EMBEDDING ICT IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING: WEBLOG AS AN ALTERNATIVE TOOL

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Abstract

The arrival of digital technology has done much to change the way in which learning is displayed, shared, and analyzed in multimedia, as well as hypermedia environments. The adoption level of emerging web technologies is on the rise in academic settings. Students become more technologically literate and the trends of writing are shifting from paper-based texts to screen based texts. This paper first points out the teaching of writing in the digital age, with the integration of Information and Communication Technologies where Weblog is used as a promising tool. Toward this end, this paper further explains briefly about Weblog in writing course, its features and types, and technical matters concerning how to use weblog for writing instruction. The advantages of using Weblog are also described in this paper, carrying out the idea of utilizing Weblog in the writing subjects in the higher level of education.

Key words: Information and Communication Technologies, Weblog, Teaching of Writing.

Abstrak

Kedatangan teknologi digital telah banyak mengubah cara pembelajaran dimana pembelajaran ditampilkan, dibagi, dan dianalisis dalam multimedia, demikian juga lingkungan hypermedia. Tingkat adopsi teknologi web meningkat di setting akademik. Siswa menjadi lebih melek teknologi dan tren penulisan beralih dari berbasis kertas naskah berbasis layar teks. Makalah ini pertama menunjukkan pengajaran menulis di era digital, dengan integrasi Teknologi Informasi dan Komunikasi di mana Weblog digunakan sebagai alat yang menjanjikan. Sampai disini, tulisan ini lebih lanjut menjelaskan secara singkat tentang Weblog dalam mata kuliah writing, fitur dan jenis-jenisnya, dan hal teknis mengenai bagaimana menggunakan weblog dalam pengajaran writing. Keuntungan menggunakan Weblog juga dijelaskan dalam makalah ini, melaksanakan ide memanfaatkan Weblog dalam mata kuliah writing di level universitas.

Kata kunci: Information and Communication Technologies, Weblog, Teaching of Writing.

A. INTRODUCTION

Technology in the digital age has affected our everyday lives in general and education in particular. It can be seen from the rapid developments in information and communication technologies (ICT), the multitude of Web-based tools available to institutions of learning, and the ever-increasing technical skills of students, which change the ways in which we teach and learn (Peretz, 2005). Recently, attention has turned to integrating technology into the curriculum, recognizing that being a competent user of technology is different from knowing how to teach with technology. The new vision of teaching practices and new roles of a teacher depart radically from the conventional teaching approaches and the traditional roles of a teacher in school to the IT and Web-based teaching and learning.

It is no doubt that one of the most powerful IT tools is the Internet, or, more specifically, the World Wide Web (Web). Many tertiary institutes around the world have started using Web as an instructional environment for both primary means of communication delivery and a supplement to classroom teaching (Hiltz and Wellman, 1997, cited in Ng and Leung, 2002). In the era of globalization and lifelong learning, the web is increasingly being used to promote learning free from constraints of time and place. Becker (1999), cited in Ng and Leung (2002), explained that "Web search has become the third most common use of computers by students at school after word processing and the use of CD-ROM. "

Every year students come to school seemingly more wired than the year before. In fact, it is a rarity to find any student who does not have access to a computer. As students become more technologically literate, the trends of reading and writing are shifting from paper-based texts to screen based texts. Methods of writing instruction are following suit and teachers are implementing technology to facilitate these new teaching methods. It seems that one of the more popular technologies used is the Web-log, or blog, an online journal which allows anyone with access to a World Wide Web connected computer to publish their writing with little or no experience.

Given that students have access to the Internet, weblogs can easily replace traditional classroom uses of the private print journal. While weblogs are normally public, free tools such as Blogger can be used for private, expressive writing. Students need only choose "no" when Blogger asks if they want a public blog site, keep their site's location on the web secret, and exchange the URL only with the teacher, resulting in a private electronic writing space where they can be free to express the personal (Lowe and Williams, 2004). Weblogging can be distinguished from formal writing by reckoning that it is primarily for fluency, and is for active conversation with others who are interested in the topic.

