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Adventures in the blogosphere: from blog readers to blog writers

Lara C. Ducate and Lara L. Lomicka* 1

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This paper reports on a year-long project in which students participated as both readers and writers of blogs. Specifically, this study examines the steps students progress through while reading and writing blogs, students’ reactions to blogging, and how self-expression is characterised in the blogosphere. Data from student blogs, reports, and focus group interviews suggest that this project fostered both ownership and creativity; allowed students to experiment with language; facilitated expression in a relaxed environment; and provided students with a window into the target culture that their textbooks did not provide. Finally, we also report on questionnaires that were designed to assess students’ reactions to the project. Examples from student projects are discussed.

Keywords: weblogs; reading; writing

Introduction

In today’s information technology age, Internet tools are becoming increasingly popular in educational settings. Social networking – interaction with and in a community – is often considered an important concept that many teachers, whether within four walls or in cyberspace, aim to promote in their classrooms. To increase opportunities for interaction outside of the traditional classroom, teachers are beginning to employ different types of social software such as blogs, wikis, chat or instant messaging. Various social tools such as social bookmarking, photography, video websites, as well as social websites (MySpace and Facebook) that promote networking continue to grow. Blogs (designating one-to-many interaction) and wikis (many-to-many interaction) along with other social tools are quickly making their way into educational settings, and even into the area of foreign language (FL) teaching. But how and to what extent do these applications promote social interaction, in addition to the development of reading and writing skills?

Social software integrates both tools and modes that result in a richer online social environment. Levin (2004) maintains that the Internet provides virtual spaces that ‘facilitate new social patterns: multi-scale social spaces, conversation discovery and group forming’ and research is just beginning to address these new social patterns to which Levin refers. To that end, this paper investigates more closely the use of blogs, one type of social software, and their relative importance to human interaction, virtual community and private and public spaces. Specifically, this paper describes two blog projects implemented over the course of an academic year in intermediate French and German university level

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language classes. The blog projects allowed students to serve as readers of native speaker blogs (first semester) and then become blog writers (second semester), where they maintained and published their own blogs. The goal of this year-long project was to examine the steps through which students progressed as blog readers and writers, their reactions to blogging, and how self-expression is characterised in the blogosphere by non-native speakers of a FL.

Blogs in education

The blogosphere is expanding every day. According to Sifry’s Alerts (April, 2007) there are over 120,000 new weblogs and 1.4 million new posts created daily. This trend is reflected in the field of education where the number of educator blogs continues to soar. Educators may be attracted by two main features of blogs: interactivity and collaboration (Godwin-Jones, 2003). The potential of interactivity is exhibited through the use of hypertext, which facilitates connections to related content, and the use of comments, which provide a space for reactions from readers. Blog entries as well as comments are archived for later access. Godwin-Jones (2006, p. 13) describes blogs as ‘one, large, loosely interwoven net of information, as blog entries are linked, referenced, and debated’. They can also be rich sources of collaborative activity as readers have options to reference, link, react to, or add information, thus shaping the content of the blog while at the same time creating a type of virtual community.

Williams and Jacobs (2004) explore the potential of blogs as learning spaces for students and point to their potential as a transformational technology for teaching and learning. Blogs can assist students in becoming regular readers and/or writers, thus hone both interpretive and presentational skills. Kadjer and Bull (2004, p. 33) argue that blogs have contributed to ‘a resurgence in journaling, through their accessibility, their audience, and their immediacy’. Blogs can facilitate knowledge sharing, reflection, and debate, and act as a vehicle for self expression and self empowerment (Blood, 2002). Godwin-Jones (2006, pp. 10–11) acknowledges that ‘blogs by their nature and page structure encourage feedback and represent both a reading and a writing activity. In the best of cases, this kind of online writing stimulates debate, furthers critical analysis, and encourages articulation of ideas and opinions’. Like Godwin-Jones, Oravec (2002) suggests that blogs can enhance critical thinking, literacy, and promote the use of the Internet as a research tool. Blogs can also help people to become more thoughtful and critical observers of the world around them (Blood, 2002) and, due to their simplicity technically speaking, offer an attractive medium for promoting literacy skills. Godwin-Jones (2006) discusses how literacy skills take shape in a non-traditional classroom environment:

The development of multiple literacies is needed in an environment in which there are no clear boundaries between text and other media. . . . There is a clear social dimension to electronic literacy; reading and writing on-line are often collaborative activities. As educators we not only need to facilitate literacy skills in this new environment, we also need to be creating language learning media or applications which mirror the kind of online world students experience – student-centred with collaborative opportunities, allowing plenty of space for creative and reflective processes (p. 13)

Oravec (2003) refers to blogs as a ‘middle space’ situated somewhere between online and traditional classroom settings (p. 225). Blogs in education can represent learner spaces that are both social and student-owned. This sense of ownership can be empowering for
blog writers in that, as suggested by Kadjar and Bull (2003), blogs are ‘engaging, rich writing space that requires no technical knowledge of HTML, while offering access to an instant publishing press’ (p. 33). Their simplicity, ease, interactivity, and social benefits make blogs a conducive environment for social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). Students interact as readers and writers as they co-construct their own learning, thus social interaction becomes necessary to second language learning. Through their interactions, students can develop camaraderie or even a sense of belonging to a community of readers or writers (Murray & Hourigan, 2006).

