1 Communicating Out in the Open: The WordPress Class Blogs Plug-In Suite and Language Learning

Barbara Sawhill[1]

Abstract

This case study discusses the development of the Class Blogs Plug-In Suite in WordPress in order to create a blogging tool for use with all levels of language classes. The template, which is openly accessible and independent of a Learning Management System (LMS), creates an open, online learning environment that not only provides students with the ability to post their own work as well as comment on their classmates' work, it also has the potential to transcend individual classroom conversations and allow conversation to happen with language speakers around the world. This template was developed over the past 10 years, with the help of language teachers and students, and with the aim of facilitating the class blogging experience: it creates a central page that aggregates information from students' individual blog posts, images and videos in one central location, making it much easier to connect and comment with classmates. The template also provides easily accessible information on number of words blogged, number of posts written as well as number of comments made on others' blogs as a way to encourage language production and a sense of community. Concurrent with the exploration of the blogging template, this case study will provide suggestions on how teachers can encourage connections with the outside world, and examples of how students have accomplished thoughtful, integrated learning in the open environment of a blog to further their language learning.

Keywords: blogging, collaboration, WordPress, student-centric learning.

1. Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH, USA; barbara.sawhill@oberlin.edu

How to cite this chapter: Sawhill, B. (2013). Communicating Out in the Open: The WordPress Class Blogs Plug-In Suite and Language Learning. In A. Beaven, A. Comas-Quinn, & B. Sawhill (Eds), *Case Studies of Openness in the Language Classroom* (pp. 11-22). © Research-publishing.net.

1. Context

Educational blogging is not a new phenomenon. Over the past decade several free blogging tools have been created for educators to use with their classes. In addition, many learning management systems (e.g. Blackboard, Moodle, Sakai) now incorporate blogs into their standard set-ups.

There are shortcomings with these versions of blogging tools, however. Quite often there is a "one-size-fits-all" feel, and users reported that they felt limited by the ways in which they could configure the technology to suit personal preferences or to address the students' specific learning outcomes. Teachers have reported informally that older blogging tools forced them to change their teaching to fit the tool instead of using a tool that reinforced their teaching methodologies.

Many blogging tools presume that teachers and students want to work within a closed environment where the students in a class could only read and write posts with their classmates. As our teachers began to weigh the pros and cons of open versus closed, many began to question whether a closed blog was any different from a discussion board.

In addition, teachers began to ponder the kind of learning that might happen if their language students' writing and commenting was open to the world. Was there a way to balance the possibilities of open-ness with security and privacy concerns? Would native speakers read students' posts and leave comments? And if so, what would they say and how would the students react?

Teachers are not always technologists, nor do teachers always work in schools that have staff that are willing to customize a blog to meet a faculty member's needs. As a result, many teachers can become frustrated and disenchanted with the generic blogging tools, and choose not to use them at all.

The Class Blogs Plug-In Suite is a combination of multiple plugins and a single

theme for use with WordPress, an open-source blogging and publishing platform. The source code for the tool is open and available to be downloaded, shared and adapted as needed. The goal of the Class Blogs Plug-In Suite is to make WordPress easier for students and professors to use when blogging as a class, an activity that the Cooper International Learning Center has been encouraging and supporting since the spring of 2007. While in 2007 we received only modest initial curiosity that semester, with two small classes experimenting with blogging, we soon saw curiosity turn into much more sustained interest in class blogging, with an average of seven classes blogging per semester, generating approximately 100 posts per class, with class sizes ranging from as few as 10 to as many as 60 students.

Regardless of whether teachers choose to use the Class Blogs Plug-In Suite, this case study will discuss both a rationale and a strategy for using open blogging in the language classroom as a way to increase student engagement with authentic language and culture via the web.

2.   Intended outcomes

The intended outcomes were to develop a tool that:

- was scalable (class sizes ranged from 10 to 60 students);

- would work in all of the eight languages taught;

- was easily customizable (i.e. able to incorporate multimedia, to activate templates and plugins to suit personal preferences, etc.);

- could provide teachers with an efficient way to track and access content created by students;

- would strike a balance between a student's individual blogging space as well as a class blog aggregation tool.

