

TEAM BUILDING THROUGH CLASS BLOG

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ABSTRACT

Student's work for a writing class is no longer one submitted for limited readership the teacher and the writer himself as it can be publicly shared online. Posted on a webpage such as blog, it allows more people to access, read, or leave comments. Though it may sound intimidating for some shy students who are likely to keep their writing private, it is less about trespassing the confidential status of a student's work than building the student's self confidence and encouraging them to produce a better composition. It is especially through class blog which is managed by a number of students of the same class. This model proves to be beneficial for the students because not only is their writing read by more audience than their fellow classmates but they can also identify themselves as a team. This paper attempts to describe the previous researches concerning the application of blog in general and what it means by class blog, the model of class blog which has been implemented in this project, and how team work among the classmates is built through class blogs.

Keywords: writing, class blog

Introduction

Technology advances so rapidly that sometimes we gasp for breath catching up with its latest innovations. We grow up with computer gadgets, mobile phone, PDA as far as we can remember. Along with the development of technology, however, globalization is also inevitable. With the help of technology for communication especially of the internet, we are in touch with people from all over the world. We share global issues and information. Via the internet, we exchange ideas online, even with people half a world away from us. Furthermore, social networking services like Facebook and Twitter seemingly become today's trend. Blogging is also popular. People like to hear and to be heard. They like to learn other culture and like others to learn their own culture. Indeed, most of us enjoy the ease that the technology offers. We cannot deny how much it has shaped our lives in the globalization process.

To relate with English teaching, this is a golden moment. Several internet features do help teachers make their class more interactive. And, of course, it can bring more fun and more learning experience for the students. For example, on the website about "Improving Your Writing"¹, the students can study types of sentences in English by reading the explanation and doing the given tasks online. The other interesting website which includes listening and reading skill is available on BBC Learning English². It offers a number of programs such as "Words in the News", "6-Minute English", "Quizzes", and more which can be watched and practiced online or downloaded as reference for teaching. Besides, a website developed by Longman³ for students who are interested to study English anytime anywhere and for instructors to design their online class is also fascinating. It offers integrated English program which is flexible.

In addition to the websites which offer English learning program that is accessible for the students, teachers of English can use the other features available. Especially for writing class, the use of blog is valuable. The basic requirement of blog is writing, so it is very suitable for the students as they can post their works there. Since the very nature of internet is its being accessible anytime by anyone, moreover, it is then potential for wider readership. In this way they have a chance to interact not only with their classmates but also with people from other places and even stay connected outside the classroom.

Concerning the application of blog for Writing class itself, teachers can have different techniques. For example, as how the website functions, the teachers themselves can post all the teaching materials and exercises on the blog, and then the students should check and download them. Here the teacher must be active and make sure that the blog is regularly updated. The other strategy is the teachers assign the students to make their own blog, post their writings online, leave comments, make links to other websites, and many more activities. It can be an individual or group project. Here the students practice at first hand how to blog. Or else, the combination of both strategies would be better.

¹It is a website developed by Janis Webb from Victoria University - Australia in 2001 for students in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology to improve their writing skills for academic and professional purposes. It was last updated in 2003 and originally designed for limited audience. However, due to the nature of internet, it can still be accessed up to today by people who are interested in the topics offered. For more details, go to http://tts.vu.edu.au/SLS/slu/FOR_STUDENTS/CALM%20Resources/Resources_Health_Engineering_and_Science/PBL%20Engineering/webja/sentences_simple_and_compound.htm.

²For more details, go to <http://.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/>

³For more details, log on to <http://longmanenglishinteractive.com>

Whichever way is best, indeed, blog can be an advantageous media for teaching writing. Considering this, I conducted a pilot project on the application of class blog instead of an individual one for my Writing-II class in English Department of UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta starting from March to July 2011. Essentially, it aims simply to introduce the students to blog that can be a medium to practice their writing skill and to build their confidence to publish their works and receive feedbacks from anybody who reads them. However, class blog model proves to give more benefits for the students in a way that it is good for team building. Thus, this paper explains previous researches related with the application of blog for English writing class and what it means by class blog, how the model of class blog for the Writing-II class project in English Department of UIN Sunan Kalijaga has been conducted, and how team work among the classmates is built through class blogs.

Blog and Writing Class

Blog or web log is defined as a web-based space for writing where all the writing and editing of information is managed through a web browser and is immediately and publicly available on the Internet (Godwin, 2003). For the field of education, blog offers a variety of models of applications. For instances, as Di Zhang⁴ exemplifies, it can be for student and teacher communication, delivery of learning materials, the provision of mentoring to students, collaboration and professional development for teachers and knowledge management.

