the student for revision. This process models the review and support functions teachers often perform in a writing class. This facility, however, did not prove very popular with teachers.

## **User accounts and school-safe blogging**

Dron (2006) argues for the need to give learners opportunities to practice in a safe environment to build up their self-confidence before venturing out into the global community, and relates how dismayed student bloggers in his course were when instead of comments to their posts they started receiving spam and trackbacks from pornographic and gambling sites.

To address learner safety concerns, students in this project were assigned protected accounts which hid personal particulars from casual browsers. Students of course were free to adopt any pseudonym they wished in order to preserve their anonymity, and could opt not to provide an email address in their profile – however, where an email

address was provided, this was only visible to authenticated community members. Similarly, the post commenting function was only enabled for authenticated users, making it easy to track any abuse.

These safety provisions contrast with the desire of many students to advertise their online presence through openly posting their photo, email address and personal particulars on their blog. As a result of requests from both teachers and students for a more visible Web presence, a user's personal profile was extended to include particulars such as their Skype contact and Technorati blog subscription.

## **Promoting dialogue and community**

Promoting dialogue between learners was considered to be one of the major objectives of using blogs in language education. Various researchers (Kurhila et al., 2002; Nardi et al., 2004; Williams and Jacobs, 2004; Du et al., 2005) have commented on the positive effect the social dialogue promoted by blogging communities has on learning.

Two mechanisms to support dialogue were incorporated in the platform – comments and linkbacks. Commenting is the traditional dialogue mode inherited from Internet fora, with users reacting to a post by appending their comments. This dialogue style relegates comments to a subsidiary role, since by their very nature they are not complete articles in their own right. Although commenting has its uses, blogging promotes a different dialogue paradigm, with bloggers writing articles in response to other articles.

For a dialogue to develop in this paradigm, articles commenting on each other must contain reciprocal links. A number of linkback mechanisms have been developed to automate this. For the purpose of this project, a limited form of the pingback protocol (Langridge and Hickson, 2002) was implemented which worked only between posts on the platform. On some browsers, this made it possible to link to an article simply by dragging its permalink<sup>1</sup> into the editing window. Nevertheless, pinging proved unpopular with learners, although the problem seems to have been conceptual rather than technical.

## **Personalisation and other features**

The importance of personalisation in electronic environments is well recognised (AoC NILTA, 2006). Two elements of personalisation are customisation – enabling learners to reconfigure their learning space to suite their learning style – and ownership – enabling users to create and manage their online identity. A simple template

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1 A permanently assigned code uniquely identifying an article in a blog.

mechanism was developed for this platform allowing users to choose from a gallery of over 40 predefined templates. Although no provision was made for users to customise their chosen templates, at least two students volunteered their own HTML/CSS designs which have been incorporated into the platform.

Other features were added as teachers' and learners' demands and expectations grew. Syndication support was requested by some teachers as a way to keep track of what their class was posting. RSS2 autodiscovery coupled with the ability to export one's blogroll in OPML format enabled teachers to quickly subscribe to all blogs they wanted to keep an eye on using news aggregators such as Bloglines ([www.bloglines.com](http://www.bloglines.com)) and SharpReader ([www.sharpreader.net](http://www.sharpreader.net)).

The ability to export blogs was also a commonly requested feature. Some teachers wanted students to include a printout of their blog in their school portfolios, so a mechanism to list all posts – comments, images and all – as a single printer-friendly Web page was included. Other teachers wanted to port their students' blogs to one of the many free or commercial platforms. Since there is no standard blog file format, the reasonably widely supported MoveableType format was used. Exporting a blog in this format also served to back-up one's work, although the platform does not yet have a complementary import feature.

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Peter Ford read Modern Dutch Studies at Hull University, graduating in 1991. He then studied for a Masters Degree in Area Studies at the Erasmus University Rotterdam and Hull University, gaining a distinction in 1993. After a number of years teaching in the UK, he moved to the Netherlands and spent five years teaching primary and secondary schoolchildren at the British School of Amsterdam. He believes in the importance of enjoying teaching and wants pupils to enjoy learning as well. He has an enthusiasm for realising the educational potential of information and communications technology. He is currently Senior Consultant at ICT4Schools Ltd in the UK and manages their Weblogs4Schools initiative.

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# BLOGS

Web journals in language education

## Blogs:

### web journals in language education

Mario Camilleri, Peter Ford, Helena Leja, Valerie Sollars

Weblogs (or blogs) are possibly the most visible of the Web 2.0 technologies, described by some as “push-button publishing for the people”. One commentator describes blogs as “impressive spontaneous acts of decentralised journalism”, while another talks of the power of blogs to “transform both writers and readers from audience to public and from consumer to creator”.

This publication is one of the outcomes of an ECML project which, over the course of three years, investigated the design of an educational blogging platform and its use in the language classroom. It is intended for the adventurous language teacher who wishes to harness the potential of the writable Web in his or her language class, the teacher trainer who promotes a social constructivist paradigm, and the educational software designer who seeks to create flexible educational tools which incorporate “subversion”.

The accompanying CD-Rom contains the entire corpus of blogs – warts and all – produced by project participants (over 4 000 posts and 9 000 comments), as well as the educational blogging platform prototype developed for this project, which is an open-source release under the GNU General Public License.

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