The untold story: A language teacher's experience in a blog-assisted writing classroom

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Abstract

Classroom blogging has been in use for more than a decade. A great number of research papers have been conducted to investigate its effects on student learning or students' attitudes towards it. However, the understanding of teachers' experience in a blog-supported classroom is rather limited. This paper is thus given the aim to expose teachers' teaching experience in a blog-assisted teaching setting. The participant involved in this paper was a teacher-researcher who had one-year experience teaching English writing to ESL undergraduates using blogs for a year. The teacher-researcher's weekly journal regarding this teaching approach throughout the year was collected for data analysis. The result show that teaching with the use of blog was rather time-consuming, which was mainly caused by technical issues rather than the teaching itself. More importantly, the teacher-researcher conceded that he failed to see his efforts being paid off by students' learning output, which left him in great disappointment about blog use in class.

Keywords: classroom blogging, ESL writing, blog assisted language learning (BALL)

Introduction

For the past decades, classroom blogging has been very popular in educational settings (Chen, 2016). Many educators (for example, Richardson, 2010) have published books to advocate the use of blogs and a great number of researchers have also shared their students' successful stories in terms of enhanced learning outcomes, such as improved learning motivation, self-confidence and the ability to write better (Arslan & Şahin-Kızıl, 2010; Challob, Bakar, & Latif, 2016; Chen, Liu, Shih, Wu & Yuan, 2011; Fellner & Apple, 2006; Grami, 2012; Hu & Wu, 2012; Kuimova & Zvekov, 2016; Kang, Bonk, & Kim, 2011; Lin, 2014; Lin, Li, Hung, & Huang, 2014; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2012; Nguyen, 2012; Noytim, 2010; Sun, 2010; Sun & Chang, 2012; Taki & Fardafshari, 2012; Vurdien, 2013; Yunus, Salehi, & Chenzi, 2012). Many researchers also believe that the use of blogs successfully augments the interaction between teachers and students (Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, 2011) and takes it beyond the classroom setting (Richardson, 2010). Moreover, the use of blogs is often described as an easy and convenient tool for teachers to master and thus it facilitates their teaching. Some also use the usefulness of blogs in assessing language learners' speaking performance (Hung & Huang, 2016) and in developing their speaking skills (Hsu, 2016).

However, most of the studies on blogging thus far concern how and what students perceive; but it overlooks the experience for teachers in blog-supported classrooms (Lin, 2012). Although a

very small number of blog researchers (Wu, 2008) did concede their negative feelings as feeling disappointed with students' inactive blogging patterns and some others (Churchill, 2009; Lai & Chen, 2011; Levy, 2009; Hourigan & Murray, 2010) have suggest that classroom blogging can be time-consuming and increase teachers' workload, no explicit or detailed accounts of the experience of blogging for teachers have been readily accessible yet.

What, then, do teachers feel the experience of teaching with blogs is like? It is this question that the author proposes to answer in terms of exposing his own experience in teaching writing in an English as a second language (ESL) classroom with the use of blogs.

Method

In this section, the author will report on the blogging project in which he himself was involved and illustrate why his experience can be of any interest to researchers in the field of blog studies or even be of any help to the understanding of teachers' blogging experience. The author will then introduce how the data were collected and analyzed for writing up this paper.

The blogging project

Impelled by the overwhelmingly promising features and advantages which were reported to result from the use of blogs, the teacher-researcher (namely, the author of this paper), implemented a program entitled Blog Assisted Language Learning (BALL) in one of his ESL writing classes.

The main purpose of this program was to use blogging to assist the teacher-researcher to teach writing and students to write in English. A total of 25 ESL student writers participated in the project. Each week on Friday morning, they received two 50-minute lessons, a pattern which lasted for 36 weeks. Before the program started, the teacher-researcher set up his own tutor blog and prepared the curriculum online. After the program was launched, he guided the students to establish their own student blogs and from time to time he instructed them how to use certain blog functions. To ensure that the student bloggers were exposed to a blog-supported learning environment, the participants were required to post journal-style articles and assignments on their own blogs. This in turn allowed the teacher-researcher greater opportunity to engage with the experience of teaching with blog use, such as marking students' entries online, leaving comments and feedback in their blogs and interacting with students by taking the questions which they had included in their blogs. To achieve the purpose of integrating blog use in the writing classroom to its fullest extent, all the learning material was uploaded online throughout the program. The teacher-researcher also published class announcements online, archived students' blog articles, and shared words of encouragement with the students in blogs. It is anticipated that his experience of teaching with such substantial involvement in the blogging approach, in terms of both time and activities, makes him a case worth discussion.

Data collection and data analysis

The data collected for analysis were comprised of journal entries that the teacher-researcher kept to monitor his teaching of the BALL project mentioned. As this is a paper where an individual teacher attempts to share his own teaching experience, no specific scientific analysis approach will be adopted. Rather, a simple approach that is commonly used in analyzing descriptive counts in the field of qualitative inquiries in general will be used. This includes: (1) listing every expression or comment (the participants' responses to the experience) relevant to the targeting experience and reducing and eliminating those are less directly relevant, (2) clustering similar

constituents and thematizing core themes of the experience, and (3) constructing a textural-structural description.