Considering that the arrival of ICT in the form of Weblog nowadays becomes popular for writing which can facilitate students to write well, this paper presents some viewpoints discussing the implementation of Weblog in writing course, its features and types, and technical matters concerning how to use weblog for writing. By embedding ICT and Weblog in the teaching of writing, it is expected that students would be more interested in writing and finally improve their writing performance.

B. WEBLOG FOR WRITING

What Is Weblog?

Weblogs have existed online for almost a decade. However, it wasn't until the second half of the 1990s that weblogs began to grow in popularity. The term "weblog" was first used in December 1997 by Jorn Barger to describe personal sites that are continuously updated, with commentary and links. Weblogs or "blogs" for short, began as websites that listed annotated hyperlinks to other websites containing interesting, curious, hilarious and/or generally newsworthy content located by the publisher of the weblog. These blogs generally are the result of wide-ranging online *and* offline research and often provide alternative perspectives on a topic or issue.

Started as a way to allow people to easily keep an online journal, Blog became popular as a means to self-publish. Blog is the simple version of a website with graphics, videos, animations, and links to other pages of blogs or websites. Blog allows the owner, or blogger, to type-in any kinds of information based on their interests. Most of the topics are about personal life; therefore blog is popular as an online diary (Bauer, 2003).

Features of Weblog

Winer (2003) describes some of the important features of blog:

1. **Weblog Posts**. Weblog posts are the contents of a blog in form of subject title and body message. Posts can be relatively short in length such as one or two paragraphs, or they could be long paragraphs. The posts comprise a variety of media objects, including text, pictures, graphics, or multimedia. These posts have timestamps to denote time and date of the posts.

2. **Comments**. Readers of a blog have an opportunity to respond to the post, through a comment or feedback link. These comments create a thread as many readers can comment on a single post (Winer, 2003). They contain a timestamp and are viewable to the public. Bloggers can also respond back to reader comments.

3. **Archives**. The front page of a blog contains only some posts. For bloggers who have maintained their blogs for longer periods of time, they can store past blog posts in an archive. Archives can be organized by month, by week, or even by number of posts.

4. **Templates**. Another useful feature for bloggers is presentation tool that allow pages to be built from preset templates. Bloggers can choose from a variety of graphical layouts, typography and color schemes. This allows a complete customization and feeling of personalization for bloggers without any sophisticated technical expertise.

Pictures of the general layout of a blog:
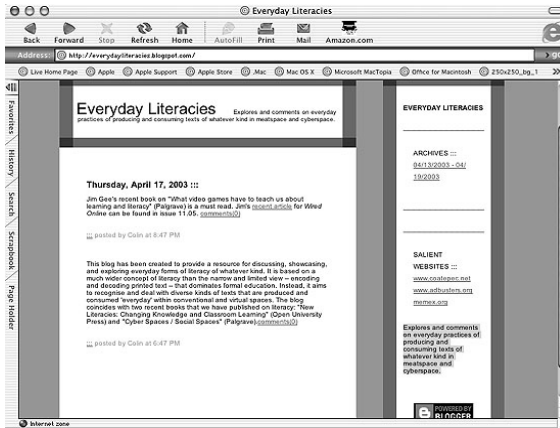
Types of Weblog for Writing Instruction

The first type is **tutor blog** through which the class teacher can produce special texts for reading and vocabulary activities by considering the students proficiency levels. Creating a tutor blog, the language teacher can also direct the students towards English websites and guide them in their self-study by creating "links to online quizzes, English news sites, key-pal networks, audio and video files for listening practice and interactive websites" (Campbell, 2003, cited in Simsek, 2009).

The second is **learner blog** run by individual learners. Campbell (2003), as cited in Simsek (2009) claims that this type of blog "may be best suited for reading and writing classes" and he explained the function of learner blogs in writing as follows: Individually, blogs can be used as journals for writing practice, or as free-form templates for personal expression. The idea here is that students can get writing practice, develop a sense of ownership, and get experience with the practical, legal, and ethical issues of creating a hypertext document. In addition, whatever they write can instantly be read by anyone else and, due to the comment features of the software, further exchange of ideas is promoted (Farmer, 2006).