More and more teachers use internet in general and blog in particular for teaching. One of the researches on blog was done by Di Zhang. In *The Application of Blog in English Writing*, he attempts to introduce the blogging phenomenon and the effectiveness of using blog exchanges for English writing. The research particularly discusses how to engage students' reflective learning in English writing through the blog.

Zhang explicates some of the uniqueness of blog. First, blog does not require sophisticated software or knowledge of computer programming. He adds further that everyone can participate with a variety of different easy-to-use, free blog accounts available on the Internet. Second, it offers several security options, such as limiting access for reading and posting. It is stated that the blog user has total control of who is authorized to view sensitive or confidential information with Blogware's easy to use security tools. Third, many blogs are written by only one author and visitors cannot make posts or edit posts, but they can add comments to

⁴ Teaching Foreign Language School, Linyi Normal University.

an existing post. Some blogs are community blogs, where all members of the community can make posts. Fourth, it disregards the status of users all users are equal. Users often use screen names rather than their actual names. Sometimes anonymous posting is allowed.

The other benefit of blog, according to Zhang, is that blog entries are generally written like a letter to someone: oriented to an audience, informal, first person narrative. It often reflects the author's perspectives on issues. Comments to posts can act as a form of discussion. Moreover, blog entries can consist of text, images, audio, video, and hyperlinks. In this way, the user does not have to email photos anymore. He or she may just tell people to go to his or her blog. Through hyperlinks, readers can be sent directly to other resources. Hyperlinks are used as supporting information for any claim. Hyperlinks can bring news, pictures, and other information from the outside to the blog's readers. Besides, blog has an auto-archiving feature. All posts are archived. Archives can be searched by keyword, or by date. Reverse chronological order of posts allows readers to identify the most recent posts made since the last time they read the blog. Last but not least, Zhang points out that blog content can be distributed via subscriptions. A person can subscribe to many blogs and have the content aggregated in one place. RSS aggregators gather entries from many blogs and send them to the reader instead of the reader going to each individual blog. Aggregators allow readers to sort through more blog entries in less time.

Regarding the types of blog, Campbell (2003) classifies blogs for use in English writing class into three that is, the tutor blog; the learner blog; and the class blog. The tutor blog is run by the tutor for the learner, and its purpose is to give reading practice to the learners, promote exploration of English websites, encourage online exchange by use of comment buttons, provide class or syllabus information, and serve as a resource of links for self-study. Learner blogs are run by individual learners themselves. Learner blogs are best suited for English reading and writing classes. The class blog is the result of the collaborative effort of an entire class. It can be used for posting messages, images, and links related to classroom discussion topics in English. Class blogs could also be used as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange.

Based on the research done, Zhang finds several influences of using blog for students in English writing. First, blog facilitates the students' critical thinking skill. Here they are engaged in collaborative learning through interactions with others which serves as a catalyst for critical thinking. Writing blogs offers students a way to improve their writing skills and encounter new ideas through interaction with other students. Second, blog provides examples for students to model.

Through blogging, they can learn from one another, thereby motivating them to produce better writing. Furthermore, the creation of online portfolios on the web amounts to a showcasing of their works over the development period of their learning. Such knowledge artifacts are a display of learner's growth and reflection on their learning. Third, blog affects the student's quality of writing. The permanent nature of publishing online encourages students to pay more attention to the content and language in their blogs. And the feedback received from the various sources as well as the different types, critical and non-critical; also affects the quality of their writing. The students also enhance the quality of their writing by adding visual representation to their blogs. This helps to clarify concepts for the reader. Visual literacy, visual thinking, and visual learning are concepts related to the purpose of constructing meaning. Fourth, blog facilitates meaningful learning for students. It is so because they explore other blogs and links to learn more about other countries, cultures, and the people who write to them. In foreign language classes, the benefits of blogs include language gains and furthering cultural understanding. Some students even use blogs to exchange different culture with some foreigners. By participating as active readers of blogs, students can gain the insider's perspective on various cultural topics, thus leading to better understanding of other cultures and what shapes them. Fifth, the use of blogs gives students chances to participate in a community. They learn that posted content can be read by people other than their teacher and classmates. The world can provide encouragement or feedback on student writings. Students interact with an authentic audience.