In addition to the social aspect of blogs, they also serve as a space for micropublishing, where sharing, collaboration, responsibility, and ownership are key features. Murray and Hourigan (2006) indicate the importance of self-expression ‘in a place where the learner/Blogger develops deeply personalised content’ (p. 158). Blogs allow users to engage in the instantaneous act of micropublishing, leave comments, archive previous posts, share hyperlinks, images and even audio with others: ‘students . . . may be more thoughtful (in content and structure) if they know they are writing for a real audience’ (Godwin-Jones, 2003, p. 13). Whereas maintaining a web page can be technically challenging, blogging removes those technical issues (Martindale & Wiley, 2005) and allows the writer to focus on content. All of these features of blogs highlight the many attributes that that make them beneficial for use in educational contexts.

**Blogs in FL teaching**

The literature on blogs in FL teaching and learning is just beginning to surface (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Godwin-Jones, 2003, 2006; Jones & Nuhfer-Halten, 2006; Lee, 2006; LeLoup & Ponterio, 2006; Murray & Hourigan, 2006; Pinkman, 2005; Ward, 2004). Godwin-Jones (2003, 2006) provides technical information as well as how-to’s with regard to blogs, wikis and online tools for foreign language educators. Ducate and Lomicka (2005) discuss ideas for how to set up and use blogs in FL courses and describe two projects for learners of French and German. First, a second-semester German class at an American university blogged every week for six weeks noting trends in practices and perspectives of the target culture; students summarised the blog in English and discussed it in class. Students ended the project by researching and writing about the product, perspective, or practice of a specific German cultural topic and presenting it to the class. Another use for blogs that Ducate and Lomicka describe is a travel journal. Students made initial entries about their expectations before leaving for their trip and then continued to post updates to the blog while abroad. The blog was active for about a two-month period and students from both sides, as well as teachers, friends, and family actively contributed by posting either with entries or comments.

Jones and Nuhfer-Halten (2006) reported on a blog project that targeted participants in beginning and intermediate Spanish classes where both language production and cultural awareness were encouraged. 23 elementary level students completed a questionnaire to gauge their technical training. Through the use of blogs, Jones and Nuhfer-Halten attempted to improve student writing, decrease inhibition, encourage self/peer editing, and practise writing strategies using tasks that encouraged free writing and describing a scene.

Like Jones and Nuhfer-Halten, Pinkman (2005) describes an action research project that aimed to determine the usefulness of blogging in the FL classroom. Data were collected via questionnaires and interviews. Participants were asked to reflect on their attitudes about the blog project and how it assisted their language practice in and out of
the classroom. Findings suggest that there were learner-perceived benefits of using blogs: an increased interest and motivation towards the target language due to both interaction and feedback from classmates and teachers.

Ward (2004) discusses the potential uses of blogs in language classes and documents a project in a first year university level writing class for non-native English speakers. Students responded to new items and provided critiques of films and books. Ward points out that:

For the language teacher the weblog is a timely arrival which can fulfill many of the needs identified for the effective teaching of writing. The weblog provides a genuine audience, is authentically communicative, process driven, peer reviewed, provides a dis-inhibiting context and offers a completely new form with un-chartered creative potential (p. 3).

For Ward, whether students act as blog readers or blog writers is mutually beneficial.

Lee (2006) investigated electronic literacy practices of two Korean-American language learners and their interactions in ‘Cyworld’ which Lee refers to as an ‘upgraded blog that features chatting, commentaries, pictures, music, a guest book, avatars and links to other homepages prompting users to network with their friends, family, and colleagues’ (p. 93). As a result of their experiences in Cyworld, Lee’s two informants reported an increased proficiency in Korean, heightened oral performance, less inhibition to use literacy skills in online environments, a more comfortable environment to receive feedback, and nurtured feelings of connectedness. Lee’s case study suggests that the social network and online community was instrumental in students’ experiences with learning Korean.

Although research related to blogs in the FL classroom is in the beginning stages, it is clear that blogs have much to offer to literacy, in developing skills in both reading and writing. The next section will describe a year-long action research project, demonstrating how students progressed through different stages as both blog readers and blog writers.

