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Peter B. Swanson
Georgia State University

Patricia Early
Georgia State University

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ESTABLISH YOUR PRESENCE IN THE BLOGOSPHERE: A GUIDE TO BLOG DEVELOPMENT FOR THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Peter Swanson
Patricia Early
Georgia State University

Abstract

As the wave of technology progresses, the static Web page has given way to the Weblog (blog) as a medium for delivering information. The blog has moved the technology forward with its bidirectional communication ability. This article discusses the evolution of blogs, important considerations when establishing a blog presence, and directions for creating blogs. Online examples are given to guide the reader.

Background

Weblogs, or blogs, believed to be first used by John Berger 11 years ago (Rachael, 2005), originated as online diaries that reflect the personality of the author (Blood, 2002; Winer, 2003). They rapidly developed into independent journalism conduits serving a multitude of purposes for targeted audiences. It was not long before educators recognized and explored the communicative potential of blogs. Unlike many multimedia tools available to educators, blogs can be developed by individuals with rudimentary computer knowledge, as they do not require users to learn to program HTML or Web authoring software

Using the Web page model, information flows from the teacher to the readers, reinforcing a Positivist model of instruction. Blogs, on the other hand, provide individuals a medium for multidirectional communication while affording the same, if not greater, functionality as static Web pages. Blogs form an interactive virtual environment where bloggers (blog authors) share opinions, experiences, and information with readers, who, in turn, have the ability to become co-authors by posting comments to blog contents. At present, blogs have been categorized by specific purposes, such as personal blogs, press blogs, group blogs, project management blogs, library blogs, and instructional and institutional blogs (Altun,

2005). Educators at all levels are developing blogs currently to be used as repositories for external links, multimedia resources, and even academic discussions among scholars.

In this article, the authors discuss the communicative possibilities inherent in blogs, giving particular attention to the different requirements and functions of blogs in elementary, secondary, and higher education. The authors also address the process and considerations for best practices in instructional blogging, including the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999).

Theoretically grounded in social learning theory, blogs enrich social interaction among participants. Cognitive learning theorists maintain that assigning meaning to information is efficiently realized through individuals' interaction with the social environment. Vygotsky (1978) claims the social environment plays a significant role in cognitive development. Likewise, Piaget (1973) posits that one of the factors affecting cognitive development is social interaction, a prerequisite for intellectual development. Further, Bandura (1989) argues that learning occurs through constant interaction among individuals, behaviors, and the environment. Thus, interaction between learners and teachers appears to have an impact on the learning process in instructional settings. Traditionally, students interact socially in face-to-face in classroom settings, but such interaction can be diminished by instruction that is more teacher-centered than student-centered. However, by providing a medium for social interaction among students and teachers that extends beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom, a collaborative learning environment can be created in which students and teachers can share their ideas and experiences can be created (Altun, 2005).

A review of the literature reveals that students have positive attitudes toward using blogs in the classroom. Barbosa and Serrano (2005) reported that students find blogs to be an interesting medium that was easy to use and that they valued peers' comments on their postings. Dickey (2004) found that the use of blogs during teacher training facilitated socialization, interaction, and peer dialogue in small groups and reduced students' perceptions of isolation and alienation in Web-based distance learning environments. Wang and Fang (2005) investigated the benefits of blogs for collaborative learning purposes. The authors reported positive results showing that the use of Weblogs increased students' confidence in learning, and the efficiency of their group work and social skills increased through use of blogs. Xie and Sharma (2004) conducted interviews with nine doctoral students to investigate student opinions of blog usage in instructional settings. Students reported that blogs were helpful for learning and thinking, providing students with a group identity and allowing them to discover and manipulate new technologies. However, students who had not been exposed to blogs prior to the class expressed some hesitation, citing a lack of confidence in this medium and their discomfort with the fact that their opinions and comments could be read by their peers.

Williams and Jacobs (2004) found that blogs could transform the way instructional technology is applied in higher education. The researchers analyzed data from 102 volunteers exposed to blogs in two different classes. Of the participants who did not use blogs, 66% stated that they did not find the activity worth doing or they were not sure whether the activity would help them. However, of the participants who used blogs, two-thirds commented that blogs served as educational environments to facilitate learning, three-quarters reported blogs to be advantageous in terms of social interaction, and 57% claimed that they wanted blogs as an instructional tool in their class activities.