The following pedagogical goals were also developed. In particular, it was decided that language teachers wanted:

- to explore effective ways in which teachers could connect their students with native speakers using technology;

- to encourage students to take (calculated) risks in a second language by writing about topics of personal interest and receiving feedback;

- to discover blogs and bloggers in languages other than English and in places other than the United States.

3.   Nuts and bolts

Most of the technical terms used in this case study will be familiar to those with experience in WordPress. However, there is a slight divergence between the standard terms used when talking about WordPress and the terms used in the following paragraphs. Specifically, WordPress refers to a setup where multiple sub-blogs are managed by a single primary blog as a multisite network, with each sub-blog designated as a site. This case study, however, refers to the primary site as the *parent blog*, and every other site as a *child blog*. With this exception, the rest of the terms used are in line with WordPress's standard terminology.

3.1.   Aggregation of posts

Figure 1 shows the front page of the parent blog, which is a template that aggregates all of the posts from the student (or child) blogs. Unlike most blogs where posts are arranged horizontally with the most recent post is at the top, this theme was created to organize students' posts in a more inclusive manner. Excerpts of the students' posts can be seen at the same time on the same page. Each time a student publishes an entry, his or her blog appears in the upper left hand corner of the page, nudging all of the other posts to the right and down, but not off of the front page.

Figure 1.   Front page of the parent blog
(http://languages.oberlin.edu/courses/2011/spring/hisp205/)

3.2.   Keeping track of content

Teachers expressed a desire to be able to get a sense of the students' production on an 'as needed' basis. As seen in Figure 2, the tool counts the total number of posts generated by the student as well as the total number of comments that student has made on other students' blogs within the class.

Figure 2.   Close up of the child blog as seen on the parent blog

Another plugin was created to help keep track of the total number of words generated by each student throughout the semester (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.   Total number of words created by the student, per week

Week of	Adiel
Mar 18, 2013	501
Mar 25, 2013	588
Apr 1, 2013	1,401
Apr 8, 2013	349
Apr 15, 2013	753
Apr 22, 2013	443
Apr 29, 2013	446

3.3.   Protecting student identity

Teachers and students alike have grown more concerned about how their personal information might be accessed online. Educational institutions also worry about privacy issues when classwork is created and shared in open spaces. As a way to address these concerns, the tool allows students to blog under a different name (visible in Figure 2).

3.4.   Multimedia

Students are encouraged to incorporate images and YouTube videos in their posts, but in past iterations of the blogging tool it was difficult to find them. A plugin was created for the parent blog sidebar, allowing all images and YouTube videos that were posted elsewhere to appear in the sidebar, with a link back to the blog of origin.

4.   In practice

In order to take full advantage of the language learning that can happen via open blogging, teachers need to understand the ethos of blogging. Successful

blogging depends upon reciprocity; it is not enough to post one's thoughts and wait for comments. Instead, bloggers need to seek out and comment upon the work of other bloggers, as a way to build community, but to also bring readers back to their blogs.

Given that there are, on average, two blogs created every second, it is statistically unlikely that a students' blog will be noticed and commented upon unless an effort is made to connect with bloggers outside of the classroom.

How does one find bloggers in other languages and countries? One way is to search for blogs via a list of the regional Google domains (list of country-specific domains).

To access the advanced blog search in any Google domain, follow these two steps (see Figure 4). The steps are exactly the same in any language and any domain.

Figure 4.   Locating blogs in Google
            via a specialized search
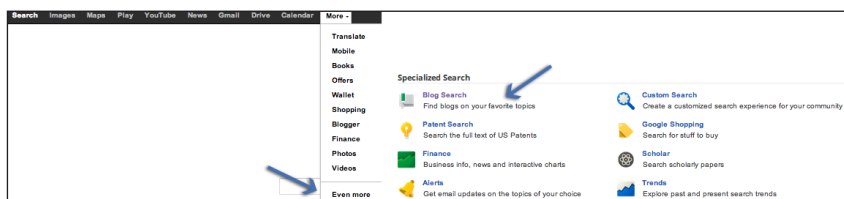
Students can search the blogs for topics, keywords, etc. of interest with the ultimate goal of reading and commenting on another blogger's posts in the target language, but also encouraging reciprocation from the blogger by leaving a url to the student's blog along with their comments.