Methods
This study was divided into two semesters. During the first semester, 20 third semester German and 9 fourth semester French students (n = 29) read native speaker blogs weekly, guided by a blog worksheet (see Appendix A). Over the course of the semester, students engaged in a research-based project: their goals were to get to know the Blogger, to better understand the target culture, and to collect a variety of information about the target language, the target culture and the Blogger. At the end of the semester, students compiled their research and information in a PowerPoint presentation and produced a short written report. These end-of-semester projects encouraged students to present the Blogger to their peers and to discuss a specific topic (related to the target culture) mentioned on the blog that they chose to explore further.

During the second semester of the study, 10 fourth semester German and 11 fifth semester French students (n = 21) maintained their own blogs where they posted weekly entries to their personal blogs and commented on classmates’ blogs. The topics were related to their class readings and the blog postings served either as pre- or post-reading tasks. For each post, students were required to post a picture or a link to support their argument. After posting, students commented on at least two other students’ postings and were asked to practise discourse strategies such as agreeing or disagreeing in their comments.

The data for this study consist of pre- and post-semester questionnaires worksheets the blog readers completed each week after they read the blog, a presentation each student gave on the Blogger s/he followed and a written report to accompany the presentation,
students’ blogs and comments left by classmates, and focus group interviews that were conducted at the end of the study with students from both language classes.

**Research questions**

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What steps do students progress through while reading and writing blogs?
2. What are students’ reactions to blogging?
3. How is self-expression characterised in the blogosphere?

Since the researchers were also the instructors of the German and French courses, this study is best described as action research. Nunan (1992) points out three characteristics of action research: it is carried out by practitioners; it is collaborative; and it seeks to make a change. As part of the project, the instructors collaborated and sought to bring about change in the way they had used traditional journals (reading and writing). This project required that students maintain journals online (in the form of blogs), thus providing a larger audience, sense of purpose, and friendly interaction from peers, which students do not have when writing a traditional journal with only the teacher as the audience. Data were analysed qualitatively based on blog data, focus group interviews, and questionnaires.

**Results and discussion**

**Pre-questionnaire for the blog reading project**

Before beginning the study, students completed a Likert type pre-study questionnaire, to assess their familiarity with blogs (See Figure 1 and Table 1). The questionnaire revealed that while about half of the students knew what a blog is, most did not maintain their own blogs or regularly read blogs. Students were somewhat neutral on whether they would be interested in using a blog in a foreign language class and almost no one had used a blog in an academic setting before. They felt it could be useful for practising grammar, writing, reading and vocabulary and as a way to interact with native speakers in order to learn more about their daily life and thoughts. From these results, we see that most students had positive or neutral associations with blogs before beginning the assignment.

**Steps of Bloggers**

From a qualitative perspective, students’ blog entries, the focus group interviews and blog worksheets illustrate the steps through which students progressed during a year of reading and writing blogs. We noticed that students followed a specific pattern as they moved from being blog readers to blog writers. We divided these stages into eight steps and will describe each below (see Table 2).

**Exploring the blogosphere**

The first task given to the students was to visit all three of the blogs provided by their teacher to decide which blog they would like to follow for the rest of the semester. To guide them during this exploration, students were given specific tasks to complete. For example, they were asked to describe the writing style used on the blog and to share what they liked and disliked about the blog. The French blogs from which students were able to
choose were ‘N’importe quoi sur n’importe quoi’ maintained by Sofie (Sof) at http://www.zerotom.net/, ‘Pierre Carion’ at http://www.pierrecarion.com (no longer available), and ‘404 brain not found’ at http://www.404brain.net/. The German blogs included ‘Orangata’ written by Pia at http://orangata.de, ‘More than just a personal space’

Table 1. Pre-reading blog project questions.

1. I know what a blog is. (3.2)
2. I maintain (write) my own blog. (2.0)
3. I read blogs on a regular basis. (2.6)
4. I visit blogs often. (2.1)
5. I have used blogs for an academic course. (1.7)
6. I have visited a French/German blog prior to this course. (1.8)
7. Blogs have academic value. (3.3)
8. I would enjoy using a blog in a language class. (3.4)

Table 2. Steps of student Bloggers.

1. Exploring the blogosphere Visit 3 blogs
2. Selecting the Blogger Choose favourite blog
3. Getting to know the Blogger Visit blog weekly
4. Connecting with the Blogger Find similarities
5. Articulating the identity of the Blogger Describe blogger
6. Exploring blogging in the FL Start personal blog
7. Establishing identity as FL Blogger Maintain blog
8. Forming a blog community Visit classmates’ blogs and receive comments from classmates

Figure 1. Pre-questionnaire results.
Selecting the Blogger

Many students based their choice of which blog to follow on the design and layout, the topics, and the difficulty of the discourse. Blogs with bright colours caught their attention; they were also drawn to blogs that were easy to navigate where the topics were humorous and personal, written in a simple writing style, and augmented with pictures. One French student, for example especially liked her Blogger – Sof’s – informal and personal writing style and the fact that she was open about her emotions. She often used the word ‘Chéri’ in her writing and included very personal information, such as the fact that she was suffering from anxiety attacks. A German student felt that she could relate to her Blogger – Pia’s – topics, such as bike riding and Bart Simpson’s comics and even remarked that reading Pia’s blog ‘makes learning German fun’. Once students selected their Blogger, they were asked to get to know them as well as they could during the next nine weeks until the end of the semester.