Issues for Consideration in Setting Up a Blog

The development of a blog for a foreign language class requires the creator to ponder several important preliminary considerations such as hosting, security, educational purpose, design, complexity, audience, and best practices in the profession. In this section, we address each of these considerations and we discuss the step-by-step process to build and manage a blog.

Hosting and Access

Hosting a blog requires the author to examine several issues, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Many hosting services are available, including *Blogger*, *WordPress*, and *EduBlogs*. These blog hosts provide registered users either a free or paid service with ample access to their server space, thereby eliminating the need for users to locate or maintain costly private server space. While these hosts may appear to be the most attractive option for educators, firewall access to these sites often can be restricted by school and district administrators. Therefore, before establishing a blog presence on a public server, we recommend that teachers consult with district technology support personnel to determine which options are readily accessible.

If access is restricted by school policy, some blog services such as *Wordpress* and *EduBlogs* allow users to download the blog framework to a local server to be installed and maintained by the school, district, or individual. Hosting the blog on a school server can reduce concern regarding public access to student work and posting of opinions and comments, as students, parents, and other contributors to the blog would have to logon to the school server to gain access to the blog before being able to read and respond to postings. Additionally, student data and information would be stored on the school server and not on a public server. Another consideration is reliable network access. With hosted services, the service provider is responsible for the maintenance, backup and reliability of the blog site. This process relieves the author or school district from any associated expenses and efforts involved in data storage and backup. Conversely, it also removes any control or local authority over such activities. Teachers have little recourse if the public server is down for maintenance and the hosting entity is not responsible for informing users of potential service outages. All of these

considerations should be explored in advance with the school's technical support team.

Security

All blog software contains elements to assist in guarding the privacy of the author and the readers. Although these features may vary in configuration and in naming protocol, essentially each service provider enables similar privacy options. For example, the blog author has the ability to limit readership to only selected readers, to allow readership only after registration on the blog by interested individuals, or to make the blog publicly available so that anyone can post comments. The blogger can elect to make the site searchable via search engines (i.e. *Google*) or not, effectively assuring the relative invisibility of the blog to all except those who search for it specifically by name or URL.

Most blog software programs also offer an additional degree of page-level security in which pages and posts can be hidden at the time of writing and released at a later date. In this way, pages can be authored in advance and made available to students at the instructionally appropriate time. Blog authors also have the ability to limit access to certain pages or posts via password protection. Some pages may be specifically for parents, others for students. Some content, such as quizzes, could be relatively safeguarded. This option would allow only those readers who know the password to view the materials and comments on that page, thereby allowing instructors to decide who has access to what information.

Once located or accessed, an individual's ability to post comments on a blog site can be further constrained by the options the blogger selects. Once posted, the author can moderate comments, approving them for publication, editing them, or deleting them altogether. The author also has the discretion to disallow comments, to require a potential commenter register for the blog, or to allow comments by any readers. Blog editing permits the author to retroactively remove or edit inappropriate commentary as needed. Through judicious use of these options, blog creators protect themselves against negative or harmful comments and protect their readers from exposure to virtual threats.

Finally, student privacy and safety are also important security considerations. Photos of students (minors) cannot be posted without waivers of consent from parents and information that could expose students to outside threats, such as full name, address, and other personal information, should not be posted on a publicly accessible blog. Adherence to these guidelines provides teachers with opportunities to speak with students about Internet safety and personal privacy, issues of increasing importance. Grades, sensitive student work, and teacher evaluations of student performance should not be shared on blogs.

Educational and Scholarly Uses of Blogs

With numerous templates, flexible design, and an increasing variety of add-ons and plug-ins, known as widgets, blogs can be formatted to serve the

needs of educators at every level. In the language classroom the blog can serve as a repository of class resources, as a vehicle for communication, or as a means of peer-to-peer interaction. At its most basic function, a blog serves the purpose of communicating information from the author to an intended audience. The audience can include the community, parents, and the students themselves. Before establishing a blog presence, we recommend that educators consider the specific purpose for their blog. For example, for an elementary French teacher interested in using technology for communication with parents and students, the format and content of the blog could consist of class calendars, external resources, or even information regarding parent-teacher conferences or school functions. The same teacher could post enrichment activities, such as links to games, printable auxiliary worksheets, and streaming audio resources to students. Secondary school language teachers may use the blog to provide enrichment opportunities to engage students in deeper discussions of class content and cultural learning. Additionally, the blog serves as a repository for multimedia resources, such as PowerPoint presentations, audio, video, and other multimodal stimuli that factor into Multiple Intelligence theory (Gardner, 1993).

