Weblogs for Use with ESL Classes

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The purpose of this paper is to introduce three ways that weblogs can be used to support ESL classroom learning. After defining what a weblog is, I will proceed to show how weblogs can be put into immediate use in the ESL classroom by means of three distinct types: the tutor weblog, learner weblog, and class weblog. I will also mention the software available for creating and maintaining weblogs.

What is a Weblog?

A weblog (or 'blog') can be thought of as an online journal that an individual can continuously update with his or her own words, ideas, and thoughts through software that enables one to easily do so. Unlike a standard website, weblog entries are made by typing directly into the browser and with the click of a button are instantly published on the internet. All basic document formatting, like spacing, bold, italics, underline, and creating links, requires no knowledge of HTML or FTP (File Transfer Protocol), so that anyone who can type, copy, and paste can create and maintain a weblog. However, with a very basic knowledge of HTML, users can extend their ability to customize the layout of their blog and even add pictures to enhance its attractiveness. Similar to an open journal, the accumulation of writings and other content creates both a record of learning and a resource for others. Furthermore, a weblog is interactive, in the sense that readers can respond to any given entry with a comment and even threaded discussions can take place depending on the software chosen.

Even though weblogs have been in existence since the very beginning of the world wide web itself (Winer, 2002), free, commercially available 'blogging software' of the type discussed in this article, seems to have made its first appearance in July of 1999 (Blood, 2000). Because of the relative quickness and ease of publishing this type of software affords, the number of users has grown tremendously since then, and we can now observe blogs being used for personal, educational, journalistic, and commercial purposes. In the following section, I will introduce three possible ways that weblogs could be put to immediate use with ESL classroom learning.

Three Types of Weblogs for Use in ESL Classrooms

The Tutor Blog

This is a type of weblog that is run by the tutor for the learners. It serves the following purposes:

- **It gives daily reading practice to the learners**. Sometimes students find assigned reading material too boring, difficult, or hard to relate with. This is because it is often written with another purpose in mind. So who better to write to them than the person who knows them best: the teacher. Entries are kept short, geared towards the learner interest, and linked to related online sources for further reading if desired. Vocabulary used in class can be recycled this way. New vocabulary words can be linked to definitions on other sites found with a search engine. Furthermore, a casual, natural writing style can be used by the tutor to develop learner familiarity with native language patterns.

- **It promotes exploration of English websites**. Any entry made by the tutor can and ought to encourage further exploration of the Internet in English by linking to related articles, and content based websites. For those learners reluctant to step outside the comfort of exploring the Web in their native language, being led to interesting English language sites will increase their confidence and help to overcome their aversion.

- **It encourages online verbal exchange by use of comment buttons**. At the bottom of each entry, any blog reader can

make a comment that can be read and further commented on by all who access the site. Ask your students questions, give them riddles, challenge their views; whatever it takes to encourage them to comment.

- **It provides class or syllabus information**. Entries in the blog can also serve to remind students about homework assignments and upcoming discussion topics. Links can be provided to sites that introduce relevant topics of discussion. The tutor can also follow up on difficult areas of classroom work that might need review or clarification. In addition, a permanent link to the classroom syllabus and rules can be included on the blog.

- **It serves as a resource of links for self-study**. In the right and/or left margins of the blog, permanent links can be set-up and organized to aid the learner in self-study, for example links to online quizzes, English news sites, key-pal networks, audio and video files for listening practice and ESL interactive websites.

The Learner Blog

These are blogs that are either run by individual learners themselves or by small collaborative groups of learners. In ESL, learner blogs may be best suited for reading and writing classes. A common reading assignment can be followed by blog postings on the thoughts of each learner or group of learners. Furthermore, the act of constructing the blog may encourage the use of search engines and net surfing in English to find the appropriate sites to which links can be made. This will empower the learner to direct the reader to sites of choice for further reading. Individually, blogs can be used as journals for writing practice, or as free-form templates for personal expression. The idea here is that students can get writing practice, develop a sense of ownership, and get experience with the practical, legal, and ethical issues of creating a hypertext document. In addition, whatever they write can instantly be read by anyone else and, due to the comment features of the software, further exchange of ideas is promoted. Tutors can even run a mega-blog of select topics of interest gleaned from student blogs so that the broader issues are brought into focus on a single website.

The Class Blog

This type of blog is the result of the collaborative effort of an entire class. The following are some possible uses:

- In conversation-based classes it could be used like a free-form bulletin board for learners to post messages, images, and links related to classroom discussion topics. It could also be a space for them to post thoughts on a common theme assigned for homework.

- With intermediate and advanced learners, class blogs might also useful for facilitating project-based language learning, where learners can be given the opportunity to develop research and writing skills by being asked to create an online resource for others.

- Class blogs could also be used as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange. In this scenario, learners from different countries would have joint access and publishing rights to the blog. The entire exchange would then be transparent to all readers and could be followed and commented on by other learners, tutors, parents and friends.

- For reading and writing classes, it might also involve the use of knowledge management software, like Userland's Manila, that allows for a great deal of threaded discussion behind the scenes. Much like a publishing group, individual learners can be given varying amounts of responsibility to publish material arising from postings on the discussion list. The results of this effort are what is seen on a website by the public at large.

Weblog Software

For those looking for weblog software, there are several dozen choices at present, all of which have different features. One major issue to consider is whether or not installation is required. Some weblog software is run on a central, web-based server, while others require to be downloaded and installed on a local server. For teachers without much technical know-how or support, the first option might be the easiest. Another important issue is cost. Some weblog software is free, while others may start at $5 and run up to $100 dollars a year or more to operate. Companies that are presently offering free blogging software and hosting services without commercial advertising are WebCrimson, Diaryland, UpSaid, and Pitas.com. Sign-up is very simple and only requires an email address. You and your students can be up and blogging in a short amount of time. Do some research to find out which software is the

best for your particular needs.

Conclusion

By introducing the three types of weblogs above and mentioning the software necessary, I hope to draw the attention of other practitioners to both the potential that weblogs have to support classroom-based ESL learning and the ease with which an ESL blogging project could be started.

Visit the Author's Blog

My tutor blog, called 'The New Tanuki' <http://thenewtanuki.blogspot.com/>, was made with software called 'Blogger' from Pyra Labs in San Francisco, and costs $15 a year without any commercial advertising. With commercial advertising it would have been free.

References

- Blood R (2000) *Weblogs: a history and perspective* <http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html> (accessed 08 Jan 2003).
- Winer D (2002) *The history of weblogs* <http://newhome.weblogs.com/historyOfWeblogs> (updated 17 May 2002, accessed 08 Jan 2003)

Appendix

- Companies offering **free** blogging software and hosting **without commercial advertising**:
  - http://www.diaryland.com/
  - http://www.pitas.com/
  - http://www.upsaid.com/
  - http://www.webcrimson.com/
- Freeware that can be installed on your own web server:
  - http://www.raelity.org/apps/blosxom/
  - http://www.noahgrey.com/greysoft/ (Greymatter)
  - http://phpnuke.org/
- Commercial software:
  - 'Blogger' comes from Pyra Labs, Inc.: http://www.blogger.com
  - Knowledge Management software called 'Manila' comes from Userland: http://www.userland.com/ It costs $299 for an educational license.
- To learn more about other weblog software and the companies providing it, please visit the resource page from Blogroots.com: http://www.blogroots.com/resources.blog or read this article from Microcontent News: http://www.microcontentnews.com/articles/blogware.htm

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