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Parallel Blogging: Explorations in Teacher and Learner Autonomy

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In order to teach autonomy, the teacher must exercise autonomy in his own learning. A teacher who does not practice autonomy cannot assist his student in achieving a level of autonomy. To employ a slightly tired cliché, we should practice what we preach. This was the call of David Little (1995), one of the first to talk about the teacher's role in autonomy as anything other than a conduit for the learner's own empowerment.

Defining autonomy, in its political or philosophical senses, is a discussion for another time and place (see Benson, 2008; Stewart & Irie, Chapter 1, this book). For the purposes of this chapter I will define autonomy as a freedom of choice in selection of learning materials and methods and a personal responsibility for learning. It is not necessarily a lonely pursuit. Indeed, it is often more effective to collaborate with peers. Neither is it an absolute state; that is, there can be degrees of autonomy, and learners may find themselves moving between phases of more or less autonomous activity. These concepts are equally applicable to both teacher *and* student. Fundamentally, though, both the language learner and the developing teacher have a duty to reflect upon their experiences. Huberman et al. (1993) admonish the teacher thus: "while the principal task of professional educators is to guide children in the course of their development, it seems that they, themselves, do not have the inclination to reflect on their own situation and their own professional future" (p. 262).

Working with a group of first year English majors at a Japanese university, my goal was to offer the students chances to select, create, manipulate and share content in English, outside of the class, and without censorship or guidance from a teacher. The blog was also a part of a curriculum directed by the institution and its proxy, the teacher, but within that framework autonomous activity took place. At the same

time, I sought to reflect on my own teaching through an on-line teacher development group. The two blogging projects ran concurrently, and each had an effect on the other. This chapter is a description and analysis of learner and teacher autonomy through parallel blogging.

The first section of this chapter outlines the technical and logistical aspects of setting up both projects, and some insight into the contexts in which they operated. This is followed by a commentary on the parallel projects as they ran from March to September 2009, and an analysis of the data gathered through questionnaires administered to the participants and blog posts and comments for the duration of the study. This discussion section connects the findings to other research in teacher development, autonomy, and technology in learning. The chapter closes with directions for future research and an assessment of the successes and failures of the project.

Background and context

Teacher blogging

I first came across the idea of reflective practice and journaling as an MA student. Taking Schön (1983, 1987) as a starting point, a great deal has been written about reflective practice in education. Journaling in particular has become a common tool in teacher education programs, both in mainstream education and in English Language Teaching. Typically, teachers in such programs are asked to keep written records of their classroom experiences, to share with other trainees, the tutor, or no one. The process of writing may in itself promote reflection, but not necessarily (see Richards & Ho (1998) for an overview of journal writing as part of reflective practice).

Despite the established tradition, I perceived a number of difficulties associated with reflective journal writing. Firstly, the act of physically writing a journal is not for everyone. I had difficulty with motivating myself to write on a regular basis, at least in a way that had any deeper reflective value. This is linked to the second issue of privacy; when I was called upon to write for a tutor, I found myself editing for an audience. Yet when I wrote purely for myself later on, the lack of an audience rendered the exercise somewhat pointless. The final problem is the worth of the content of the journal. For novice teachers, assessment of classroom techniques can be very valuable. But as I gained experience I found that I was asking the same questions and receiving the same surface answers without accessing inner beliefs and values. I found this echoed in much of the literature, for example in Richards and Farrell

(2005) the attention was focused on questions relating to how lesson plans worked, specific problems and what could be done differently, neglecting (I felt) the more holistic, underlying motivations of the teachers and learners. By only looking at what happened, rather than why it happened, I felt I was caught in a rut.

I read two books at this time which helped me to formulate a way forward. The first was Bolton's (2005) book looking at creative writing and metaphor in reflection from a broader perspective (mainly in the medical and social work fields). The questions she asked helped me to find new perspectives and to peek around corners to catch a glimpse of what I was actually thinking. The second was Farrell (2007), in which the author described teacher development groups. In this way writing could be seen and commented on by others to help spotlight deeper issues. With these goals in mind, I set about developing an on-line journaling group with a small cohort of teachers to share and comment on one another's writing about teaching and learning.

Student blogging

After the first year of teaching an upper-intermediate level oral communication class, three times a week, I was preparing to teach the class once more with a new class of learners. The lessons were based around a series of issues (beauty, racism, language and so on), each one studied for about two or three weeks, and each ending with short student presentations. In total, close to two hundred students take this course, divided into eight classes between four teachers. Although each teacher plans his or her own curriculum and assessments, there is close collaboration between teachers and the content, themes and methods are fairly consistent. Three areas for attention arose in the first year.

