Using LiveJournal for Authentic Communication in EFL Classes

Aaron Patric Campbell

edp03apc [at] sheffield.ac.uk

Ryukoku University (Seta, Japan)

http://www8.ocn.ne.jp/~apc33/

This paper describes a way for teachers to set-up and facilitate authentic international communication in the EFL classroom using LiveJournal.com: a free, hosted weblog tool with a 1.9 million-member-strong community of active users and built-in social networking features. It also highlights the potential that social software, like LiveJournal, has for encouraging greater autonomy and self-direction in foreign language learning.

A Challenge in EFL

Unlike most of their ESL counterparts, many EFL students lack access to native speakers for authentic communication, be it speaking or writing. As soon as they leave the classroom, they re-enter a world full of speakers of their own first language, leaving them with little opportunity to use what they've learned. Various approaches to overcoming this problem have led EFL practitioners to design and implement pedagogic strategies incorporating internet based communicative activities, such as the use of keypals, tandem language exchanges, chat, message boards, and discussion forums. Recently, the use of weblogs in the classroom is yet another such approach; one in which students publish their writing and receive comments from outsiders, potentially leading to discussion and further use of the target language. Indeed, several recent papers have appeared in the literature (Duber 2002, Campbell 2003, Godwin-Jones 2003, Johnson 2004, and Dieu 2004) highlighting the possible uses of weblogs for language learning. Fiedler (2003) defines the weblog as a 'reflective conversational tool for self-organized learning', which best captures the constructivist spirit with which the tool can be used for fostering autonomous, self-directed learning approaches.

One of the major difficulties of using weblogs in EFL is lack of participation from readers outside the classroom. Some form of mutual interest must exist between the writer and reader if the latter is to respond in a meaningful way. Simply posting thoughts, journal entries, or homework assignments on a weblog isn't sufficient to generate an immediate and sustained interest for any given reader, nor is it likely that a potentially interested reader would come across the site, given the enormity of activity on the internet. This, therefore, places the time consuming burden of networking on the teacher to find potentially interested readers willing to commit to helping an EFL learner. Most EFL learner blogs run a high risk of stagnation otherwise.

Why LiveJournal?

LiveJournal addresses this problem by offering a free weblog hosting service that also facilitates social interaction with members from around the world based on their mutual interests. Learners write and the software helps them find readers and conversational partners with its 'interests', 'friends', and 'community' features. The merger of social networking and blogging creates a 'social semantic web' (Downes 2004), where content and identity are bundled together. In a microcosmic way, LiveJournal may indeed offer a glimpse of the direction in which internet communication at large is evolving. This is excellent news for EFL learners, for it presents them with opportunities to converse with people outside the classroom in a meaningful way, putting to use what is learned in class and being exposed to authentic usage of the language. Below are some other advantages to using LiveJournal in EFL classes:

- LiveJournal hosts a community of approximately 1.9 million active users, 90% of whom are under the age of 25 (Bauer, 2004), making it an ideal peer group of potential conversational partners for EFL learners at the high school and college level.

- After using LiveJournal consistently for several weeks, learners will begin to develop a network of friends centered on their own personally defined interests. What emerges is a cluster of unique personal learning communities in the target language, each transcending the traditional, cultural, linguistic, and geographic boundaries of the classroom.
- As ownership belongs to the learners and their online identities are situated in an authentic, flexible, and unpredictable international context, they can experience a degree of power and freedom not normally granted by their institutions of learning. The teacher should act as a monitor and facilitator of the process. Once the semester is finished, most students should have the skills and means to continue blogging their own, thus encouraging them to take control over their own learning.

How to Use LiveJournal in EFL Classes

In the spring of 2004, I made the use of LiveJournal a central component in my reading and writing classes for second year university EFL students in Japan, who met once a week for a semester. In addition to working out of a writing textbook and doing face-to-face activities in class, students were required to write weekly on their LiveJournal weblogs. Homework assignments were not only designed to encourage students to put to use what they were learning in class, but also to instill positive and responsible blogging behaviors necessary for success in a text based community of English speakers; such as the importance of linking, commenting, responding to comments, proper source attribution, etc.

Based on my recent experience, what follows is a step-by-step, practical guide for successful implementation of LiveJournal in EFL classes. It should, of course, be adapted according to the circumstances of each classroom. Also, weekly homework assignments should, in part, serve to drive the development of the stages listed below.