Blogs may also focus on faculty professional development, academic discussions on best practices, and even research. For scholars, the purpose for entering the blogosphere is "to reach the 'digital natives', namely our students and to add to the public sphere of knowledge as scholars, teachers in higher education" (Kirby & Cameron, 2008, p. 16). Academic blogging for scholars has emerged as a powerful tool for sharing and promoting research within their respective fields and areas of expertise. Through the widespread availability of the Internet, academic debate and intellectual development is no longer limited by location and can extend beyond the brick-and-mortar campus.

Design and Complexity

Available software, templates, widgets, and packaged digital media allow educators to focus on the content of the blog more so than does traditional Web page (HTML) authoring. However, some design and layout considerations at the initiation of the blog will save much effort in the long run. As we discussed in the previous section, selecting and authoring a blog for a specific purpose establishes the foundation for the functional aspects of the blog, and design considerations naturally follow. Another important consideration is ease of navigation for the blog audience. We have found that fewer features equates to lower complexity, a motivation to not add superfluous features to blogs. Simpler, cleaner designs appear to reduce audience anxiety and promote more immediate engagement and interaction.

Audience

Bloggers must be cognizant of their readers' technological and intellectual abilities. We suggest that passages for K-12 community use short sentences,

avoid jargon, employ terminology familiar to the audience, write to inform and not to impress, and use the active voice (The Informatics Review, 2004). Knowing the intended audience will help the blogger tailor postings and discussions that engage readers encourage multidirectional conversation and participation.

After careful consideration of the aforementioned issues, the neo-blogger can begin the process of establishing a blog presence. The next step is to identify and select the most appropriate host and software for the blog.

Blog Tools

Hosting Considerations

Blog authors have numerous tools to choose from when establishing their blog presence, and new tools are being developed all the time to suit different requirements and audiences. Many course management systems, such as the open-source *Moodle*, include blog tools for seamless integration of blogs into courses. Many free hosting services are available for the user who does not have institutional access to blog software. At the time of this writing, the three most prominent hosting services used by educators are *Blogger*, *Edublogs*, and *WordPress*. Each tool has unique qualities, advantages, and disadvantages and advantages; therefore, we recommend that educators experiment with each hosting service to identify the host that is most appropriate to the design, intended function, and audience of the blog.

Three Prominent Tools for Bloggers

Blogger, part of the *Google* suite of tools available at <https://www.blogger.com>, is an easy, entry-level blog host for novice bloggers. Account creation is fast and free. One of the primary advantages of *Blogger* is its relationship with other *Google* tools, facilitating the incorporation of many types of media into the blog environment. However, *Blogger* is somewhat more limited than other tools and offers fewer choices in exchange for ease of use. In addition, because *Blogger* is a *Google* tool, the plug-ins and functionalities are limited to encourage the use of other *Google* applications. As a result, while the host has streamlined the integration of media and editing through the interrelatedness of Google applications, *Blogger* capabilities are often uniquely proprietary to *Google*.

Another free tool on the market is *Edublogs* <www.edublogs.org>, a host that provides service specifically to teachers, with user information, tutorials, and recommendations written with educators in mind. One potential advantage to using this blog host is that school administrators may be more inclined to grant access to *Edublogs* as opposed to other public blogs. However, because it is targeted to a limited and often novice audience, ease of use once again translates into limited options for formatting, plug-ins, and other tools.

As post-secondary educators, we selected *WordPress* as the hosting service for our blogs. There are two hosting options: *WordPress* saves the blog on its server, maintains the server, and provides a limited, but ample space for data storage; or bloggers can download the free platform onto a local server if there is adequate technical support team can maintain the server. For ease of entry into the blogging community, we recommended that educators begin with the hosted version and then migrate their blog to a local server when they have more experience blogging. *WordPress* provides many plug-ins that allow for media incorporation of a wide variety of formats not limited by proprietary development. In addition, because the community of users is proficient in technology, plug-ins, and templates are created and shared continuously among its user groups.