Distribution of media and material

The teachers on the course used a variety of authentic video, audio and text to teach each topic. I wanted to make this more accessible to the learners outside the class, and also to share student-sourced materials. Photocopies of articles and videos shown only in class seemed to me to be too teacher driven.

Collaboration

Students were preparing together in class. However, I wanted to create a space for them to share ideas and research outside of class.

Critical thinking and research skills

The students were required to find their own information to support their presentations. However, it wasn't always apparent how and where they had found that information. I wanted an insight into what they were looking at to help me plan my teaching of research and thinking skills.

Little (1995) points out that the teacher needs to "decide on the areas in which she will seek to promote learner autonomy" (p. 179). In this project, the blog was designed as a teacher-led media delivery system, as well as a semi-autonomous collaboration area, and a free space for student-generated content. The degree of autonomy afforded to and exercised by the students was flexible.

What is a tumblelog?

I soon found a particular web-based platform which I thought would be appropriate for both teacher and student blogs, at www.tumblr.com. For the reader familiar with web 2.0 applications, *Tumblr* can be classified as a micro-blog, which operates like a hybrid of twitter and social bookmarking software such as delicious or diigo. For those less familiar, the term tumblelog appears to have been coined in around 2005 to refer to a new style of short-form, text-light blog exemplified by Christian Neukirchen's Anarchaia (<http://anarchaia.org/>) (Kottke, 2005). These blogs were and are used to display images, links, and short texts in a rolling fashion. The most prominent current example is probably twitter, but for several reasons I selected *Tumblr* for this project.

First amongst these was simplicity. For the students, I wanted to dispense with passwords and registration procedures, allowing them to access the site via an easily memorized URL and to contribute by email. Each *Tumblr* account has a unique email address, and links, text, or attachments (of certain file types) can be sent directly to the account and published instantly. This accessibility is achieved at some cost of security. However, clear guidelines were laid down regarding the levels of personal information which students were able to disclose (first names and initial only, for example) and *Tumblr* also offers users the option of removing the blog from the directory and from search engine statistics, making it extremely unlikely that anyone would stumble across the site. Although the site was not technically secure, effectively the risk to students was minimal.

When setting up the site, the administrator also has the opportunity to select the theme (the look) of the blog, most of which are fairly clean

and light in their design. One early disadvantage became apparent at this stage; *Tumblr* is primarily a sharing and display-based application, and although interactivity between users is becoming more common, there is not, as yet, an inbuilt comments function. However, by signing up to a third-party comments management application through *www.disqus.com*, a small piece of code can be cut and pasted directly into the raw HTML available through the *Tumblr* dash-board, and comments are enabled. This highlights another aspect of *Tumblr*; its customizability. Through the customize page, it is easy for the administrator to access his own blog's HTML code, and make adjustments. Of course, this is either an advantage, a disadvantage, or inconsequential, depending on one's attitude towards computer coding. It did appear to have an effect on the project as a whole, as I will discuss later.

From the course management side, there were a number of helpful features. One was the "share to *Tumblr*" bookmarklet, a small tab which can be saved in the Internet browser's bookmark folder. This enables the user to post to the blog directly while browsing the Internet, with a couple of clicks. For example, if the user finds an interesting *YouTube* video, he simply clicks on the bookmarklet, and it's on the tumblelog. For more adept users, the pop-up screen offers the chance to add text, publish as a picture, a link or an embedded video, and add tags for searching within the blog. I hoped this would facilitate use by several members of staff at one time, in particular the three other teachers who were teaching concurrent classes on the same program. Each teacher had access to the dash-board, with a shared user name and password, and thus the capability to fine-tune and edit posts.

When the time came to initiate the teacher development project I had been thinking about, all these *Tumblr* features seemed attractive. I also liked the synchronicity of using the same platform for two separate projects. One especially important capability for the project I had in mind was the ability to follow another *Tumblr* stream and keep up to date with others' posts via one's own dash-board: a virtual emulation of a face-to-face journal sharing session. As each member of the group wrote about issues which concerned them, shared links to things they had been reading or using in class or described their experiences in the context they worked in, the others could respond by commenting or by posting on their own tumblelogs.