The last type Campbell (2003, cited in Simsek, 2009) advises for use with language classes is **class blogs** a collaborative work through effort of an entire class. It can serve like a free form bulletin board for learners to share thoughts on a common topic assigned as homework. It can also prove to be useful for an international language exchange.

Activities Using Weblog in Writing Class

So, how do we get started implementing blogs in teaching writing? Like many aspects of teaching writing, the success of using blogs to supplement composition lessons relies on the directions and methods of the teacher. There are some steps that should be paid attention to when implementing blogging as strategy in improving writing skills. The steps are as in the following:

1. *Signing up on blogs*. Teachers and students should register to blogs in order to participate in blogging activities. Establishing a personal weblog is a relatively straightforward progress and can be done in about 10 minutes. In every meeting, teacher can ask students to access www.blogspot.com, and log-in to their blogs. Teachers and students should be familiar with commands and features in blogs.

2. *Writing on blogs*. This activity is also known as composing post on the blog. During this activity, students should develop their essays by typing in the composing field. Teachers can respond to students' questions during the typing-in activities.

3. *Utilizing the search engine*. This activity is intended to aid students in finding and expressing ideas for their writing or blog post. Students should browse the internet to find websites or blogs covering topics which can support their essays.

4. *Browsing English dictionary and grammar websites*. This activity is directed

to help students in using the appropriate vocabulary and correct English grammar. Students may acquire new vocabulary and lessen the errors or mistakes in their writings.

5. *Publishing blog posts*. This activity is the process of displaying students' writings on their blog pages. As this activity is performed, teachers and students can access blogs in order to see the essays developed by students.

6. *Giving comments, corrections, or suggestions to peers' writings*. This activity is aimed at having students to read their peers' blog posts. The teacher can ask students to click on links to their peers' blogs and then read their peers writing. Teacher then asks students to make comments, suggestions, or corrections on the textbox of their peers' blog. Through reading on peers' essays, students are expected to learn how their peers choose topics, elaborate ideas, use appropriate vocabularies, and write effective sentences.

Meanwhile, Fauzan (2009) conducted a Classroom Action Research on the use of Weblog to improve students' writing skills in developing example essays. All of the activities were done in the computer laboratory, as described in the table below:

Meeting	Activity
Meeting 1	Giving materials Example Essay
Meeting 2	Giving materials of blog, signing up to www.blogspot.com
Meeting 3	Writing Example Essay on the blog
Meeting 4 2 (Students 11-20)	Writing Example Essay on the blog
Meeting 5 (Students 1-10)	Giving comments, suggestions, corrections to peers' blogs
Meeting 6 (Students 11-20)	Giving comments, suggestions, corrections to peers' blogs
Meeting 7 (Students 1-10)	Revising the Essay based on comments, suggestions, corrections
Meeting 8 (Students 11-20)	Revising the Essay based on comments, suggestions, corrections
Meeting 9 (Students 1-10)	Writing Example Essay on the blog
Meeting 10 (Students 11-20)	Writing Example Essay on the blog
Meeting 11 (Students 1-10)	Giving comments, suggestions, corrections to peers' blogs
Meetirg 12 (Students 11-20)	Giving comments, suggestions, corrections to peers' blogs

C. ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS' WRITING

Teachers can use various types of scoring rubrics in assessing students' writing included in their Weblogs. Each of these types has a different purpose and focus in instruction and will provide different information for teachers and students (O'Malley and Pierce, 1996).

1. *Holistic scoring*

O'Malley and Pierce (1996) explained that holistic scoring uses various criteria to produce a single score. They stated that holistic scoring system is used because in judging a written text to have a good quality is not merely from the sum of its components.