Getting to know the Blogger

For the remainder of the semester, students were required to read their blog once per week and write down new vocabulary words as well as report on one or two postings left by the Blogger during the week. In this way students were encouraged to read the postings that interested them and thereby learn new vocabulary that they could integrate into their own new contexts. Topics normally consisted of personal stories and feelings, reports about daily life, current events, and popular culture. Sof, for example, discussed saving animals through Project Jessie, punk music, cultural tendencies of the north and south, and strikes against the opening of new malls. Pierre focused on the 2004 US presidential election, Google and advertising, kayaking on the Seine, censorship on TV in France and in the US, and French perspectives about Thanksgiving. 404brain.net’s topics included movies vs. sports on TV, shopping, also the 2004 U.S. election, Iraq, MOX (Mixed Oxide Fuel), and the anniversary of 9/11. In the German blogs, Pia wrote about public transportation and biking to work, the German school system and proposed changes, the terrorist attacks in Chechnya, the movie Fahrenheit 9/11, Hallowe’en and identity theft problems from Ebay. Babs discussed her family, her husband and son, an expo for women that she visited, the weather in Austria, a bombing that occurred in Egypt, her vacation in Egypt (she even maintained her blog while she was there), Das Urteil by John Grisham, and the anniversary of 9/11.

From this varied list of topics, students in both classes were able to get a taste of everyday German and French culture, such as public transportation or striking, as well as a feel for the Blogger’s personality and interests, including both practices and perspectives of the Bloggers regarding French/German and international issues. The American
students could appreciate that they have similar interests, worries, and problems as some of the Bloggers and how pervasive American culture is in both Germany and France. Two French blogs commented on the US elections and several Bloggers referred to 9/11, showing the American students that even years later, this is still a day remembered by people outside of the US. Reading these authentic texts throughout the semester provided students with a window into the German or French culture within the context of the native culture (Galloway, 1998). After the students got to know their Bloggers, they reported that they began to feel a connection to them due to their similar interests and ideas.

Connecting with the Bloggers through similar interests/ideas

After reading the blogs for several weeks, students began to discover how similar they were to the Blogger. For example, many students had interests and hobbies parallel to those of the Bloggers, were also interested in politics, had a comparable Weltanschauung (outlook on life), and similar senses of humour. A French student, for example, learned that her Blogger, similar to her, likes to make lists, loves animals, enjoys going to clubs and dance music, and keeps up with the latest fashions. One of the German students was excited to learn that her Blogger teaches math and physics in Potsdam, is interested in politics and environmental issues (she was upset about a new Aldi being built on a lake and about the hostage crisis in Chechnya), likes to ride her bike and go on bike trips, and buys clothes online. Finally, after discovering what they had in common with the Bloggers, students tried to depict the identity of the Blogger. During this phase, students were confronted with the important realisation that even though the Bloggers were from a different culture, they still shared much in common. This idea could possibly lead students to develop intercultural competence (make them more sympathetic to other cultures) by helping them understand that Germans/French have their own distinct identities and thereby help them to avoid stereotyping (Byram, 1997). Not only do intercultural learners bring to the classroom their own cultures, but they are also exposed to the culture of the other; thus, the negotiation of intercultural issues becomes a multifaceted process and can lead to self-reflection. Kramsch (1993) suggests that this process of inward and outward reflection takes place in a negotiated space, which she refers to as a ‘third place’ (p. 236). In this ‘sphere of interculturality’ language learners engage in meaningful reflection based on their personal perspectives and demonstrate understanding of the culture of the other (1993, p. 205).