One other aspect of *Tumblr* prompted its use in this project. Although many blogs are fairly easy to use these days, platforms such as *WordPress* and *TypePad* are designed for professional-looking, text-heavy websites. The *Tumblr* dash-board is stripped down, and lacks many of the features

of other platforms. When opening it up, one is confronted with an empty box much like a blank page. There is little choice but to write, and the writer has very few options regarding the presentation of that writing. Conceptually, I felt this was closer to what I wanted to achieve – a note to a friend rather than a finely polished academic article.

Results and discussion

Teacher development blog

The call for participants was posted on several email message groups between March and May 2009. There were 19 initial inquiries from prospective participants. Requests for information came from Algeria, Spain, China, Japan, Turkey, India, Malaysia, Columbia, Oman, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Italy and Serbia. However, only seven of the inquirers set up blogs. The seven participants were DE (Japan), CC (Italy), CB (Brazil), PT (Oman), KD (India), SG (Czech Republic), and PN (the UK). Each person set up a blog and linked it to the others in the group. Of the seven participants, only four made more than one post or comment. Two "participants" made no posts or comments at all, after initially setting up the blog. I will focus on the two most active members of the group.

Recruiting and maintaining momentum from all the members of the group was challenging. I initially received plenty of interest but the number that actually set up a blog was fairly small, and the number that continued to post was even smaller. I was excited by the diversity of participants (native and non-native speakers, working in a variety of countries and contexts), but the amount of content generated was

Table 13.1 Teacher development blogging activity

Administrator	DE	PT
Posts	24	10
Total comments on posts	51 (2.2/post)	44 (4.4/post)
Posts with no comments	10 (41.6%)	1 (10.0%)
Comments by administrator	20 (39.2%)	7 (15.1%)
Comments by other project participants	14 (27.5%) 13 from PT, 1 from another	15 (34.1%) 13 from DE, 2 from another

limited. As you can see, within the group myself and one other member were active in commenting on each other's posts. What was surprising was the number of outside commenters, and although the table doesn't show it, this trend became more marked as the project continued.

Although I posted more regularly, and in greater depth, than I would have had this been a paper journal, I found myself holding back at times to allow others to respond. As it became apparent that these responses would not always be forthcoming, I began to post more frequently again. But despite my initial intentions the posts did become more polished and less "honest" with the awareness of an audience. My own recognition of the disparity may, in itself, be helpful. But regardless of the context I realize now that there is a trade off between honest reflection and feedback: you can only write without fear if you know that no one else will read it and judge you, but you have to then forgo the benefits of feedback. Bailey et al. (2001, p. 58) present a seven-level cline of teaching journals usage, from the totally private (written and reread alone) through sharing selected entries with trusted colleagues, to reporting to an unknown audience. This project leapt straight to the last level and, in retrospect, it may have had an impact on how much people were willing to share, as well as the manner in which they did so. It may be more effective to focus on free-form writing for personal reflection and edit what is produced for public consumption. For example, my post of 16 June 2009 entitled "Student Blogging Notes Part Two" received no comments at all, but I am not sure if the failure to receive feedback was a total failure. Writing about a specific, personal, and contextually precise teaching experience can be valuable for the writer in consolidating and clarifying his own ideas. It is interesting that the posts which elicited more interaction were more general ("Metaphors for Teaching and Learning", 2 June – six comments). Perhaps part of the reason that PT was able to encourage more discussion on his blog was his skill in blending the specific with the general. For teachers hoping to hone their craft as researchers and writers, blogging offers an opportunity to practice combining these qualities.

It also appears that a community, on-line or otherwise, cannot be forced. I have made other connections through keeping this blog beyond the group I was trying to form. By placing restrictions on the format and applications used, and trying to control the direction of the group, it has been somewhat stifled. I am looking now at building a more organic community. A personal learning network (PLN) is just that – personal, and needs to be developed to suit the needs of its creator at a given period in their professional development. The PLN is built between various nodes (technological hubs such as blogs, or

face-to-face hubs such as the staffroom) and employs differing modes of communication (synchronous, semi-synchronous or asynchronous) (Warlick, 2009). That is, a teacher in development may learn from talking directly to other teachers in the staffroom in real-time (synchronous, face-to-face communication) or by exchanging comments on a blog or a forum across time zones (asynchronous, computer-mediated communication). The PLN, then, does not operate in a vacuum, and it needs to be acknowledged that participants in any one learning network will likely be active elsewhere. At the same time as maintaining activity on my tumblelog, I was communicating with other bloggers outside the group, collaborating with other teachers at my own institution, reflecting alone and reading both on-line and on paper. This is my PLN, in its current form, but it is a very changeable entity.