1. **Getting Started**: Students will need to sign up for their own LiveJournal accounts. Make sure that each student has a personal email account *before* attempting to sign up. As part of the registration process, LiveJournal sends out a confirmation email containing a link necessary for activation of the new account. Remind your students that their websites will be available for public viewing and that it is perfectly acceptable for them to use pseudonyms or nicknames when signing up.
2. **Collecting Student URLs**: After registration, require your students to email you their new URLs. That way, you will be able to match screen names and blog titles with actual student names. It is also advisable to create a centralized, tutor weblog with links to all student sites (i.e. thenewtanuki.blogspot.com - screenshot). This can act as an online focal point for the class, where the teacher can make announcements, point students to interesting links for self-study, and highlight student successes with the new medium.
3. **Customizing Sites**: Once students have signed up, ask them to immediately to select a layout and color scheme for their weblogs. LiveJournal provides a generous selection of ready-to-go templates and colors that can be chosen with the click of a mouse. Simple customization is important, for it helps to create a sense of ownership and unique online identity from the very beginning.
4. **Posting, Editing, and Commenting**: Students should now practice creating and editing posts on their weblogs. They should also learn how to make comments on other LiveJournal sites and answer comments on their own sites. A good place to practice this is on the weblogs of other classmates. Encourage your students to post and comment frequently. Especially important is for students to understand the importance of answering comments posted on their own pages. By not doing so, conversation cannot develop. Once students demonstrate proficiency in posting, commenting, and editing; they are ready to interact with the native speaking community at large.
5. **Setting Interests**: Do an activity getting them to list their top ten interests in life. Then, have them each go to their 'manage personal info' pages and enter these ten words into the 'Interests' box. Ask them to be specific. For example, instead of listing 'music', they should list the name of a specific artist (Enya), group (Aerosmith), or genre (hip-hop). At this point, students may also wish to upload a small picture to represent themselves during community interaction. Most of my students chose pictures of small animals or cartoon characters.
6. **Finding Friends**: Have students go to their 'User Info' page (screenshot #1), find their 'Interests' list, and click on the first word that appears. LiveJournal will then reveal a list of communities and other users who have also listed the same word as one of their interests. The students should then follow one of the links and skim the contents on that site, continuing to the same on other sites until an interesting community or person is found. Then, the student should add this person or community to his/her friends list by clicking on the 'add user to friends list' button on the other person's 'user info' page. The student should then comment on one or more of the posts on the new site added. I recommended that

my students strive to find two new friends per week.

7. **Reading the Friends Page and Responding**: After 'making friends', students should make frequent visits their 'friends' page, which aggregates the postings of all the friends on their list. Reading the friends page eliminates the need of students having to surf from site to site to read what they're new friends have written; it all comes to one page. Students can also make comments directly from the Friends page. Reading the Friends page and responding with comments should become a part of each student's weekly language learning activities. As McGarry (1995, in Benson 2001, p125) argues, working with authentic materials in language learning plays a major role in fostering autonomy in learners by enabling them to match learning opportunities to their needs.

8. **Community Building**: At this point, students should be in midst of reading and writing in an authentic setting. They will be meeting a variety of people; learning new language patterns, idioms, and vocabulary; and striving to understand comments that were posted on their site or things that were written by their new online acquaintances (screenshot #2). They might even be so lucky as to receive help from outsiders (screenshot #3) From here, it is necessary to teach them the importance of making links in their postings to other users and sources of relevant information on the internet. Linking is vital for community building and will in turn attract more interest to their sites. Along with learning how and when to link comes the ethical practice of attributing sources properly, which is necessary for building trust amongst readers.

9. **Assigning Homework**: Have the students post something weekly, for a quiet page quickly leads to a stagnant one. Scaffold the students' online behavior by designing homework assignments that require putting to use what is studied in class in combination with writing about their own interests. Use your imagination. If more friends are needed, give them the task of finding someone who fits a specific profile. If linking needs to be practiced, have them introduce a new friend on their blog or connect an interest with a source of information on the internet (screenshot #4). If correct attribution is to be learned, either have them quote another blogger and write something in response or have them find a controversial article and post their opinion of it. Try to view homework assignments as the key to unlocking the doors of self-access and learner autonomy. Remind them that their weblog belongs to them and that they are free to write anything at anytime. Urge them to post outside of homework assignments, as they would in a free journal.

Keeping Track of the Action

As your students begin their individual journeys upon the open waters of internet communication, your job as the teacher will be to keep track of all the activity, not only for the purposes of evaluation, but also to step in and help when necessary. The easiest and most efficient way to accomplish this is through the use of a free, web-based aggregator like Bloglines, which will allow you to subscribe to the RSS feed of each student weblog. RSS, which stands for 'Real Simple Syndication', is a 'behind-the-scenes code', usually referred to as a "feed", which allows a reader (the teacher) to subscribe to the content being generated on that weblog. In this way, the content comes to you instead of you having to go to it (Richardson, 2004). By using Bloglines to subscribe to student RSS feeds, the teacher no longer needs to visit a student site to see if it has been updated. Furthermore, the teacher can:

- be notified of new postings when they happen;
- comment on student postings directly from the aggregator;
- organize weblogs by students' real names rather than pseudonyms;
- view a student's entire semester of postings in a single click (screenshot #5).

The use of an RSS feed-reader saves tremendous time and is an invaluable tool for educators seeking to use weblogs in their EFL classes.

Conclusion

This paper has described how LiveJournal - a large weblog community with built in social networking features – can be used in EFL classes to provide students with a target language community centered around their own personal interests. Such personalization in an authentic conversational environment can motivate students to take more control over their own learning, thus encouraging a move toward greater learner autonomy. Like Illich states, "Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting" (1970, p56). In the end, they just might have fun doing

it, as most of my students did.

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Appendix

- LiveJournal can be found at http://www.LiveJournal.com
- Bloglines can be found at http://www.bloglines.com
- Links to the author's LiveJournal student blogs can be found at http://thenewtanuki.blogspot.com
- For teachers interested in learning more about using weblogs in ESL/EFL classes visit:
  - Yahoo! Discussion Group: ESL / EFL Weblogs at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/esl_efl_blogs/
  - ESL / EFL Weblogs: Creating and using weblogs in ESL / EFL at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/esl_efl_blogs/