Articulating the identity of the Blogger

In order to describe the Blogger, students focused on the Blogger’s family and personal life, his/her personality, hobbies, and political views. This information was compiled and presented to the class in the form of a PowerPoint presentation at the end of the semester and written up in a final report. In addition to describing the Blogger in their written composition, students also chose an issue discussed on the blog to research more in depth in both the written composition and PowerPoint presentation. Since several students were reporting on the same Blogger, the presentation focused more on the cultural topic they chose to research so that the information would not be redundant for students who followed the same Blogger. For example, since Pia had written about public transportation, several students chose to discuss the pervasiveness of public transportation in Germany compared to their state. This assignment allowed students to focus on an aspect of the target culture of their choice and to explore the practices, products, and perspectives associated with it.
Exploring blogging in the foreign language

After students gained experience reading blogs and became familiar with all the different components of an accessible blog (links, postings, pictures, interesting information, simple language), they had the chance to write their own blogs during the second semester of the year. The majority of the students who participated in the blog reading were the same students who maintained blogs the second semester. According to Habermas (1984), an ideal speech situation consists of three components: equal opportunity to start discussion; no power differences; and the interlocutors acting truthfully. In our case, the students’ blogs fit all of these requirements: everyone had his/her own blog; all students were seen as equal in the class and had the same assignments; and it was expected that everyone was truthful. We hoped that this would help to facilitate communication among the Bloggers in our classes. As Ward (2004) found, writing a blog is communicative, reduces anxiety, and provides students with an audience for their texts. In addition, participants in Pinkman and Gakuin’s study (2005) reported that their writing skills improved as a result of regular blogging in the FL. It was our goal to realise these same benefits in our study.

During the second semester, students were required to set up their own blog using a blog server in the target language (TL) provided by their teacher. Once a week throughout the semester students posted to their blogs on teacher assigned topics that were related to the textbook topics (a total of 8–10 postings). After posting, students wrote two comments in response to their classmates using a list of prescribed discourse strategies to encourage them to practise agreeing, disagreeing, complimenting, etc. and using the appropriate discourse strategies for each act. For extra credit, students could write personal postings whenever they wanted. Example topics in the French blogs were crime and violence, friendship, discrimination, terrorism, pollution, unemployment, the homeless, head-scarves, and racism. In the German class, the topics were examples of propaganda from the movie Das Versprechen; parents’ responsibility for children’s behaviour; their favourite fairy tale; a role play with characters from a text; an apology for breaking a promise; leaving home to go to the university; why other people leave home (refugees); heaven and the afterlife; confidante for secrets; favourite music, and spring/summer break plans. In both classes, the topics acted as pre- or post-reading tasks and corresponded to issues that were being discussed and read about in class. The prescribed topics provided students with a wide variety of themes to discuss, including both personal and less personal issues.

Students were assessed using the same rubric each week and their posts were graded on content, coherency, and accuracy, while their comments were graded on content and use of discourse strategies (see Appendix B for a sample grading rubric). Since this was not a formal writing assignment, students were not required to correct their errors and submit a revised version, however if there were recurring errors, the teacher drew the student’s attention to them through comments on the grading rubric. Since the focus of the blog task was to promote fluency in writing and freedom of expression and it has been found that tasks that do not focus on form nonetheless promote accuracy and brevity (Chastain, 1990; Reichelt, 2001), the process approach to writing was not deemed appropriate for this task.

Establishing an identity as a FL Blogger

To describe how students were able to build their identity as Bloggers, we focus mainly on the experience of one French and one German student. The French student’s ‘Did you chag’ blog (see Figure 2), http://cequejepense.over-blog.com/, was truthful, honest, and
creative and served as an outlet where she could articulate her feelings and problems. Whereas she was not a frequent participator in class, she seemed to feel more comfortable expressing herself in the blog. For example, during a discussion about friendship, she shared feelings about family problems and how important the support of good friends at school was to her during that time. This topic was not one that surfaced in class discussions during the academic year yet this student openly and honestly discussed this personal experience in her blog posting.

The German student did contribute often to class discussions, but never in as personal a manner as he did on the blog. In his blog (see Figure 3), http://www.blogigo.de/ealdent, ‘Die Tagen eines alten Studentens’ (the days of an old student), he shared intimate details about his life (the death of his grandfather and his cousin being in Iraq) and feelings (what kind of music he listens to when he is sad or happy and why). He probably would have been too timid to mention these issues in class and due to the restrictive nature of many class discussions, since the topics are normally decided by the teacher, he also likely would not have had the chance. Furthermore, he was creative in the design of his blog, wrote almost every day, and used his blog to experiment with language by trying out new expressions.

These students are representative of many of the students in class. The blog offered a forum where students were comfortable expressing themselves more openly than in class, perhaps because they had more time to think about what they wanted to write and due to the personal nature of blogs.

Forming a community with classmates and/or FL community
Since students were required to comment on each other’s blogs and therefore read each other’s blogs, they learned things about each other that they would never have experienced
in the FL classroom. Some students even received comments from native speakers who happened upon their blogs. Due to the personal nature of many of the blog postings, students were also inclined to comment in a personal way and seemed to appreciate learning about their classmates in a deeper way than they normally would through in-class discussions. In the excerpt below, for example, one of the German students (Sam) was pondering whether he should join a fraternity, as his parents were encouraging him to do, even though he was not interested in being in a fraternity, a topic that likely would not have surfaced during class.

