

# Creating a Learning Community Through Electronic Journaling

Anne Bollati

bollatia [at] bhcl.bhc.edu

Black Hawk College (Moline, IL, USA)

For two years I listened to comments about the benefits of using asynchronous discussion boards from my colleagues in the English and the Math Departments. "Community--a strong sense of community is built--students really get to know each other." Their enthusiasm was contagious, but I was skeptical of the value of such a tool to our ESL Program that already had small classes and was already a tightly knit group. However, not wanting to deny our students the opportunity to experience a new way of learning, I decided to make our intermediate writing class a web-enhanced course. Students make three entries per week to the board, thus eliminating the paper journals that had been part of the class.

Discussion boards are a very simple tool for both teacher and students to learn. The discussion board for the writing class is placed on the college's server. The teacher is then given the rights to the discussion board, which means that he/she has ultimate control and can add and delete both users and content. Once the board is established, the teacher enters the lists of users by name and student number and issues a generic password. After completing these few steps, the students are ready to receive a brief orientation to the board. Even computer novices can learn how to change the generic password to a personal one, to post an entry, and to respond to a classmate's journal. One 50 minute class period in a lab is more than sufficient to get the students started.

After the short orientation, students begin the writing project that will last for the rest of the sixteen-week semester. Every week the students open a conference begun by the teacher. In this conference, the teacher comments on the previous week's discussion board by summarizing the ideas of the students and commenting on interesting aspects of writing: effective language choices, well-focused examples, creative approaches to the assigned subject. Then, the teacher sets the stage for the next week's writing which always includes one specific writing task, one free journal topic, and three responses to classmates' entries. Sometimes the assigned topic relates to the in-class writing assignment; sometimes it relates to a current event; sometimes it is a response to a short piece of literature. Students' free journal writing varies greatly from comments on American culture to creative pieces such as solving a murder mystery.

At one level, electronic journals perform the same function as paper journals that provide a more personal, less structured, and less self-conscious writing opportunity for students learning highly structured academic writing. In addition, journals help students to develop writing fluency and to take risks while taking charge of their own writing. Journals also allow the teacher and the student to develop a more intimate form of communication.

I was pleasantly surprised that the electronic journals produced in class accomplished the above-stated purposes and many more. With comments taken from readings and from the evaluations of the students in this class, I will list below the added benefits of electronic journals:

1. Development of a sense of audience. The electronic journal expanded the audience for the students' writing. Now, they were writing for the whole class in addition to the instructor. As a consequence, they chose topics that were of interest to classmates and therefore would generate many responses. They often made reference to the ideas of other students while writing their own. Kate Newman in her article on electronic journals expressed this development well saying, "The audience, whether it be the teacher or a peer, responds to their writing not as an evaluator, but as a partner in communication." One of my students expressed this same idea a little differently, "I think that the discussion board is closer to speaking than writing because once one reads a message, he/she can reply to a classmate right at that moment."

Similar observations were made by Yu-mei Wang in her study of e-mail dialogue writing in an ESL reading and writing class. The e-mail group of students in her study tended to open and close their journals with greetings, asked more questions, and produced more language functions. The writing was also much more spontaneous. The students using the computers took less time to write than those creating paper journals because they did not produce drafts and did not use dictionaries. They felt that referring to the dictionary

slowed down the journal response time. Thus, the students in her study felt the same way as my student--the electronic journal writing is closer to speaking than to writing.

2. Development of a learning community. My colleagues were right. Students feel closer to each other by sharing this writing experience, even in a small ESL class. Almost all the students expressed pleasure in learning the "mindset" of their classmates. Sandra Kerka in her article on the role of journal writing in adult learning stated the "...these response journals have the power to build a community of learners through the process of critical co-reading and co-writing." A Chinese student in my class corroborates this point. "It was really interesting to read all of my classmates' articles because we got to know each other more and more from the discussion board. Maybe we can see each other every day, but we have no time to talk to each other because we are so busy doing homework."

3. Opportunities for the quieter students. Those students who feel uncomfortable speaking in class find in the discussion board the vehicle to express themselves to their classmates. In my class one of the shiest students became one of the most "talkative" and creative on the discussion board. After reading his comments, students often came to class saying, "Did you read X's journal--it was so interesting. He really made me think." This student wrote in his evaluation, "I could get many wonderful ideas from my friends, and I could also give many ideas to my friends. In addition, I told my thinking and my viewpoint that I could not let them know by talking in the class."

The discussion board also brought more tangible and practical benefits:

4. Learning to type quickly and to get over the fear of using the computer. Two of my students commented, "My experiences in the discussion board have been fantastic because I learned how to use computers a little bit and I practiced my typing, that is not very good still." Another student said, "At first, I was scared to work on the computers because I thought that I would break them, but later I knew that the computers are to be used by people like me. I feel happy because computers are becoming my friends."

5. Instructional tool and an efficient method of writing. This comment expresses it all, "I can see that writing on the computer is more fun because it corrects our errors (spell check) and we don't have to stack tons of paper in our bookshelves and book bags."

I have to admit that I was skeptical at first wondering whether the discussion board would be just another "gimmick" that would add little to well-established practice of journal writing. However, the positive and concrete comments of my students and the echoes of the comments of my colleagues proved that I was wrong. Kate Newman says about her experience with e-journals, "This extra twist to dialog journals was clearly a success." But I will give one of my students the last word, "Please suggest other teachers to use the discussion board. It is good for students to improve their English skill."

## Works Cited

- Kerka, Sondra. "Journal Writing and Adult Learning." ERIC Digest No. 174. ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Career and Vocational Education Columbus Ohio, 1996, Accessed at [http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed399413.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed399413.html) on 6/11/01.
- Newman, Kate. and Jan Strever. "Using Electronic Peer Audience and Summary Writing to Decentralize the Role of the Teacher." Journal of College Reading. Sept. 1997. Accessed at [http://www.gonzaga.edu/isp/ma\\_tesl/mtsl500/writing/esl\\_writing.htm](http://www.gonzaga.edu/isp/ma_tesl/mtsl500/writing/esl_writing.htm) on 6/11/01. (Offline when checked on 9/1/02.)
- Wang, Yu-mei. "E-mail Dialogue Journaling in an ESL Reading and Writing Classroom." ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education. Washington, D.C. 1966: 766--781. (ED 397 845).