

Web Journals in Language Education (BLOGS)

A peer-to-peer collaborative writing platform for language learning

Project description

Updated the 29 November 2006

Co-ordinator: **Mario Camilleri**, University of Malta, MALTA

Project team: **Valerie Sollars**, University of Malta, MALTA
Helena Leja, Teacher Training College, Rzeszów, POLAND
Peter Ford, ICT4Schools Ltd, Nottingham, UK

1. CONTEXT

The pedagogical rationale behind the use of Information and Communications Technologies in language education is firmly tied to the popularity of communicative language teaching approaches and constructivist (especially social constructivist) learning philosophies. Network mediated language activity offers benefits not otherwise available in a traditional classroom set-up – access to expert/native users of the language, access to a richly diverse community of interlocutors, authenticity of tasks and heightened motivation for the student to actively participate in dialogue using the target language.

Asynchronous first generation Internet tools such as email have been successfully used in foreign language education (see for example the eTandem Europa project¹) and remain a viable tool in the hands of experienced language educators. The scope for collaboration in such technologies however is limited. Collaborative, peer-to-peer asynchronous environments such as discussion fora and synchronous environments such as MOOs (immersive internet multi-player role-playing scenarios) offer more potential for communicative language use in a language learning context. However, the collaborative environment which has received most attention and generated most interest in recent years are *blogs* (web logs) – essentially a composite personal web site and online diary or journal organised either chronologically or thematically. Although journal writing has always been a favourite tool of language teachers, the public nature of a *blog* gives it a social, collaborative and intercultural dimension not otherwise present.

Although *blogs* are essentially on-line journals, they can also be used in collaborative ways, and usually are. Bloggers (writers of *blogs*) typically make rich use of hypertext to link to external content, especially other *blogs*, thus forming a dense mesh of cross-commented postings with links going to and from between journals.

This project investigates the use of *blogs* to promote collaborative, intercultural writing by secondary school-aged students of English and of French.

¹ The eTandem project was funded by the European Commission as part of the European Year of Languages 2001.

This project builds on the work developed and results obtained in ECML project 1.3.3 – ICT and Young Language Learners (2000-2003) – co-ordinated by Mario Camilleri and Valerie Sollars.

2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

General aims

- To investigate the use of peer-to-peer collaborative online writing environments within the context of language education.
- to create a collaborative web platform which allows language students to keep an online journal.
- to investigate cross-cultural virtual communities of language learners.

Specific objectives

- To design and implement a 2nd generation XML-based content-management platform which will enable students to publish an online journal without requiring any technical know-how. This publishing tool will incorporate features to promote collaborative writing by enabling students to cross reference their writing with that of other students in the same community, annotating and commenting their and other's writings, and linking to sites of common interest. Class-management and editorial features will also be implemented to enable teachers to monitor and (if so desired) exert editorial control over their students' published writing.
- to develop a language teaching methodology based on writing and publishing online journals within a cross-cultural collaborative framework
- to explore implications of using the technology for students' writing vis-à-vis assessment procedures.

3. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- To popularise web logs as a medium for collaborative language writing.
- to produce a publication discussing the theoretical rationale of the project, its realisation and outcomes, and cite examples of good collaborative writing practice.
- to publish an open-source language-independent content-management platform which is reusable and easily installed and configured even by someone with minimal technical expertise.
- to publish a corpus of writings created by students during the course of the project using the collaborative publishing platform.

Note: the product will be in the form of a CD with accompanying brochure.

4. ACTION PLAN

The project will be carried out in four phases – development, piloting, implementation and evaluation – and would involve the following events:

- 4 project team preparatory meetings (one of which involves also 3 or 4 teachers who will be piloting the project in their classes)
- 2 workshops (one to launch the implementation phase of the project and one to conclude and disseminate the results).

The following is a provisional time schedule:

Development phase

2004

January – March

The project team carries out preparatory research relating to the project theme. Items to be researched include:

- *the use of conventional journaling in language teaching (specifically in English and French);*
- *the use of web logs in education - examples of good practice;*
- *web log technologies and protocols.*

A website with links to online web logging resources will be set up and gradually expanded over the course of the project.

19-20 March

Meeting of project team in Graz.