Results

Just as Levy (2009) suggests, classroom blogging was truly a very labor-intensive and time-consuming approach to the teacher-researcher, as he often repeated in his journals: "once again, it took more time than planned today!" or "I am tired of coping with those seemingly endless tasks." Indeed, although the teacher-researcher always managed to upload material for students ahead of the course, to maintain his tutor blog and to comment on students' entries and questions without undue delay, this was a result of many late nights. Specifically, apart from imparting writing skills to the students, some class time was used to show them how to use certain features. For example, the teacher-researcher recorded that he "spent about 15 minutes showing students how to revise their posts," which delayed his schedule of teaching that day.

Additionally, while teachers in a traditional classroom probably need only print out handouts and distribute them to students, in this case he had to spend extra time in waiting for the file to be completely uploaded online. The completion of the task became even more difficult and prolonged when it involved the uploading of text with pictures or with formatted bullet points. Unlike the MS Word system (for example), with which a wide variety of applications are equipped to allow users to play with text easily, most blog hosts offer only basic tools, so adjusting a blog entry with pictures or numbering in the way that the teacher-researcher planned sometimes consumed more time than he had expected. Because the editing interface of blog is rather different from that of MS Word, pasting and copying a text with pictures between the two systems also created extra workload. An even more slow and unexpected step ensued when the technology failed for no reason! There were times when the teacher-researcher had to re-write his comments and posts because they went missing before he had time to post them.

In addition to the issues of technical support and content management which took more time of the teacher-researcher than he expected, helping students with their learning development also ended up as a time-consuming and distracting activity for this BALL teacher-researcher as well. For example, "the commenting function is not really ideal, as its functionality is not flexible enough. I can only leave comments line by line in fixed order in a small 'commenting window' inserted below students' entries. This causes me to spend more time than I would spend when I teach in a traditional classroom of low-tech pens and paper," as pens and paper allow teachers to mark compositions freely and even to draw a few lines/arrows between the comments made and the content referred to. More detailed comments need to be done in written language while they could be done using pens and paper. This increased the already labor-intense assessing task. Additionally, to ensure ordered and in-time feedback in ways which perceptibly benefit student bloggers, both in and after class, the teacher had from time to time to keep a lookout for the upload of students' entries and questions. Not only was this protracted, but it 'invaded' the time set aside for his private life and chopped it into fragments.

 Unfortunately, the pressure on time associated with learner support activities was not entirely the worst part for the teacher-researcher to overcome, although it did leave him feeling irritated now and again. The most troubled moments were when the researcher observed that his students showed low blogging involvement both in and out of class. Doubts would often rise at this point: "whether or not the time and effort that I have put into the blogging project and my student bloggers would ever pay off?" Throughout the project of 36 weeks, the students produced a total of 408 entries, that is, an average of only around 17 pieces of writing each. On average, the student writers produced only one journal every other week and most of the entries

were required by the teacher. Since low blogging involvement was the norm, it is not surprising to see that the teacher-researcher's doubts accumulated to such a level that he started to resent the whole blogging approach, though he managed to keep these feelings to himself and see the project to completion.

Discussion and conclusion

It seems clear from the results above that the teacher-researcher's experience of teaching with blogs is rather negative and failed to make blogging seem an attractive approach for facilitating teachers' teaching or improving their workload, in particular when compared to previous researchers' positive reports about students' learning achievements. This teacher-researcher seemed to be trapped by the pressure on time and effort created by ensuring a functioning class blog and the concern grew greater when students' performance failed to meet his expectations. Such concerns echo the blogging experience of Wu (2008), namely, the feeling of disappointment, and the observations of Levy (2009) and Hourigan and Murray (2010), that is, labor-intensive and time-consuming. This in turn confirms that the experience of the author of this paper is objectively justified, even though it is the experience of only one individual teacher.

In addition, this result once again raises an important question that have been touched on but have not been fully studied yet (Levy, 2009; Lin, Lin, & Hsu, 2011): would it be the case that the overwhelmingly positive effects of classroom blogging on language students' learning performance as have been reported in previous studies achieved at the expense of the time and effort of language teachers or moderators rather than the blogging approach itself? This could be a fruitful line of inquiry for future BALL research to pursue.

However, it should also be noted that more investigations are urgently needed into teachers with different teaching styles or teaching philosophies, before a more comprehensive and objective understanding can be reached of blogging teachers' experience as a whole. This is suggested because it is possible that teachers who believe in the value of making great sacrifices (such as time) for students or who enjoy engaging in technology-supported settings may perceive their teaching experience with blogs differently. It is also worth mentioning that, to improve blogging teachers' experience, it is recommended that future blogging projects recruit assistants to share the workload of sustaining the blogging approach. Last but not least, although this is not the main concern of this study, it may be better for teachers to take students' learning styles into consideration when blog use is introduced into classrooms. It is possible that the blogging approach may be more suitable for students of some learning styles than others and thus students' low engagement in blogging activities, as deplored by the teacher-researcher in the present study, may increase.

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