Finally, I imagine that other members of the teacher development project came to rely less on the group as it became clearer that participation was limited. As the group was formed artificially, there was neither loyalty nor pressure to commit to making it work. This contrasts with face-to-face teacher development groups as described by Mann (2002) and Farrell (1999) in three major ways:

1. The face-to-face group often has a clear task and pre-determined timeframe. Farrell (1999) points out the difficulties his group faced which it was able to overcome because the participants recognized "the end in sight" (p. 169).
2. The participants have some existing relationship or tie. In most cases, this is either a shared workplace or as trainee teachers studying together. Physical proximity and feelings of obligation encourage group members to follow through on tasks.
3. There is either a leader with a level of authority (a tutor, for example), or the group is formed entirely democratically and ground-rules are decided before the project commences. In either case, the end result is that tasks are carried out.

None of these conditions were in place for this project, and this led to its failure. Although the way the group was organized was rigidly set, its goals were not.

Student blog

The initial intentions of myself and the other teachers altered during the course of the project due to a number of practical and pedagogical considerations.

Plans to post material frequently soon proved problematic, as the students didn't have time (or perhaps the inclination) to absorb or respond to large volumes of media. Blogs are dynamic, and each new post will replace its previous post at the head of the front page. Despite the search and tag facilities, which should have enabled learners to navigate the site looking for something of interest, most students appeared to stick to the main page. Considering this aspect from the perspective of learner autonomy, the learners exercised their prerogatives in not using the material offered by the teacher.

In planning, the use of the blog across classes was seen as a benefit, as a chance for students to interact who might not otherwise have done so. However, in practice, it became apparent that different teachers had different ideas for the direction of the blog, and that tying the blog to class content made it difficult when classes were out of step. The size of the community made it unwieldy; with too many people it was easy to lose track of posts and projects that were taking place at any one time. Ironically, this problem was part of what prompted the formation of the teacher development group, as I tried to track the ever-fluctuating movements of my on-line communities and got drowned by the noise. It may be that there is an optimum size for an on-line group which provides enough interest for participants but doesn't generate a surfeit of content.

For each of the class themes, students worked together in groups of four or five to prepare short presentations, which they then presented alone to other members of the class. Once the groups decided on a title, they posted it to the blog via email so they could collaborate in the comments section before presenting. They usually had about a week to do this. Between 22 and 24 April, there were 11 titles posted, which elicited a total of 68 comments – an average of 6.1 comments, between one and 17 comments per post. Although early on in the project many students only posted links to information they had found, some exchanges demonstrated how well the students could collaborate without teacher guidance, and how they took on leadership roles within the group.

As the students began to see what others were doing and how the blog could be utilized, such interaction increased. Later in the project, students used the comments section to share drafts of presentation scripts and to thank, admonish and encourage one another more frequently.

The effects of the particular technology used as a medium for the project have to be addressed. The concept of "digital nativism" (Prensky, 2001) has become fairly common currency in education. However, the idea that all those born since about 1980 are very comfortable with

Blog Post Title - Couples should Hold a Marriage Ceremony	
S. 05/04/2009	Hey!!! T., W., C.!!! Please send me your articles!! A. 05/01/2009 I am sorry to be late. I think the research Y. found is useful for the presentation. How will you begin to write a sentence?
T. 05/05/2009	I sent you e-mail yesterday. if you couldn't get the e-mail, please show me your e-mail address again in this home page.
W. 05/04/2009	Sorry,S.... I found this articles. (url)
C. 05/04/2009	I'm sorry, S. I'm going to send an email to you today.

Figure 13.1 Student blogging exchanges: couples should hold a marriage ceremony

Blog Post Title - Marriage Across the Age Gap	
Y. 04/29/2009	I'm sorry to be late. I've lost the url of the page. The research I found shows an interesting result. Husband wants 6 - 10 years younger wife rather than same age. But if wife is older, husband wishes she would be almost same age. On the other hand, wife wants 6-10 years older husband than same. If husband is younger, wife wants him to be as same age as possible. Considered this result and M's article, the ideal couple is old husband and young wife and their age gap is 6-10. How do we make the presentation? Active or negative to the age gap? Who is the director?