Holistic scoring is usually in the form of rubric which provides bands of descriptions corresponding to particular proficiency or rhetorical criteria (Hyland, 2003). Some ESL teachers, as mentioned by O'Malley and Pierce (1996), developed a holistic scoring rubric which consists of four dimensions, they are: idea development/organization, fluency/structure, word choice, and mechanics. Other ESL teachers, cited in O'Malley and Pierce, developed another holistic scoring rubric which has six levels. Each level has five dimensions: meaning,

organization, use of transitions, vocabulary, and grammatical/mechanical usage. Another well-known holistic scoring rubric for ESL is the scale used for TOEFL Writing Test (TWE) (Weigle, 2002).

2. Analytic scoring

"In analytic scoring, scripts are rated on several aspects of writing or criteria rather than given a single score" (Weigle, 2002:114). According to Hyland (2003), it is beneficial since by rating each category, the features are not collapsed into one, so that more information will be gathered rather than a single holistic scoring. Analytic scoring is also usually in the form of rubrics.

According to O'Malley and Pierce (1996), analytic scoring has two advantages. The scoring provides feedback to students on aspects in their writing, and valuable information for teachers in planning the instruction. It also provides positive feedback on components of writing on which they have progressed most rapidly. However, Weigle (2002) claimed that the major disadvantage is that it takes longer than holistic scoring, since readers need to consider more than one aspect for every script.

3. Primary trait scoring

O'Malley and Pierce (1996) noted that primary trait scoring focuses on features that are demonstrated in writing with respect to the teacher's instruction. In other words, the main consideration of primary trait scoring is whether or not students show the features instructed by the teacher in their scripts. The primary trait, as mentioned by O'Malley and Pierce, could be language-based or content-based.

Hyland (2003) claimed that primary trait scoring lacks generalizability and needs a very detailed scoring guide for each specific writing task. In second language writing assessment, as indicated by Weigle (2002), primary trait scoring is not commonly used.

Meanwhile, concerning the assessment, Fauzan (2009) focused on the content of students' example essays, not the feature of their Weblogs, because Weblogs only serve as facilitator or tool to make the students interested in writing more fluently. He used a modified analytic scoring rubrics, as presented in the table below:

CRITERIA	SUB-CRITERIA AND POINTS		
Introductory Paragraph	(3) Provides all essential background information	(2) Provides some essential background information	(1) Provides minimal background information
	(3) Introduction creates interest and shows' engagement with topic	(2) Introduction creates some interest and shows some engagement with topic	(1) Introduction creates little interest and shows little engagement with topic
	(3) Thesis statement is clear and insightful	(2) Thesis statement is clear and logical	(1) Thesis statement is somewhat unclear or lacking in logic
	(3) Rich, effective vocabulary and language use	(2) Effective vocabulary and language use	(1) Simple vocabulary and language use
	(3) Spelling, punctuation, capitalization enhance clarity	(2) Spelling, punctuation, capitalization are mostly correct	(1) Some errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, diminish clarity
Body Paragraphs	(3) Topic sentence is clear and insightful	(2) Topic sentence is clear and logical	(1) Topic sentence is somewhat unclear of lacking in logic
	(3) Transitions between paragraphs or sentences are logical and enhance meaning	(2) Transitions between paragraphs or sentences are logical but do not enhance meaning	(1) Transitions between paragraphs or sentences are insufficient
	(3) Example, explanation, or evidence are comprehensive	(2) Example, explanation, or evidence are fairly enough	(1) Example, explanation, or evidence are minimal
	(3) Rich, effective vocabulary and language use	(2) Effective vocabulary and language use	(1) Simple vocabulary and language use
	(3) Spelling, punctuation, capitalization enhance clarity	(2) Spelling, punctuation, capitalization are mostly correct	(1) Some errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, diminish clarity
Concluding Paragraph	(3) Conclusion thoughtfully and effectively ends the essay and goes beyond mere summary	(2) Conclusion effectively ends the essay and includes some observation beyond mere summary	(1) Conclusion ends the essay with summary and repetition only
	(3) Conclusion shows engagement with topic	(2) Conclusion shows some engagement with topic	(1) Conclusion shows little engagement with topic
	(3) Rich, effective vocabulary and language use	(2) Effective vocabulary ana language use	(1) Simple vocabulary and language use
	(3) Spelling, punctuation, capitalization enhance clarity	(2) Spelling, punctuation, capitalization are mostly correct	(1) Some errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, diminish clarity