The other research on blog was done by Laura Blankenship⁵. She uses the term "interactivism" to describe an approach to teaching writing that uses blogging as its main medium. She believes that blogging offers the most comprehensive set of features that allow the kind of interactions. She adds that blogs enable students to interact collaboratively with each other and the teacher, with other people outside the class, with texts, and with other online resources. Blankenship states that,

When students write within a class blog, they are writing within a network that is not simply a collection of interconnected links, but one that is dynamic and changing and one that can be changed by the students themselves. Interactivism is informed by a number of different approaches to teaching writing, from cognitive process models to social constructivist approaches that rely on discourse communities and collaborative learning (2007)

⁵In her dissertation entitled *Interactivism: Transforming the Writing Classroom through Blogging* (University of Arkansas, August 2007)

Apparently, with class blog, students are exposed to multiple points of view. They will immediately find that their peers may have different perspectives on issues. Further, it is also possible for peers and readers from outside the class to question students' points of view or present their own directly through comments.

Class Blog Model for Writing-II Class in English Department of UIN Sunan Kalijaga

English Department in the Faculty of Letters and Cultural Studies of UIN Sunan Kalijaga is a new department⁶. Though of non-Islamic studies, it is intended to support the university's vision, and the current academic paradigm is integration-interconnection in which the curriculum and teaching-learning activities must be integrated and interconnected to some extent with Islam. Thus, it directs the lecturers to always try, if possible, to connect their subject with Islamic issues and principles, or at least give some advices of Islamic values to the students in relation with attitude and character building. The paradigm is, of course, a challenge in the effort to build an identity that makes the departments which are of non-Islamic studies such as English, biology, and some others unique. Therefore, the use of blog for writing class is beneficial in a way that it can be a platform to publish the students' written expressions such as their personal experience, opinions, and general information about Islam that they love to share and it depends on the topic for the writing assignment.

In response to this, I decided to conduct a pilot project by assigning the students to make class blogs instead of an individual blog. First of all, to make it clear, what I mean by "class blog" here is a blog account created by a group of students from the same class. In this setting, since there were three parallel classes class A, B, and C consequently, there were three class blogs. Each class consisted of approximately 33⁷ students, and they shared one similar username and password of each class blog account. Therefore, for safety reason and in order to make sure that the blog account ran well, each class blog has one main administrator responsible for whatever is going on with their blog account.

⁶It was established in 2009 and has approximately 180 students up to this semester with no graduate yet. So far it has not been accredited and thus the lecturers are forced to work hard to build a strong foundation upon it. Besides research, in order to provide the students with valuable learning experience and equip them with sufficient skill, the lecturers, therefore, are trying to find better learning strategies, and our primary method is of active learning. For the media, IT is very important and frequently used mostly of PPT slides. Facebook is common for communication among the students and lecturers. To get the most advantage out of the internet, blog should also be applied to improve teaching learning process.

⁷There are 35 students in Class A, 32 students in Class B, and 32 students in Class C.

Moreover, the main administrator has the right to change the password when necessary. The main administrator of class A is Desi Lestariningsih; that of class B is Jeni Diana Wati; and that of class C is Rawuh Yuda Yuwana. These three students were chosen for their capacity in terms of internet literacy and willingness to spend time checking the blog. The web address of class A is <http://www.writingsia.blogspot.com>; that of class B is <http://www.everlastingfriend-sib.blogspot.com>; and that of class C is <http://www.sparklingofenglish.blogspot.com>.

To be noted, in Writing I, the students had learned how to make sentences which are grammatically correct, ranging from simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, and compound-complex sentence. A step ahead, the focus of Writing II is on writing academic paragraph. By the end of the course, the students are expected to be able to make good topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence. Moreover, they are to write three basic types of paragraph, that is, time order, space order, and listing order. In Writing II, they are supposed to put what they have learned in Writing I into practice. They should write academic paragraphs which consist of a combination of the four types of sentences. It is not an easy job. In fact, lots of students still made a lot of grammatical errors repetitively. They can be as simple as punctuation marks, spelling, capitalization, and run-on sentence.

Related to the project, the students of Writing II did not directly post their writings on the blog. It was a long process. Technically, I gave them six assignments throughout the whole semester, and each was to be submitted every other week. The assignment was to write an academic paragraph consisting of at least five sentences. It means that at the end of the course each student had to write six different paragraphs. The first three topics were (1) Three Strategies to Study English; (2) Three Things to Do after Graduation; and (3) Three Things I love about Islam⁸. These three assignments corresponded to the subject materials in the first term, that is, the elements of academic paragraph. They were at the same time taken as exercises on how to make effective topic sentence, cohesive and coherent supporting sentences, and good concluding sentence. The other three assignments were of free topics but in line with the subject materials for the second term, that is, the three basic types of paragraph: (4) how to... (practice making time order paragraph), (5) my cozy spot (space order paragraph), and (6) any topic related with Islamic issue and teaching (listing order paragraph).