Entering the Blogosphere

Naming Considerations

A great title can contribute tremendously to the success of a blog. We suggest titles that give information about the author, the site's content, and the site's focus. Bloggers should think of keywords or phrases that search engines can use to find their site. Since the inception of blogs 11 years ago, the number of blogs worldwide has grown to an estimated 112.8 million blogs, not including the 72.82 million Chinese blogs counted by The China Internet Network Information Center (Helmond, 2008). Therefore, we recommend that authors search the Internet to ensure unique and appropriate titles and to avoid trademark conflicts.

Developing Blogs

As mentioned earlier, *WordPress* is the host for our blogs. In this section we outline the steps in developing a blog using *WordPress* as an example. We suggest that readers go to <www.wordpress.com> and construct a blog as they read this article. The first step is to register. At the top right of the homepage there is a tab for new users to register for an account. After entering a user name and password, *WordPress* guides the blogger through a series of steps to create the blog name and set the language that the author will use. *WordPress* allows users to choose whether the blog will appear in search engines and public listings around *WordPress*.com.

In the next step, the site sends an e-mail message with information and a link that first-time users need to activate the blog account. Users also are offered a name and password information. For security reasons, we recommend that bloggers save this information into a word processing document, even though *WordPress* will send the information later in a separate e-mail message. Once reg-

istered, users need to logon to the site. The page that appears first is the Dashboard, an administration panel that allows bloggers to control features related to author identity and site activity. Subpanels on the Dashboard allow users to compose posts and pages, add links, and pay for storage capacity upgrades. Moving from left to right, the subpanels are titled Write, Manage, Design, Comments, and Upgrade. We recommend that readers take a few minutes to familiarize themselves with each subpanel by clicking on the different tabs to explore what each contains.

The Design tab allows bloggers to create their blog space. *WordPress* boasts a large number of themes and options from which to choose. Each theme has a brief description below a sample picture of how the homepage will appear. Again, we recommend that bloggers consider the intended audience and select an age-appropriate theme that will be easily negotiated by students and parents. Once the user has selected a theme, bloggers can then Extras and a Custom Image Header. Educators might want to add Widgets such as calendars or blogsroll (links to different internet Web sites), a search button for information contained on the blog, a list of drop-down categories (such as Homework or Syllabus), videos, or blog statistics to mention just a few. Widgets can be added or deleted later; therefore, it is not necessary to decide everything for the blog at this moment. Once the widgets are chosen, users should the Visit Site button to inspect the blog creation process thus far.

We now direct readers to the Write page so that bloggers create pages to display on the blog. The *WordPress* default page directs individuals to write a page and title and then gives the blogger the opportunity to tell the audience about the specifics of the page. Additionally, links can be added to pages to direct the audience to different sites. The editor has features of most word processors with the addition of icons to add media (video, audio, PowerPoint presentations, pdf files, and internet links. There is also a tab to show HTML programming code. As pages are being developed, the blogger can preview, save, or publish them. *WordPress* saves the author's posts every minute on a server to guard against computer failure or crashes.

We recommend that FL educators first create the About the Author page, including a short biography and an interesting image or photo to stimulate reader interest. Additionally, we suggest that the teacher add a short piece describing the intent and use of the blog, adding any links to various sites that may help illuminate the conceptual framework of the site itself. Teachers should also post contact information and any pertinent school information.

The process for creating additional pages and posting comments follows similar procedures. The blogger begins at the Manage subpanel and chooses the Page option just below. The author selects the page on which to place the posting and same text editor appears requesting a title for the page as well as the post itself. Initial posts can be used as a method to introduce the audience to the page. FL teachers might create different pages representing the *Standards*, different language levels (French 1 or French 2), or chronological listings (Week 1, Week 2, Week 3, and so forth). Pages could be created for presentations, lecture notes, additional readings, or podcasts.

Once the pages are developed, the audience can find the intended information and post comments. After comments are posted, each commenter receives a message that the postings will be moderated by the blog author. In turn, the author receives an e-mail when a comment has been posted to the blog, and when logging in, author sees a red highlighted square above the Comment subpanel. A click on the Comment tab leads the blogger to the comment, where it awaits approval or where it can be deleted.

