

Beyond the Class Blog: Creative and Practical Uses of Blogger for the ESL Classroom

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Using Blogger, a free Google-powered weblog-generating website, English as a second language (ESL) instructors can create motivating and empowering learning opportunities for students. Instructors can generate their own blogs, including not only a class blog that builds a community-learning setting online, but also a teacher's homepage to communicate with students and a content-specific blog that extends classroom lessons to online practice. In addition, instructors can guide ESL students in the blog-creating process, leading them to write their own blogs, such as an online journal of their experiences in a foreign country.

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With each new generation of collegiate-level ESL students that uses computers as a way of life, instructors are discovering the importance of using online activities such as blogging as a means of teaching authentic language. One useful resource on the Internet is Blogger, a Google-powered weblog-generating website, that helps teachers and students create blogs with relative ease. The purpose of this article is to document several ways in which ESL instructors can use Blogger to build practical, educational blogs to complement their courses, including both teacher- and student-generated blogs.

AN INSTRUCTOR'S PERSONAL HOMEPAGE

The first blog that a teacher can set up is the instructor's personal homepage, a blog that can function as the teacher's communication with students from all of their classes. For

example, an ESL instructor with a teaching load of four to five classes, ranging from a low-level grammar class to an advanced speaking class, could use this method of communicating to his or her students with announcements, homework assignments, and special notes on learning. Teachers can update their blog as often as necessary and set up links on their blog to other websites. Students can in turn check it for updates on assignments and class notes.

To begin creating a teacher-generated homepage, go to the *dashboard*, the main starting page of Blogger, and click on the link that says *create a blog*. Write an easy-to-remember title and web address, and then choose a template style. That completes the initial step. To post something new, click on *new post*. Write a title and text directly in the space provided. To add a photo to the post, click on the small *add image* icon across the top of the post, in the same row as italics and bold. The computer will prompt the user to upload a photo from a computer, and the user can set the photo to appear on the left, right, or in the center of the post. To add a *homework* sidebar, go back to the dashboard. Click on *layout*. At the sidebar, click on *add a gadget*. Click on the *text* box and a pop-up window will open with space to write information. Once a homepage is created, teachers can start to be more creative with using Blogger to build more aspects of it. See an example at <http://livingwateresl.blogspot.com>.

THE TEACHER-GENERATED CLASS BLOG

A teacher-generated class blog can be different from the homepage in that class-specific activities and class-related information can be made available to students in a particular class. This blog can also function as a help for students to get to know their classmates better.

Including individual and group photos of students can bring color and fun to a class blog, but instructors ethically need to consider the background and sensitivity of their students to determine whether or not modifications to the blog need to be made if there are personal or cultural objections to posting personal photos online. Modifications to a class blog can include allowing students the freedom to choose a photo or icon that best

represents themselves, such as a photo of a famous building in their home country, or anything that the teacher and student agree upon. Privacy settings can also be set by the instructor to make the blog only available to the class for viewing by starting at the dashboard and clicking on *settings* and *permissions*. A little coaching about the purpose of the class blog will also help students understand what the instructor is trying to do. As Crie (2006, n.p.) mentions, “Blogs may be viewed publicly, as any other website. Students must be trained on issues regarding access, privacy, security, and free expression.”

If posting student photos on the blog has been deemed appropriate and all students have agreed, teachers can begin by organizing a photo shoot on campus and asking the students where they would like to pose for group and individual photos. After the photos have been taken, teachers can post them on the blog, beginning with the group photo. Then they can post each student photo individually with a student-written introduction of him/herself. Students can read information about their classmates online and especially about classmates that they might not know very well. See an example at <http://alcibasicspr10.blogspot.com>.

After the class blog has been created, instructors can also begin to create content-specific blogs for each of their classes. Here are some examples from basic-level writing and intermediate pronunciation courses.

CONTENT-SPECIFIC BLOGS

For a basic-level writing class, teachers can create posts using clip art photos. Instructors can write several question-prompts related to the photo to guide the students’ creative writing. The students can write their passage in Microsoft Word, and instructors can help them through the editing process, using peer editing, self editing, and teacher editing to finish the draft. Guiding students through the editing process might take 1 to 2 hr of class time, depending on the level of the students and expectations from their writing. Every aspect of the writing process is completed in Microsoft Word, and then students post their final draft in the comments section of the blog entry. With three or four students writing about the same photo, the comments section could list the

writing entries about one photo in an organized way. See an example of a photo, writing prompts, and student responses at <http://eslcreativewriting.blogspot.com/2009/05/old-ruin.html>. The writing blog can be seen at <http://eslcreativewriting.blogspot.com>.