Figure 13.2 Student blogging exchanges: marriage across the age gap

technology and social media, and that educators are short-changing their learners if they don't incorporate technological resources into their classes, is rather one-dimensional. Research is indicating that, although the young are generally using technology in their daily lives far more than in the past, factors such as nationality and culture, gender, educational context and personal preference are also important (Bennett et al., 2008; Kennedy et al., 2008; Hargittai, 2010). It also appears that learners may be incredibly adept at utilizing certain tools in certain ways, yet unable to perform simple tasks with other technologies. Techno-literacy is uneven within peer groups, and within individuals. For the Japanese university student, the mobile phone often acts as the primary web portal, dictionary, email client, personal organizer and a digital media creation/storage device, and many students have commutes of an hour or more on public transport with only their phones to keep them company. Their personal computer use, however, may be limited by practical obstacles (lack of home access) or affective ones (lack of confidence) (Elwood & MacLean, 2009).

In the end-of-semester questionnaire administered to 63 students, responses to the open question "What did you think about the blog?" highlighted these issues. Comments with explicit reference to technical difficulties occurred 12 times (19.04%):

- *someone don't have their computers in their house.*
- *It was a little troublesome for me. I can't use my computer.*
- *I couldn't use it by mobile phone. If I could, the blog would be more useful.*

From an autonomy perspective, feelings about peer collaboration online were overwhelmingly positive, with 29 comments (46.03%) making reference to sharing scripts, ideas and research on-line while preparing presentations. The word "share" was used by ten students, and "useful" by 26:

- *It played an important part in the preparation of the presentation.*
- *We could communicate with each other during weekend.*
- *I could know other's opinion.*
- *I was helped by sharing idea with people at the blog.*

As part of my original motivation was to promote peer collaboration, these comments were encouraging. However, outside the summer vacation period when students were extremely active in posting and

commenting entirely learner-generated content (with 52 posts and 114 comments in August alone), students only posted their own content unless specifically instructed to. It appeared that many were satisfied with the teacher taking the lead:

- *You posted a lot of videos, and I like them.*

Student posting was empowering, however:

- *I posted video, and when I got comments from my friend I was glad.*

On reflection, it may be that certain aspects of autonomous learning were neglected in this project. Although students were encouraged to select their own materials and take responsibility for research, an over-emphasis on the blog as a method of study may have been restrictive:

- *It works only the case everyone check the blog often. Some people don't check it, so some comments couldn't work well.*
- *Not necessary because we can get in touch with classmates by email.*

Face-to-face meetings, or other forms of communication outside class, are equally valid methods of peer collaboration.

Conclusions

One blog can be deemed a relative success, the other a failure. But both provided learning opportunities and in this respect can thus be considered beneficial. I am still disappointed that the teacher development group didn't succeed, especially as I wanted to learn from my colleagues in international settings. However, there are many opportunities to do that with on-line teaching communities worldwide opening their doors to others and sharing ideas. It seems that both projects demonstrate that the community and the task come first, the technology later. The students' blog was most successful when the participants had clearly defined tasks and when the community was allowed to operate within those goals. The teacher development project fell down on the inauthenticity of its community, and the abstract nature of its goals. Web 2.0 is a great place to find people and tools to help you with whatever you need to do right now, and my future projects may well reflect this. For example, the students' blog was most active over the summer break when freedom (within the parameters of certain goals) was

total – something that the simplicity of the *Tumblr* interface was well suited to. However, although collaboration on presentations was effective it might be even better served by slightly more complex applications such as Wikis, which allow students to post links and also to edit documents (for example, scripts) together. The students' blog operated as a teacher-led content delivery system, as a space for student collaboration, and as a free area for student-driven content. Ultimately, the movement between degrees and styles of autonomy may have been confusing for the students: something which separate platforms for distinct activities would perhaps clarify.

The relationship between the two blogging projects is a curious one. Certainly, my experience as a teacher–blogger has informed my practice with student blogging, from the purely practical (learning more about what the blogging platform could actually do) to the more abstract (developing concepts about participation in on-line communities). I rediscovered the reflective worth of writing about teaching, and have started a new blog with less of a fixed agenda for that purpose. I have also set up five more student blogs, addressing some of the technological issues (with a mobile-friendly platform, for example). I hope to be more relaxed as a teacher, more open to allowing students to select other methods of study, and to encourage more flexible student participation.

Note

1. Masculine pronouns have been used throughout this chapter to avoid cumbersome “his or her” constructions, and because the author/researcher is male.

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