Example of Students' Response to Blog

Blogging represents the interaction of a community in the sense that all posts are subject to concerns about audience. In a classroom that uses weblogs extensively for posting content, as well as discussion and feedback from peers, the ongoing conversation becomes the voice of that community, which can make itself heard over the voice of any one, including the teacher. With the teacher no longer the overly predominant active reader and responder of student texts, students, as a community, take more ownership of their writing. Writing teachers should remember that much of the purpose of private writing is to create a teacherless writing space where students take ownership. Peter Elbow (1998) arrived at free writing as a means of escape from the anxieties created by a history of writing instruction. Private writing created a comfortable place where he could find himself as a writer; public writing through weblogging can do the same. One student wrote:

When I first looked over the syllabus for the class before the first day of school and I saw the word 'blog' all over the place, I was like what??? I had never ever heard of the word blog… So I got a little nervous, but I realized that I probably wasn't the only one who didn't know what a blog was, so I decided not to freak out and keep a positive outlook on the class. Now, 3 weeks into the class, I love blogging! It's really cool! I really like how you can read what other people wrote, and other people can comment on what you wrote so you get some feedback from your class mates. It's also a really good way of communication and you get to know people in a sort of different way, other than meeting them face to face.

Another student wrote:

What I have enjoyed most about blogging is that even though we have certain topics to expand upon, I can post my own thoughts and feelings in a relaxed environment. As I have already stated in a previous blog, being in relaxed environment when you write is probably one of the best things for your writing. You can always write how you feel about the desired topic that you have to blog about.

Advantages of Using Weblog

There are numerous benefits that Writing teachers and students can get. One of them is that Blogs provide the space for students to express themselves through text-based medium. Blogs are best implemented to *activate students' learning independence*. Blog can be a forum for students to express themselves, reflect on what has been learned in the class, engage in critical thinking and express opinion.

Blog also provides a writing space for a student to claim ownership like no other medium of writing. Similar to a journal, the student has complete control over the discourse and can choose what audience they might direct their writing towards, but unlike journals, which has an audience of primarily the author and a select number of readers, the audience can be anyone with access to a computer connected to the World Wide Web. Not only will students be able to experiment with writing for an unknown audience, they will receive critical and "real" feedback from their audience (Wentzell, 2009).

According to Leverett (2006), A crucial difference between students' publishing work on weblogs and preparing paper copies of finished work is that anyone can read the weblogs at any time, and people do. While most writing teachers hold the English-speaking world

as the ideal, if abstract, audience of essays and research papers, those who publish on weblogs experience this audience first hand. If our ultimate goal is integration into an English-speaking discourse community, we have at least shown them one, and begun the process, in marked contrast to the private-exchange model, where a student's paper is seen primarily by one teacher (a private reader) - who may, by virtue of knowing the student, be more tolerant of his/her writing weaknesses than the typical English-speaking reader, or their academic teacher.

Fellner and Apple (2006) investigated the improvement of students' writing through blogging activities. They compared the number of words and word frequency levels in students' blogs at the beginning and at the end of the program. At the beginning, the students' blog posts average word count was less than 35 words. By the end of the program, there was nearly a 350% increase in the number of words used in students' blog posts. Fellner and Apple believe that using blog as part of an intensive English CALL program would *promote writing fluency* because students can recycle vocabulary and notice their language use.

Here are other advantages of using weblog:
• weblog foster active learning.
• weblog eliminate physical storage problems.
• weblog are accessible and easy to upgrade. Teachers and students can tap into the blog wherever there is an internet connection.
• weblog are interesting in form and content as it can store multiple media.
• weblog motivate students, especially in improving their writing ability.
• weblog are instruments of feedback and discussion on student performance.
• weblog allow cross-referencing of student work.