A pronunciation content-specific class blog can be used for a course in either pronunciation or oral communication. Instructors can create additional pronunciation practice, including some of the aspects of a language lab with visual and audio capability. Each entry can be contextualized, such as *At the Bank* or *At the Supermarket*, and for each entry students perform a particular pronunciation skill within that context. For example, an entry with the context *At an Outdoor Café* includes a practice activity of listening for and repeating question intonation. Teachers can post a clip art photo of an outdoor café and write a list of questions that students can hear and repeat themselves. For the listening component, teachers can record their own voice using a sound generator website such as [vocaroo.com](http://www.vocaroo.com) (www.vocaroo.com). At [vocaroo.com](http://www.vocaroo.com), they can record their voice, copy the html code of the recorded passage, and paste the html code onto their blog post. See the example at <http://eslpronunciationplus.blogspot.com/2009/10/outdoor-cafe.html>, and the pronunciation blog at <http://eslpronunciationplus.blogspot.com>.

STUDENT-GENERATED BLOGS

Once instructors have become comfortable creating blogs using the Blogger application online, they can start teaching their students how to create their own blogs, ideally in a computer or language lab setting.

An example of an ESL student-generated blog is one that documents their experiences of living and studying in a foreign country. Teachers can explain to students that their readers will either be native-speaking students at their university who are curious about the international student experience, or friends and family from their own country who want to follow what they are doing abroad. Students write their own blog entries about their experiences overseas and include their own photos. The lessons

can be progressive, leading students through guided writing activities each week.

The following activities are suggestions for guiding basic students' writing once a week for two hours. However, the activities can be lengthened according to the level of the students and the class time.

Week 1: Teachers help students create their own blog using Blogger, working closely with students who have very little experience with the Internet. Students choose their own template, title, and write something about themselves in the *About Me* section of their blog.

Week 2: Students write one entry about their former lives in their own countries. What were they doing before they came abroad? This gives their reader perspective about the writer's past.

Week 3: Students write one entry to introduce themselves, including information such as where they are from and describing their families back home. They can also answer questions about why they are studying abroad and what their goals are now. Students can also share three things that their classmates don't know about them. This information piques their classmates' interests in reading each other's blogs. It is also the same paragraph that would appear next to their personal photo on the class blog.

Week 4: Students write about their environment in the overseas country. Where do they study? Where do they live? In this entry, they can write about their dormitory or apartment and about their roommates.

These four weeks build a foundation for an online journal about their experiences abroad. From then on, the instructor is free to guide students each week with a new prompt along the lines of the same theme. For example, students can write an entry of their observations of local holidays, or compare and contrast aspects of their own country with the overseas country. For the last entry of the semester, students can write a summary of their reflections on the semester and what their future goals are. Some students may even continue their blog entries on their own after they have finished the course. See a student's example of an online journal at

<http://david09new.blogspot.com> (this blog has been included as an example with permission from the student).

THE BENEFITS OF STUDENT-GENERATED BLOGGING

Using Blogger to help ESL students or students of English as a foreign language (EFL) create their own blogs has many advantages. Aaron Campbell, an EFL instructor, states in the following way that using blogs in the classroom can empower students to write:

My hope is that by acting like bloggers, they [students] can get a taste for what it feels like to communicate their own ideas in a foreign language and develop their own social network based on their interests. They will also be in possession of a tool that empowers them to be in control of this process and encourages them to interact in a direct way with their peers. (Campbell, 2005, para. 5)

Alexander Halavais, the graduate director of informatics at the State University of New York's University at Buffalo, has his students write blogs and read each other's entries. His comment in an interview with *The Washington Post* has implications for using blogging exercises with ESL students:

I think students learn a lot more from reading each other's work than they would by writing just for me. I've also found, over years of using blogs, that students are likely to write much more carefully for an audience of their peers than they are for the professor alone. ("Blogs sidestep classroom restraints," 2006, para. 5)

Vicki Davis mentions several reasons why ESL teachers should use blogging as a learning tool in the classroom, including creating a stronger connection with the teacher, helping students engage their own learning styles, and getting students to write (Davis, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The time spent creating a teacher-generated class blog or content-specific blog as mentioned in this article, along with posting entries, is definitely a consideration, especially for instructors with

heavy class loads and high student enrollment. However, instructors require minimal time to begin building their own personal homepage blog. From that point, they can begin to create content-specific class blogs according to the needs of their courses and build them over a period of time. Student-generated blogs can be created almost entirely in class sessions, placing the responsibility of the time and effort primarily onto the student.

As students find blogging in their ESL classes an engaging and motivating hands-on activity, instructors should consider the educational benefits for their students and weigh the pros and cons of using Blogger in their own classes to see if following the suggestions in this article is right for them.

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