Blogs in the language classroom are an excellent way for students to explore and converse about their personal interests in the target language. Examples of students using blogs in this way can be seen in Figure 5, Figure 6 and Figure 7.

Claire was interested in graffiti art in Latin America. After researching blogs written in Spanish about graffti, she encountered a blog created by women graffiti artists and began to leave comments and ask questions. To her delight, the artists started leaving comments on her blog posts as well. Over time the conversations moved from the asynchronous format of the blog to a synchronous instant messaging tool (as seen in Figure 5).

Figure 5.   Claire interacting with women graffiti artists /bloggers

Claire and the Grafiteros
Graffiti Mexicana

http://www.ladysgraff-index.galeon.com/enlaces1616681.html

Encontré este sitio de grafiti femenino. Hay entrevistas con grafiteras de v años, varios estilos, y varios paises. Es muy distinto porque en general la ma de grafiteros son hombres. En mi experiencia, la comunidad internacional grafiteras es de bienvenida a mi.

Entonces, yo tuve la oprtunidad de hablar por MSN a la mujer que hizo este Se llama KIF, en Leon, Guanajuato. Aqui estan algunos de sus obras de su sitio.

Para mas imagenes ven a http://www.lgguanajuato.galeon.com/

Tambien, tuvimos una conversacion bastante intersante.

Claire says: Pues, para mi proyecto (y yo), puedo preguntarte algunas cosa grafiti?
KIF says: si
Claire says: Gracias!
KIF says: de nada

Claire says: Primero, es que piensas que hay una diferencia entre grafiti, y arte de la calle?
KIF says: no
Claire says: grafiti tiene que ser ilegal, o legal esta grafiti tambien?
KIF says: Lo primero debe de ser la ilegalidad en el graffiti, pero no necesariamente... El graffiti para mi es legal o ilegal... Depende tambien de las necesidades que tenga cada escritor y lo que le de mas satisfaccion en cuanto a su trabajo y en cuanto a lo personal
Claire says: Hay estilos que son mas de la tradicion hip hop, y entonces son "mas" grafiti, como tags o stencils? o todo es igualmente grafiti?
KIF says: El termino graffiti se le da al hecho de realizar escrituras en las paredes... pueden ser escrituras de protesta no muy relacionadas al Hip Hop y aun asi es graffiti al menos para mi... lo que yo no tomaria como graffiti son los personaJEs plasmados en un muro a menos que sirvan para complementar alguna pieza...
Claire says: plasmados?
KIF says: pintados

Claire says: Que piensas de l@s grafiter@s que venden sus imagenes a corporaciones?
KIF says: ME PARECE BIEN, PORQUE FINALMENTE NO TODOS PUEDEN VIVIR DE LO QUE MAS LES GUSTA HACER... ADEMAS ES UNA FORMA DE DAR A CONOCER MAS SU TRABAJO
Claire says: verdad

Claire says:tienes sugerencias para mi como empezar a hacer mas grafiti sola? o necesito encontrar compeneras?
KIF says: Pues, eso depende de como te sientas tu, no?
KIF says: porque un ejemplo cuando yo comence a pintar graffiti lo hize sola y poco a poco fui conociendo amigas y amigos que compartian el mismo gusto y me gusta mas pintar acompañada de alguien pero antes comence sola
Claire says: imagino que si
Claire says: y porque empezaste?
KIF says: yo tenia un novio grafitero y por el fue que me llamo la atencion, pero no porque el me iniciara en el mundo del graff incluso cuando yo empeze lo hice a escondidas no queria que el lo supiera 2 meses mas tarde termino la relacion y yo segui en el mundo del graffiti

Muchas Gracias a KIF, estoy feliz conocerte y ojala que charlamos otra vez!

Evie used her blog to write about her experiences when studying in Ciudad Juárez, México, and to share information about the femicides that were happening at an alarming rate during her stay. She used her blog to connect with contacts she had made in México and to discuss ongoing efforts to solve the tragedy of so many women being killed at that time.

At the end of the semester, Evie received an unsolicited comment from the

mother of Brenda Lerma Pineda, a 17 year old woman who had been found brutally murdered in México (as seen in Figure 6). The mother sent her letter in the comment section of Evie's blog with the instructions that it be sent "to the congress of your state" in order that the perpetrators "be punished in accordance with the severity of their crime".