Agenda:

- to review the preparatory work done so far;
- to draw up preliminary specifications for the web logging tool which will be used during the project;
- to identify teachers who will be participating in the pilot phase;
- to start work on a teacher training handbook;
- to prepare a schedule for the teacher training meeting to be held in December.

April – October

The project team undertakes preparatory work relating to the piloting phase, including:

- *to contact the teachers who will be participating in the piloting phase;*
- *to implement a prototype of the web logging tool which will be used for piloting the project;*
- *to prepare a draft of the teacher training handbook to be piloted during the teacher training meeting in December.*

Piloting phase

3-4 December

Meeting of project team + 3 or 4 teachers who will be involved in the piloting phase.

Agenda:

- to pilot the training handbook;
- to discuss methodological issues regarding the use of journaling (and specifically web journaling) in language education;
- to train the teachers in the use of the web logging tool;
- to discuss the logistics of the piloting phase;
- to adopt a set of evaluation criteria to be used at the end of the piloting phase.

2005

January – March

3 or 4 teachers: piloting of the project in three or four schools.

Project team: technical and pedagogical support to piloting teachers.

17 – 18 June

Meeting of project team to evaluate the piloting phase and prepare for the November workshop.

Implementation phase

23 – 26 November

Overall objectives and aims of the workshop

This 4-day ECML workshop will:

1. discuss methodological issues regarding the use of web journaling (weblogs) in language education;
2. train the teachers in the use of the web logging tool developed specifically for this project;
3. discuss the logistics of the implementation phase of this project.

Expected results of the workshop

1. Ideas and strategies for integrating weblogs into the language classroom.
2. Training of teachers in the use of the web tool.
3. Training of teachers in the effective use of web logging in teaching English or French as a foreign language.
4. Wide scale implementation of project among participating schools from ECML member states.

Participants' profile:

This workshop is intended for qualified and practising teachers of English or French teaching students between 13-16 years old, who have reached a minimum global competence level B1 in the target foreign language. Participants are expected to have basic ICT literacy (specifically in the use of e-mail and web browsers), and to have web access within their schools. Following the workshop, participants will be responsible for using Weblogs with at least one of their classes from January to March 2006.

It is crucial to the success of the workshop that participants:

1. are the same individuals who will actually carry out the project in their own classroom;
2. have basic IT skills (specifically word processing) and internet literacy (have used e-mail and browsed the web);
3. have class room access to the internet for one timetabled language lesson a week;
4. are practising, experienced teachers of English or French as a foreign language currently working with 13-16 year old students.

Ideally, participants will identify the class with which they will be carrying out the project before attending the workshop. It would also be helpful if participants bring with them to the workshop a list of the students in this class.

2006

January – March

Implementation of the project in all participating classes.

Evaluation phase

April – May

Formal evaluation of project by participants.

9-10 June

Project team: **meeting** in Graz to evaluate project and start work on publication.

24-25 November

Project team: **meeting** in Graz to work on publication and prepare for the concluding dissemination workshop.

2007

29-30 January

Meeting to finalise publication.

5-6 June

2-day **final dissemination workshop** in Graz:

Overall objectives and aims of the workshop

This 2-day ECML workshop will:

1. report on the outcomes of project D1 (Web Journals in Language Education);
2. discuss methodological issues relating to the use of blogs in language education;
3. promote the practical use of blogs in an educational setting;
4. promote the use of blogging to form communities of practice in teacher education.

Expected results of the workshop

1. Ideas and strategies for integrating blogs into the language classroom.
2. Training teachers in the effective use of blogging.
3. Potential uses of blogging in teacher education.

Participants' profile:

This workshop is intended for trainers of teachers of modern languages who wish to explore the use of new technologies in training teachers and teaching modern

languages. Participants are expected to have basic ICT literacy (specifically use of email and web browsers), and to have regular Web access.

It's crucial to the success of this workshop that participants:

1. have basic I.C.T. skills (specifically word processing) and internet literacy (have used email & browsed the web);
2. are practising, experienced teacher educators in a position to influence the teacher training curriculum and to disseminate and support good language teaching practice.

5. LANGUAGES

The working languages will be English and French. Simultaneous interpretation will be provided for the two workshops in Graz planned for this project. Participants are expected to be fluent in at least one of these languages.