

INNOVATIVE USES OF BLOGS IN JAPANESE LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

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Abstract: Blogs have the potential to be an effective tool in foreign language pedagogy. Some Japanese language educators have experimented with them in their curriculum. Typically, blogs used in Japanese language education seem to focus on improving students' writing skills. Each student owns his/her own blog and utilizes it as their personal space. The content of blog entries varies greatly: students can express their thoughts or opinions, publish creative works, or keep travel logs, etc. However, the use of blogs is not limited to improving only writing skills. In this paper, Ishida will outline an innovative use of blogs in students' project.

Keywords: blog, communal space, innovative uses, pedagogy, students' project

1. INTRODUCTION

Blogs have become very popular in the past few years. Many people now not only know what a blog is, but also have read someone's blog entries and commented on them. Perhaps, they even own a blog and have become bloggers themselves.

According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (2006), a blog or a weblog is defined as 'a personal website on which an individual records opinions, links to other sites, etc. on a regular basis.' Indeed, blogs are usually perceived as personal space. You 'design' your space using a template that predetermines which item should be placed where. You express yourself using texts, graphics, movie clips, music, etc. in that space.

A blog is personal space, however, it is not private space. Since a blog is on the web, it is open to all those who have access to the Internet. You would not be surprised to receive comments on your blog entries by total strangers who do not even disclose their real names. In another words, you write your blog entries having the world as an audience in mind.

Recently, blogs are used not only for personal entertainment, but also for educational purposes. The common use of blogs in education seems to focus on improving students' writing skills. The typical example is to have each student establish a blog and write entries on a regular basis, often as a part of assignments. Instructors check the entries once in a while and comment on the entries. Students read their classmates entries and also leave comments. I have seen this type of example in foreign language courses and writing courses.

There is one drawback to using blogs in this manner, especially in foreign language courses. When students write blog entries, the accuracy of their language is often times not checked by instructors. This is understandable if the purpose of a blog project is only to have students express themselves in the target language: as long as the basic ideas are conveyed, no correction is required. However, I do not condone the practice of having students read the blogs of their fellow classmates unless finding and correcting grammatical and lexical mistakes is part of the pedagogy.

Using blogs as venues for purely personal expression reflects the idea that blogs are personal spaces. However, the use of blog is not limited to this. In this paper, I will introduce an example of how blogs can be used as a communal space rather than personal space, thus improving their pedagogical application.

2. INCORPORATION OF A BLOG INTO A STUDENTS' PROJECT

Since 2004, I have incorporated a blog into students' projects, as part the curriculum of Japanese 31. The institution I teach is on the quarter system, and Japanese 31 course is the first term of the three-term sequence of the third year Japanese courses. Students who register in this course have completed five terms of Japanese courses, which include two terms of second year intensive courses in Japan. Average class size is about ten students.

The project that utilizes a blog is called 'My Campus' project. The purpose of this project is to improve all four skills in the target language, plus enhance students' awareness of their own environment.

This is a term-long project, and students work on their own outside of class following a predetermined schedule. Students selected one building on campus, researched it, wrote a paper in Japanese, and gave an oral presentation in Japanese at the end of the term during the class hour. Students submitted a proposal and stated which building they were going to research and the reason of their selection. They were given ten research questions, which they had to respond to before writing a draft. They submitted the revised version of the draft as the second draft, and that was revised again to made into the final draft.

A blog was incorporated as space for publishing their papers. One blog was prepared for the entire class, and each student uploaded their paper with photos. After everybody's paper was published on the blog, students selected two entries by their classmates, read them, and left comments. Also, they had to ask a Japanese person who does not know Dartmouth campus at all to read their entry and leave a comment.

Advantages of using one blog for the entire class include creating a central place where all students can gather. Since everybody's entry is in one place, students can see all the projects created by their classmates. I used the same blog for this project for the past three years so that students cannot only see their classmates' projects, but also their predecessors'. Because students commented on their classmates' entries and had Japanese native speakers comment on their entries, the blog has become communal and collaborative space where everybody contributed in order to make it happen. Since only one blog was used, broken links, which often happen due to sudden termination of free blog services was not an issue. All entries in the blog had been revised several times before they were uploaded. The common problem of having students read their classmates entries, which may contain grammatical and lexical errors can be avoided when a blog is used this way.

3. CONCLUSION

Blogs can be incorporated in different students' projects in foreign language courses. Depending on the type and purpose of the project, blogs can be used as personal space or, as in this project, as communal and collaborative space. Due to its user friendliness and some useful functions of the blog possesses, blogs can be an effective tool in foreign language education.

REFERENCE

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary. London: Oxford University Press, 2006.