For Evie, this was a remarkable moment. The horrible reality of femicides was no longer something she was blogging about from a distance. One of the families affected was now contacting her via the blog and asking for support in their quest for proper punishment for their child's murderers.

Figure 6.   Evie and the Mexican femicides

Sean was a passionate student of music composition and theory. He also expressed a growing interest in the art of teaching and in the process of learning. Sean was able to mesh all of his worlds and his passions – Pedagogy and Spanish

and Music – into his class blog (Figure 7). Thinking of the hours he had spent teaching himself in anticipation of his Conservatory studies, Sean created a blog that was a guide, a syllabus, and a tool to help others learn as well. As a result his Spanish 305 blog was an openly available study tool for Spanish speakers interested in Music Theory and Composition. He wrote about the process of blogging as follows:

> I quickly found that blogging was a good way for me to show – myself – that I knew what I was talking about. It demanded that I understood my material and actively thought about it and the clarity with which I was teaching. I also had to weigh countless movements, works, and names from over a century of music literature against one another, and then I quickly found that while I could avoid bias, I still tended to write most clearly about what I understood best – AND what I was more passionate about.

Figure 7.   Sean's blog

Towards the end of the semester, he received this comment:

> Hola!!!!! buscando datos sobre impresionismo llegué a tu información. La verdad que esta muy bueno como explicas los movimientos, me intereso

> sobre todo el Impresionismo porque tengo que dar unas clases prácticas en secundario y estoy buscando información para que a los chicos les resulte didáctico, entretenido y puedan aprenderlo… [sic]

In this comment the writer, a secondary school teacher in Argentina, was looking for information about how to teach Impressionism to her students. She found Sean's blog and asked for his guidance in teaching the subject to her students. Through their interactions on the blog, Sean's writing became a valued resource for the teacher and for her students. Sean commented:

> Short and sweet, the blogging system to me demonstrated that I am not the ignorant Spanish student I thought I was, and helped instill the first thoughts of pedagogy into my mind – I have been thinking about education differently ever since.

The remarkable connections that Claire, Evie and Sean experienced via their blogs happened because they were invested in their subjects and were eager to share and learn out in the open, and because the tool they were using made their work available to the outside world.

5.   Conclusion

The Cooper International Learning Center at Oberlin College has worked with faculty to create an open source blogging tool with built-in plugins that allow faculty and students to engage in conversations with their classmates, and with people beyond the classroom. The blogging tool was customized to allow faculty better and more efficient access to the work being done by their students, as well as allowing students an easier way to add multimedia, tags, comments and text about topics that were of interest to them.

When used as a place for students to explore and write about personal areas of interest in the target language, blogs can provide a space outside of the closed learning management system to explore ideas and potentially connect with

others. Those connections may need to be cultivated intentionally, but when they do happen, blogs can provide an excellent opportunity for students to engage with authentic language practices and to learn about culture first hand.

The Class Blogs Plug-In Suite was developed and tested in WordPress version 3.3. It has been downloaded over 3,000 times from the WordPress plug in site. As is the case with other OER, it is available for others to adapt and improve and then share back with the community. We welcome the community's participation in its continued development as well as feedback about the extraordinary connections that can happen through this tool.

Acknowledgments. The author wishes to acknowledge the work of Justin Locsei for the development of the Class Blogs Plug-In Suite, as well as the students in HISP 205 and 305 at Oberlin College for the work they have done using these blogs over the past ten years. In particular, she would like to thank Claire Miller, Evie Levine, and Sean Hanson for their dedication to their projects and for sharing their work with others.

Useful resources

A list of the courses (language and non language) that have used this tool: http://languages. oberlin.edu/cilc/blogs/archives/

A list of international Google domains: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Google_domains

Further information about blogging and language learning: http://languagelabunleashed.org/ series/teaching-transparently/

The Class Blogs Plug-In Suite: http://wordpress.org/extend/plugins/class-blogs/

Wordpress: http://wordpress.com

Case Studies of Openness in the Language Classroom
Edited by Ana Beaven, Anna Comas-Quinn and Barbara Sawhill