⁸ Such a topic is in accordance with the university's paradigm and is good for the student's personal exploration on his or her love about Islam.

The topics chosen were simple, but they were good for sharing experiences and ideas. From the students' writing on the three strategies to study English, the readers can be inspired of how English students of UIN learn this language based on their experience. From the students' writing on three things to after graduation, the students can learn what these students plan for their future. From the students' writing on three things they love about Islam, the readers can understand why and how much these students love their religion based on their personal depth of faith. From the students' writing on "how to.." (in the scope of time order model of paragraph), the readers can learn how to do or make something. From the students' writing on "my cozy spot" (in the scope of space order model of paragraph), the readers can find out which place is comfortable for these students. From the students' writing on Islamic issues (in the scope of listing order model of paragraph), the readers of the blog can learn something about Islam. Here anyone can learn ways of lifes and ways of thinking of English Department students of UIN Sunan Kalijaga.

On the due date, each student should submit the paragraph that he or she had written on the paper. Once handed in I checked some of their assignment in the class; some at home. When done, I returned all of them to students with some notes on the paper. In the classroom, they had to revise the errors found in their paragraphs. In this session, they do peer reviewing. They should consult with the dictionary to find the right diction. They should read their grammar book to fix their grammatical error. They should open their previous handout for Writing I about sentence structure and types of sentences to check the rules of comma and punctuation. They should get to the internet to visit official blog for Writing class to find the rules of capitalization. They should defend what they think was right with reasons. They might ask the teachers for help when necessary. These were some steps that they had to get through in the revising and editing stage.

After the students were confident with their revised paragraphs, they gave their works back to me to be re-checked. Mostly at this stage, though much better, there were still some mistakes found in their paragraphs. Therefore, after I did the second check, I would return the works to them. The students whose papers are with "Revise!" note at the bottom had to be revised and edited their works for the second time. They had to do the same steps and re-submitted the revised paragraphs attached with the other two paragraphs that had been marked. After I did the third check, I returned their works to them once again. If there were some other mistakes this time, they still had to revise and did the steps all over again. If not, they could post their paragraphs on the class blog.

Each student was supposed to type each of their paragraphs and posted it on the class blog. Since not all students had already known how to blog, those who had

been familiar with blogging shared their knowledge and helped their friends step by step. They also helped re-check the grammar mechanic after typing. Indeed, they really had to work together at this stage. Once posted, the other students from all three classes left comments. They might feel happy to see their works on the net and got them responded by their friends. Besides the text, they were also concerned with the template and decoration of their blog to look better than that of other classes. Once in a while in a semester they changed the background and style of their blog.

In one semester, each class blog should contain at least 150 paragraphs. It is a collection of paragraphs written by around 30 or more students. The paragraphs which are found on the blog are actually the end results of a stage of writing process. In fact, a great deal of teaching strategy for this Writing class still relied on paper work, and the blog was only part of the strategy. At the end of the semester, each work of the student both on paper and on the blog was marked, and the score was final.

However, it is still open for revision and comments in the future. The blog may also be continued on until the student graduates from the university. This is when the job of the administrator becomes important. It is them who keep the username and password. Therefore, when a student is willing to make some revision, he or she should contact the administrator of the class blog.

Team Building through Class Blog

There are two kinds of blog that the students can manage. Actually, they may create either individual blog which is managed solely by one person or class blog which is managed by a group of people. To my observation, however, having class blog proves to be more beneficial especially for team building among the classmates during this project. First, of all, since a blog represented a class, they could identify themselves as a team. In this way, they were likely to work together to design their own class blog and manage the posting. In case of my Writing-II class, some students spent some time discussing to decide what kind of design proper for their class. Once or twice they changed their blog template and background. For example, in the first place, class B put a picture of class B students taken when they were having a field trip to Parangtritis Beach, but then the blog administrator of class B removed it and changed into a plain background. Blog administrator of class C also changed the color of its blog background. These students visited other classes' blog, and they might be inspired and decided to change their blog design into something new. In addition, there was a reward for the best blog, so they could be more competitive in order to make their own site the

best one. After the semester ended and the mark had been filed, I ask other lecturers to be judges to choose which blog was best. They were to score the blog based on the creative design, the frequency of comments, and the content of the paragraphs. From the scoring, it had been decided that the blog managed by Class B was the best one.