Sam’s post:


Hello, my life is normally boring. This week I rushed for Greek Life. I don’t like fraternities, but Sigma Phi Epsilon is good. I went to a party and it was good too. I am having an internal struggle with the purpose of fraternities. I like brotherhood, one shouldn’t lose his identity when he joins a group. My parents want me to join, but I don’t want to. What do you think? What should I do?

Comments:


Michelle

03.02.2005 um 20:54 Uhr

Hello Sam! My name is Michelle. How’s it going? I have other friends and they are doing Rush too. My friends are A., J., M., and E. A. and E. like Sigma Chi and M. and J. like Lambda Chi Alpha. I don’t know about Sigma Phi Epsilon. I know that fraternities have very good parties, but pledges have to clean the house. If you like the people, you should join SPE. I didn’t join a sorority. Good luck!

Wenn Sie keine Lust haben, mitzumachen, sollen Sie es nicht machen. Mussten Sie der Bruderschaft nur beitreten, weil Ihre Eltern das wollen. Koennen Sie ihnen nicht erklären, dass Sie Ihre Identitaet nicht verlieren wollen und deshalb der Bruderschaft nicht beitreten wollen?

04.02.2005 um 16:45 Uhr

If you don’t want to participate, you shouldn’t do it. Do you have to join because your parents want you to? Can you explain to them that you don’t want to lose your identity and that’s why you don’t want to join the fraternity?

Hi Sam!

In Deutschland gibt es an den Universitaeten auch Bruderschaften – sie heissen bei uns Burschenschaften. Sie sind nicht sehr beliebt, weil sie als sehr konservativ gelten und es vor allem nur um das gemeinschaftliche Betrinken mit Alkohol geht (glaube ich zumindest). Man kann den Eindruck gewinnen, dass die Mitglieder einer solchen Bruderschaft tatsaechlich ihre Identitaet verlieren, daher verstehe ich Deine Bedenken sehr gut. Meine Meinung ist, mach was Du willst, nicht was andere Dir vorschreiben, es ist Dein Leben. Viele Gruesses aus Deutschland

04.02.2005 um 17:57 Uhr

Hi Sam!

In Germany there are fraternities on the universities – they are called Burschenschaften. They aren’t very popular because they are seen as very conservative and centre around getting drunk together (at least that’s what I think). One has the impression that the members of such a fraternity do indeed lose their identity so I understand your concerns. In my opinion, do what you want, not what others tell you to do, it’s your life. Many greetings from Germany

As is evident, three different comments were left to Sam’s post: one by a classmate, one by his teacher, and the third by a native German speaker who found his blog, thereby affording him three different perspectives on his predicament. By reading the comments of the native German speaker, Sam was even able to learn about how fraternities and sororities differ in Germany. After having described the way in which students progressed through various steps as Bloggers, we will next discuss their reactions to the reading and writing blog projects.

Evaluation of reading blogs

According to the survey distributed at the end of the semester (see Figure 4 and Table 3), just over half of the students reported that they enjoyed reading the blog, most reported that it helped them to improve their reading skills and vocabulary in the target language, and they felt it slightly increased their knowledge of popular culture in the target culture.

Students were able to connect and identify with their Blogger and found similarities and differences with their Blogger and between German/French and American culture.
While we had expected that reading the blogs would give students an authentic window into the target culture, students instead learned more about the Bloggers themselves, or at least about the sides of themselves they chose to share. The aspects of the target culture they learned about did not seem to contribute as much to their understanding of the German/French culture as we had hoped because they were so specific and briefly mentioned – such as people go to the Rhein River to sunbathe, kayaking on the Seine, Germans drink apple juice and like John Grisham and Bart Simpson. Rather than experience how different German/French culture is from their own, students learned to focus on similarities that the two cultures share. For example, students identified with people in the target culture pointing out that they do certain things in the same way or share the same interests: ‘They have crazy expos or they do shop on Amazon.com just like we do’, ‘She listens to the same punk music groups as I do’ or ‘Germans went into overkill on the September 11th news too’.

Students could identify with various aspects of the Bloggers’ lives, thoughts, hobbies, and daily outlooks and many commented on what their Blogger wrote about and how

Table 3. Blog writing post questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Likert Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I didn’t know what a blog was before we used them in class this semester.</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I enjoyed reading the blog this semester.</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The blog helped me to improve my reading skills.</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I visited German/French blogs often.</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The blog project in class has heightened my interest in Germany/France.</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The blog project in class has heightened my interest in exploring blogs outside of class.</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I feel my knowledge of pop culture increased as a result of reading blog postings.</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I feel my vocabulary has improved as a result of reading blog postings.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I will continue to read the blogs after the semester ends.</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I would enjoy using blogs in other language classes.</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Post-reading questionnaire results.
similar that was to what someone might do in the US. Through reading blogs written by members of a foreign culture, students had the opportunity to understand their own culture in a new way while learning about the foreign culture. In addition to learning about themselves, as they learned more about the Bloggers and identified with them, the students also gained a better understanding of the perspective of ‘the other’ – why one of the French Bloggers thought what he did about our elections, for example, or why the German teacher chose to travel with public transportation.

