Chapter III
Blogging and Academic Writing Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the use of blogging in a beginning level academic writing course. Blogging was used in this writing course both as a means of interacting with the other students and as a means of discussing the issues the students were to write about in their classroom assignments, all of which dealt with issues related to the nature of plagiarism and what policies towards plagiarism should the university adopt. The chapter analyzes the blogs of an African immigrant student. It is argued that the use of blogs allows the students to develop a variety of rhetorical strategies outside the confines of the course that could then be transferred into the student’s academic writing assignments.

INTRODUCTION

Blogs have become one of the most widely used forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC), perhaps because of the relative ease with which they can be used to publish ideas, opinions, personal experiences, or responses online. With the of various technologies, ranging from traditional forms of hyperlinking to blog rolls, RSS feeds, and aggregators, blogging has become a network of what Weinberger (2003) has called “small pieces loosely conjoined.” Composition teachers have begun to recognize their importance in the writing classroom. Lowe and Williams (2004) argue that “weblogs can facilitate a collaborative, social process of meaning making (Para. 16)”.
Blogs differ from other forms of computer-mediated communication in a variety of ways. The most important for the L2 composition teacher may be in how they can create different types of relationship between the writer and the reader than may be found with other forms of CMC. The nature of authorship has become one of the most controversial in blogging. While the Internet has often been thought to decenter the role of the author (Bolter, 1991), blogs have often made the author the center of attention. Listservs and Usenet groups often resemble the e-mail upon which communication is based. As a result, messages seem to be shorter and more hastily written. Hypertext tends to de-emphasize the role of the author by giving the reader greater control over how a Web page is read. WebPages also tend to be topic-centered, sometimes anonymously written and often infrequently updated.

The focus on authorship can affect the purposes for which blogs can be used. Unlike traditional Web pages or listservs, which are usually organized around a topic, blogging communities have been formed primarily around the author or group of authors (Shirkey, 2003). The most prominent and frequently read bloggers, who reside on what Shirkey calls the high end of the “long tail” (Anderson, 2006), often become highly identifiable on the Internet. Even those blogs on the low end, who may have a very small readership, can make important contributions to the overall development of what is called the blogosphere by allowing authors an easy way to express themselves and their audience to respond.

There are also specific features of the architecture of blogs that allow blogs to be used in different ways than other forms of online discourse. Blogs can be easily updated, which allow the writers to publish their ideas as often they want to. The permanence of a blog can give the reader many opportunities to return to the blog when it has been updated and to read new posts or reread old ones. Compared with, for example, listservs, this permanence makes blogs seem more like texts that students can publish, share, and use for a variety of different pedagogical purposes (Bloch & Crosby, 2006). Thus, they can be a useful technology for creating discussions in the classroom.

The evolution of this role of authorship means that the use of blogs in a composition classroom may differ from the use of other forms of CMC. Pedagogical decisions regarding having individual students create their own blogs or having a group of students or a class create a blog can impact on their nature as a writing environment (c.f. Farmer, 2005).

For all these reasons, the evolution of blogging has been one of the foremost factors in re-conceptualizing how individuals can participate in publishing information of the Internet, what Berners-Lee (2000) has called the read/write Web or what is often called Web 2.0 (O’Reilley, 2005). Regardless of what form of blogging is used, the specific decisions a teacher makes in the implementation will go a long way in affecting the nature of classroom writing which raises many questions teachers need to consider in how blogs are used. What types of assignments are the blogs used for? Are they used for generating ideas for classroom-based assignments or are they used as texts in themselves? Are they corrected and graded? How does the use of a technology vary according to different types of users?

The sheer number and complexity of these questions can make the use of blogging in one writing environment and with one type of student difficult to generalize into another writing environment with different types of students. Therefore it is important to examine the uses of blogging in a variety of contexts using a variety of types of implementation, as well as with students of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, in order to better understand the pedagogical potential of blogging. Our primary concern in this paper is on two critical areas: how blogs can be integrated with traditional types of classroom assignments and how they can be used with a particularly group of students, in this case an East
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