The other benefit of class blog is that every student learns about blogging. They learn how to create a blog account. They learn how to post writing on the blog. They learn how to edit their post when they find that there is something wrong with their paragraph. They learn how to leave comment on other friend's posting. They become familiar with the terms commonly used in blogging. This is good for their vocabulary enhancement. They also individually practice typing on the computer, and it makes them more careful with the punctuation marks and spelling. And all these activities can be done together. In this way, fellow classmates can assist each other when one finds it difficult to operate the computer in general and the features available on the blog.

In terms of the content which is related with the paragraph itself, fellow classmates can be effective peer reviewers. As a team, when one student comes online to visit his or her class blog, he or she can check not only his or her own works but also his or her friends from the same class. It is also more comfortable for the students to ask their own classmates for something they are not surely of, and their fellow classmates are likely to give their best advices and suggestions in order to improve their friends' writing which at the same time means improvement for their own class blog.

Through class blog, trust can be built. In this project, the rule of the game was the class shared the class blog. Therefore, all the students from the class were allowed to know the username and password of their own class blog. Of course, it was risky and prone to misuse as more than 30 heads used the same site. However, this was good for building and maintaining trust among the classmates. Here the students were made responsible for keeping the same class blog. The student's sense of belonging was thus vital.

Besides, team work is also helpful for the students in tackling a number of obstacles that they face. In the case of Writing-II students of UIN Sunan Kalijaga, the main problem was related with computer as the main requirement for such this project. Not all of the students could afford to have their own personal computer or netbook, so some of them had to use their friends' computer or netbook which was also quite problematic since less than half of the students had it. Otherwise, they used computers in the library, but sometimes they had to queue and be sure they would not spend too long using the computers because other users needed to use

them, too. Besides, they went to local computer rent shop or a place where a person can use a computer for typing or printing and is charged for that. In fact, however, some students solved this problem together, that is, by using their classmates' computer whenever it was not used. In this way, they should be very generous to their team.

Another problem was the internet access. Almost none of the students' computer or netbook was connected to the internet. Only rarely did they have modem for internet connection of their own. Mostly they depended on the wireless connection on campus, but sometimes there was some connection problem which was quite disturbing. During office hours, however, they often had classes that they did not have much time to go online, so they could only check their blog after all the classes were over. Besides, the free internet access for the students is limited in certain range of area that they register in the first place. For example, if the student is from English Department which is part of the Faculty of Letters and Cultural Studies, he or she can only access the internet in this location and thus unable to browse the internet in another faculty. Therefore, to overcome this problem, usually the soft file of their typing was saved in flash disk or USB. They asked the administrator of the class blog to post the writing on the blog whenever they connected to the internet. This way was not recommended, however, since it could prevent them from learning how to manage a blog.

The other problem is related with comment. There is a tendency that the students only gave comment on their classmates' writing. They were likely to visit their own blog site and left a comment there. Throughout the semester, hardly any student commented on the writings posted by the student from other classes. This is contradictory with the purpose of the project and should be made clear in the future.

The only problem that failed to be fixed through team work during the project was the order of student's posting. Since the assignment given was scored at the end of the semester, most students posted all their six writing assignments at the end of the semester while some others did it regularly and no operator who was responsible to monitor the posting of the class. As a consequence, there is no fixed order related to this. It also makes reading the blog difficult. The topics are not in order, so it is hard for the readers to get the ideas of the students. For example, at some point, the reader reads a paragraph about the strategies to study English posted by one student, then the reader reads another paragraph still about the same topic from another writer, which is good. However, after that the reader reads a paragraph about how to make an omelette and then reads a paragraph about three things one loves about Islam, but then the reader reads another paragraph about the strategies to study English. It can distract the flow of the reading.

Conclusion

From the explanation above, it can be learned that the use of class blog for Writing class is beneficial for team building among the English Department students of UIN Sunan Kalijaga. For instances, they can work together to manage their class blog that eventually every student become familiar with blogging and the features offered, and it is good to for their internet literacy; they can make their writing which consists of their thoughts and feelings⁹ public and accessible anytime, and it can comfortably build their confidence since their blog is a team blog; they can get comments about what they have written without being individually intimidated since their works are put together with their classmates' works, and it is good to shape their mental to be open for critics. Moreover, although Writing II class is over, the blog will always be available online and open for anyone¹⁰, and it is good for student's reflection in the future. All in all, the model of class blog in this project still has some weaknesses and is subject to improvement in the search for an ideal class blog model to apply, but it cannot be denied that it is a useful strategy for team building and teaching English writing in the midst of the advance of technology and globalization.

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⁹ It is in line with Zhang's view that what is written on the blog can lead to better understanding of other cultures and what shapes them.

¹⁰ As Zhang points out that the online portfolios on the web are a display of learner's growth and reflection on their learning over a period of time.