Evaluation of writing blogs

Most students responded that they had a positive experience writing the blogs. They were able to learn from their peers and improve their vocabulary and writing. Due to this learning potential, students reported that they see blogs as having high academic value and would like to use blogs again in a future FL class (see Figure 5 and Table 4).

Findings of focus group

Two focus groups were conducted, one with four French students and the other with four German students: volunteers who had been involved in both the reading and writing aspects of the two-semester blog project. Students had both positive and negative comments about the project as well as suggestions for how to improve it in the future. Among the negative responses were that the native speaker (NS) blogs were sometimes boring and some of the topics students had to write about were not interesting. As mentioned above, the topics were linked to the texts students were reading in their German/French class and could not always involve issues of interest to all of the students. Although students were required to comment on each other’s blogs, the Bloggers often did not read

Figure 5. Post-writing questionnaire results.
the comments, and when they did, they did not find the quality especially good. Also in regard to comments, they did not enjoy being constrained by having to use the list of discourse strategies. Sometimes they did not fit the context of what they wanted to write and had to contrive a response where they would fit. They also found it difficult to comment if their classmates posted late or if there were technical problems with the website.

There were also many positive responses in regard to the project. Students found it interesting to learn about their classmates and found writing the blogs to be an effective way to practise vocabulary and grammar. They especially liked that the blog server was in the TL so they could learn new vocabulary associated with technology. In regard to reading the blogs, they enjoyed visiting different websites in the TL and felt that they learned about the target culture from the NS blogs. While some students said the discourse strategies became boring, others found the list helpful. They also felt that writing the blogs promoted a sense of responsibility for doing homework since other students were counting on them. These comments from the students also correspond to Ferdig and Trammel’s (2004) list of benefits, including that blogging enhances students’ interest and involvement in learning, gives students more opportunities to participate in the learning process, and affords students a glimpse at a variety of viewpoints to help them expand their own.

From this list of positives and negatives, students came up with suggestions for incorporating a similar blog project in future FL classes. They would prefer more choices regarding the blog topics, including more personal topics. This request makes sense since the purpose of the majority of blogs is to express oneself (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004). In addition, when the topic was personal, we found that students’ postings were normally much more unique and candid. So that more students would take advantage of the creative aspects of the blogs, such as posting pictures or changing the background, students suggested including creativity in the grading rubric. To encourage students to read the comments, the Bloggers should be required to comment on their classmates’ comments and the requirements on using discourse strategies should be loosened. They would find it especially interesting to exchange blogs with NS rather than with classmates. And in regard to the technical aspects of the blog, they would like more information on the blog functions before beginning to blog. In addition to the students’ suggestions, we, as the teachers of the classes, also came up with some improvements on the project.

Challenges that we encountered were finding pertinent, reliable, and diverse NS blogs as well as locating a reliable TL blog server. Based on what the students said, we would...
suggest conducting a tutorial on blogging/technical vocabulary before students begin writing their own blogs. We might reconsider how often the students should blog – perhaps once per week was too often. If students wrote once every two weeks about a more personal topic chosen from a list of possible topics, they might feel they have more to write about. When the topic was more personal, such as writing a letter to someone to whom you owed an apology, the postings were more interesting and heartfelt and students were more engaged in the topic. We would also encourage students to comment on their comments, perhaps by offering extra credit, so that the comments would be read. Finally, if one could find a class in the target country with which to exchange blogs, students would have an even more personal window into the target culture than if they were reading TL blogs from random NS, with whom they had no relationship or connection.

In this action-based research, blogs tended to lend themselves better to the establishment of private spaces where students revealed personal information (Henri & Pudelko, 2003). To our surprise, students seemed ambivalent regarding their classmates’ comments. While we had hoped to create a community with the blogs, we found the blogs functioned more as a private space for students to describe, explore, and express their own ideas and feelings in the TL without needing input from other students. Students did, however, enjoy learning about their classmates and expressing themselves in the TL in a personal way.