Shortcomings in Using Weblog

Weblogs have come into their own as an educational tool and are beginning to be used more often in ESL/EFL settings in a variety of ways. However, a major obstacle in the practice of web-based instruction is the limited understanding of learners' characteristics and perceptions about technology use (Saeed, N., Yang, Y., & Sinnappan, S., 2009). Thus there is a need to understand the relationship between students' learning styles and their preferences for instructional strategies, including the use of emerging web technologies. Since learning styles provide information about individual differences in learning preferences they can suggest how instruction can be best designed to support the learning preferences.

Another difficulty in using Weblog is that not every school or institution has a good computer lab. Although almost all schools have computer lab, only some are connected to Internet. However, this shortcoming does not prevent creative teachers to use weblog. They do not always have to use weblog or internet connections every time they teach writing in the class. They can give students homework to post their final draft of writing on their blogs, at the end of the meeting schedule. Most of the students do this kind of homework at the weekends at home or in the nearest cybercafé.

D. TIPS FOR WRITING TEACHERS USING WEBLOG

Wentzell (2009) suggested the following activities to start using Weblog for writing teachers:
1. *Consider blogging yourself.* To understand the finer details of blogging, starting and maintaining a personal or professional blog is advised. This

technology presents an opportunity for hands-on experience and may spark ideas for how to best apply blogging to your writing lesson plans. Blogs are analogous to blank sheets of paper. They are tools which students use to compose, but unlike a piece of paper, blogs have the unique characteristics of continuous feedback, collaboration outside of the classroom, and a broader audience.

2. *Start by modeling blogging for your students*. Like other mediums of writing there are successful blogs, and not so successful blogs. Showing students what is expected of their blogs, and participation in the reading and commenting of other blogs will reduce confusion and misunderstanding.

3. *Make the blogs more public*. One of the more significant and unique aspects of blogging is the opportunity for students' writing to be published for, and commented on, by an authentic public audience. One method of making a student's blog more public is to have the students read other writers blogs, make comments, and then invite them to read their blogs. Before long, students may find they have a network of readers commenting and recommending their blogs.

4. *Explain the "reach" of blogs to your students*. Just as there are benefits to having students' writing being made public, there are also downfalls, but these pitfalls can be avoided with the explanation that what is published can be read by anyone including teachers, parents, current or eventual employers, school administrators, and even police. To these suggestions might be added that a teacher give purpose behind the blogs. A common misuse of blogs is letting students set their own agenda for what writing they might choose to do.

Students do need the direction of the assignment to write.

E. CONCLUSION

In the era of globalization and lifelong learning, the computer, Internet and Web are increasingly being used to promote learning free from constraints of time and place Moreover, Web search has become the third most common use of computers by students at school after word processing and the use of CD-ROM. As a result of the availability of ICT, the teaching of writing is undergoing modification, for both native and non-native writers.

Blogging is an authentically collaborative medium of public writing. In relation to the teaching of writing, some articles published on the internet show that blog is best implemented to increase students' performance in writing skills. It allows students to develop and maintain control of their discourse, and teachers to develop assignments and activities that promote a democratic classroom that encourages student writers to collaborate, critique, and define knowledge. Used effectively, blogs address both these virtues of writing and give students' ownership of writing and a responsive audience that is authentic in cyberspace.

There are three types of blog used for writing: tutor blog, class blog and learner blog. Some activities which are crucial in the teaching of writing using Weblog are signing up on blogs, writing on blogs, utilizing the search engine, browsing English dictionary and grammar websites, publishing blog posts, and giving comments, corrections, or suggestions to peers' writings.

Among all the advantages of using Blog for writing is that Blogs can be used to facilitate directive based assignments or projects where the teacher sets the agenda

of the discussion and writing, or where the student is free to exercise their own methods of discourse, similar to writing in a journal, but with a difference of having an audience that is not limited by the relatively minimal availability of the text.

Moreover, Blogs provide a writing space for a student to claim ownership like no other medium of writing. Unlike journals, which have an audience of primarily the author and a select number of readers, the audience of Blogs can be anyone with access to a computer connected to the World Wide Web. Not only will students be able to experiment with writing for an unknown audience, they will receive critical and "real" feedback from their audience.

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