Examples from the FL Classroom

To assist readers FL teachers, we developed two different blogs. We urge readers to view them online as they progress through the remainder of the article. The first <2009blogsample1.wordpress.com> utilizes the Cutline theme, described as a squeaky clean, minimalistic two-column wonder. This template allows users to replace the top image with a different image of the blogger's choice. We opted to leave the default image and started by creating four different pages in addition to the homepage: Assignments, Calendars, Course Information, and Instructors.

The different pages on the blog are found above the image in alphabetical order, unless the blogger wants to order the pages manually. Parents and students only need to click on each word to open the pages. This blog is an example for an elementary school FL classroom blog. The grade school FL teacher can direct students and parents to the different pages with notes and class calendars. Students and parents only need to touch the calendar dates that are highlighted in blue text to see what assignments are due. Clearly, posting a digital calendar of events quickly becomes an appealing option for busy parents who can assess their children's assignments online. Another advantage of this type of blog is two-way conversation between the author and the intended audience. For parents and guardians who want to stay involved in their children's education, blogs provide an environment for dialogue and requests for information. This type of environment may assist the innovative FL teacher in the continual refinement of the educational experience for everyone involved.

In addition to handy calendars and the interactive dialogue, the elementary FL educator can post daily, weekly, or monthly assignments. As an example, we created a table using Microsoft Word and pasted it on the page. The FL teacher would post weekly lesson plans as pdf or Word files for download. Parents or guardians could then access these files and post assignments in a visible place at home. Such a system would be beneficial when students were absent, enabling parents to see assignments their children needed to complete.

The blog has a sidebar that contains important such as grammar review sites <www.studyspanish.com>, cultural information <www.realiaproject.org>, current events taking place in the school community <www.dekalb.public.lib.ga.us> and throughout the world <www.bbc.com>, and a link to the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* <www.actfl.org>. FL teachers might add other appropriate links to engage students and improve instructional strategy.

Our second example, <2009blogsample2.wordpress.com> utilizes the Digg 3 Column template featuring three columns with two sidebars and a customizable header. Instead of using the default image, we chose a picture from our travels in the Mayan world to use as the header. The two sidebars contain a calendar showing the date of the latest post, links to important sites, and the pages we created: Assignments, Conversations, Course Information, Instructors, Oral Assessments, PowerPoint presentations. The pages are also found at the top of the homepage above the image. This blog example is more complex and perhaps more appropriate for a secondary school FL classroom. While the Instructors and Course Information pages are similar to the elementary blog, more advanced blog features are showcased here. For example, on the Oral Assessments the teacher has posted two images, the rubric for the assignment and a digital voice recording. The free version of *WordPress* does not allow users to post audio files, so we uploaded the file to a local server and created a link on the blog to the server. In order to begin the assignment students click on the link to listen to the teacher's prompt and follow the directions.

A second example of blog innovation is the Assignments page, where we linked teacher-created activities. FL teachers can post assignments in different formats, such as Word documents, pdf, and PowerPoint. For example, we used the free *Hot Potatoes* software (http://hotpot.uvic.ca) to create two HTML activities, we saved them on our local server, and then we created links on the blog to the activities. On the final page, Conversations, we posted a topic for discussion between students and the teacher. All comments are moderated by the teacher to ensure task appropriateness before being released for public consumption. Once approved and published on the blog, the conversation begins. Although traditional pencil-and-paper journals can enhance language learning, the interactive and digital platform allows for interaction among multiple users while encouraging communication in the target language. In addition, the blogosphere may reduce the affective filter of students who hesitate to express themselves in class.

Conclusion

No longer is class interaction and social learning limited to the brick and mortar of our classrooms. Through the use of electronic media, interaction can now extend from school to students' daily, digital lives. As discussed earlier, blogs can enrich social interaction among language learning participants. Solidly grounded in social learning theory (Bandura, 1989; Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978), the use of blogs in an educational context can enhance intellectual development and promote interaction among individuals learning languages. Regardless of technical proficiency, language teachers can enter the digital world of today's language learners by integrating blogs into daily pedagogy. The interactive nature of blogs allows language educator to speak the digital language of our students while sharing the richness and beauty of world languages.

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