**Conclusion**

As students progressed through the eight steps of reading and writing blogs, they became fully immersed into the culture of blogging, specifically blogging in the foreign language. By reading the NS blogs first, students were able to become comfortable and familiar with the art of blogging before writing their own. Overall, we found this project to be quite beneficial to the students. The blogs promoted ownership and creativity, allowed students to experiment with the FL and express themselves in a relaxed environment, and provided students with a window into the target culture that they would never get from their textbook alone. Students progressed through eight different steps throughout the year, guided by both the teacher and themselves, progressing through higher levels of engagement with each step. They enjoyed the project and felt that it aided in their learning of the TL both in terms of reading, writing, vocabulary, and cultural knowledge. In regard to self-expression, topics that were more personal were more engaging to the students and encouraged them to express themselves in a manner not often encountered in the FL classroom. Having had this opportunity to guide their own learning in the blogosphere will hopefully make students more technically and linguistically competent and confident.

As the blogosphere continues to grow and teachers search for the most pedagogically sound applications of blogs, the results of this study suggest that they should be used as they are outside of the classroom: a forum for expressing oneself and one’s opinions, similar to a diary, where the topics are mostly self-selected. Further studies should investigate whether blogging can actually lead to gains in FL interpretive skills and what topics reap the best results for different goals. The function of commenting should also be examined and how students can be encouraged to comment and read comments or whether this is an important component of blogging at all. As with all aspects of teaching with technology, before encouraging students to explore the blogosphere, the objectives of the FL course must be examined to ensure that blogging is the best tool to help students realise their goals.
Notes

1. Authors are listed alphabetically and contributed equally to this paper.
2. Cyworld is more similar to virtual communities such as MySpace or Facebook than to a blog. Wikipedia.org describes it as a ‘web community’.
3. For the Likert scale, strongly agree was assigned a value of 5 and each value decreased by one point to strongly disagree with a value of 1.

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References


Appendix A

Blog worksheets

Blog Worksheet (for weeks 1, 2 and 3)

Name: ________________________________

Visit one of the three blogs provided by your instructor three days each week for three weeks. Complete the following worksheet for each blog you visit.

Week 1  Week 2  Week 3  (circle one)

URL: ________________________________

Blogger identity: ________________________________

Dates followed: ________________________________

List number of entries read: ________________________________

Briefly summarise the blog in English on one particular day of the week (provide date here ________)

Tell us about the Blogger and describe his/her writing style.

What did you learn about French/German pop culture by reading the blog this week?
Did the Blogger make reference to anything in pop culture that you already knew? If so, what?

Week 4: Visit each of the three blogs again this week. Decide which of the blogs you would like to follow for the semester. In a few paragraphs, tell me which blog you would like to follow and the reasons for your choice. (Do you have common interests with the Blogger or particularly enjoy his/her style of writing? Are you interested in the themes he/she discusses? What topics caught your eye this week?, etc.)

Week 5
Try to find out as much information or deduce what you can about the Blogger himself/herself. Then, write a short description of the Blogger here (age, gender, interests, location, etc.).

What are three topics the Blogger discusses this week? Briefly describe what the Blogger has to say about each.

List five vocabulary words that are new to you this week. Be sure to identify if the words are nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. Include the sentence or phrase in which they are used.

Write down two questions you would like to ask the Blogger this week.

Weeks 6 and 7
Read some of the comments offered by visitors to the blog. Discuss them briefly here.
Follow 2–3 links from the blog. Where did they take you? What did you learn?

What new things did you learn about the Blogger this week?
What themes surface this week? (music, politics, food, current events, etc.)
Discuss what you learned about one of these themes in more detail.
Write one response to one of the Blogger’s entries this week.

Week 8 (due week of Nov. 8)
Write a 1–2 page typed report on this pop culture topic (to be turned in with this worksheet). (You will begin to research this topic and prepare a short PowerPoint presentation on it – Week of Nov. 29). In this report you should select a theme related to pop culture that interests you that the Blogger addresses. What is the theme and why does it interest you? What do you already know about this theme (prior to reading this blog)? What have you learned from the Blogger about this theme? Why and how is this theme important to French/German pop culture?

Appendix B
Blog grading rubric
Your blog

5 points – content
4–5 pts – question answered with several examples from text or your experiences
2–3 pts – only one example provided
1 pt – no examples provided

5 points – coherency and organisation
4–5 points – coherent and well-organised
2–3 points – somewhat difficult to follow
1 point – not organised

5 points – grammar and spelling
4–5 points – few errors in spelling and grammar
2–3 points – many spelling or grammar errors, but still comprehensible
1 point – meaning unclear due to spelling or grammar errors

Total points
Comments
5 points – content
  4–5 points – demonstrated that you read their posting by reacting to or asking about what your classmate wrote
  2–3 points – questionable whether you read or understood classmate’s posting
  1 point – no demonstration of having read classmate’s posting

5 points – discourse strategies
  4–5 points – at least one phrase from the ‘Useful words and phrases for class interaction’ on page xix used to assist you in your comments
  2–3 points – another type of discourse strategy used
  1 point – no discourse strategies used

Total points _________