

DESIGNING A TEACHING AND RESEARCH BLOG TO DO REGULAR GUIDED ACTIVITIES IN AN ADVANCED GRAMMAR AND PRAGMATICS SEMINAR

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Nowadays there are some remarkable examples of web blogs which discuss aspects of English Language, Linguistics, Literature and Pragmatics. Well-known scholars and researchers have been using this online resource for some years now as a complement of their regular university activities and publications. Blogs are versatile and fast, especially suitable to present brief reports and discuss them with a group of followers, also to provide day to day information and updates of all kinds of activities. However, there are not many blogs specialized in English Studies in Spain, even though their characteristics make them quite suitable for teaching in the new degrees. In this paper I intend to discuss some of the obvious technological and organizational advantages blogs present to design projects and activities which aim at developing and perfecting specific, generic and transversal competences in courses which are based on the portfolio and evaluation rubric. I will also provide an example of application: a restricted blog to do practice on the grammar and pragmatics of comic strips I have designed for my advanced English Seminar class.

Keywords: blog design, web 2.0., competences, methodology, English Studies

1. First general considerations

In the last years, the use of blogs for all kinds of purposes and activities including teaching and research has become widespread. Nowadays, practically all teachers and researchers at university, no matter their age, have gone through the experience of composing and publishing a blog in an update course on the new technologies. However, most of these blogs are ephemeral. It takes time, regularity and initiative to keep a blog going so that it can attract a group of followers and get listed in the main directories.

The most usual directories on the web (Dmoz, Google, Yahoo, BOTW) list blogs of roughly three main kinds: 1) professional and business oriented, 2) personal and collective works on all topics (some of them quite important and prestigious), 3) tips and information on new products and services of all sorts. Most newspapers and commercial sites also keep blogs written by professionals.

In the case of English studies the threefold classification that I have drawn corresponds roughly with: 1) language courses and related, 2) journals, diaries, studies in the fields of language, linguistics, literature 3) bulletins of news dealing with conferences and similar events.

A blog is basically a succession of posts chronologically arranged which are formed by a combination of texts, illustrations and visual material. They are meant to be fast and agile. The treatment of the different topics is not usually very thorough or extensive therefore. Quite often the posts refer to other works and pages and hint at

more detailed work in the future. The different posts can be commented by means of Internet messages sent by the readers. The posts are archived periodically and the key words are listed according to frequency. Blogs can be distributed by means of specific channels (see Yahoo for a list) and usually offer some complementary resources on their margins (blog roll, a list of links) and also some of the gadgets available on the web.



Illustration 1: The English Blog: Language and Culture

The number of pages, studies and books on blogs is immense, but shallow and repetitive. Regular blogging has been going for too short a period of time to create well defined models. The different kinds of functionalities they can perform are not clear and there are no fixed criteria. This is not negative at all, of course. It means that there is an open field of experimentation in the technology, design and learning that it is worth exploring. The new educational environment aims at achieving a balanced, comprehensive and effective learning of different kinds of competences (Council of Europe 2002). Consequently, the new English degrees must provide their students with the level of linguistic and communicative competence that will enable them to use English as their first language for all purposes: social, professional and academic. Publishing and sharing a blog on the web 2.0 is a good way to design online activities to achieve these goals.

2. The use of blogs in the different fields of English Studies nowadays

As far as I know, the number of specific blogs on English language, linguistic and culture is not that high. I leave aside the blogs supported by newspapers and related (*Guardian*, *New York Times*, *New Yorker* and so on). There is a good representation of blogs on culture, teaching and education, but there are few blogs which we can be considered essentially academic. Some of them are collaborative works (*Language Log* is an outstanding example). Some others are personal initiatives supported by a number of correspondents and supporters (for instance the well-known blogs by Wells or Crystal). They all share the basic blog format, but they are quite different in style, presentation and scope. I have not found many blogs that try to relate regular class work

and new ideas and creation on university level. They seem to be more popular in secondary education. With respect to Spain, the overall number of blogs in English is very limited (Sara Martín Alegre's *The Joys of Teaching Literature* is a remarkable new initiative). Blogs started to become popular about 5 years ago and they require some practice and a lot of regular work. They have a lot of potential that is necessary to explore, develop and consolidate in the following years. Some aspects to highlight:

- a. The content and treatment of the posts. They are usually comments, new ideas to explore, first impressions, on a variety of topics that are published for open discussion. Usually, blog posts are brief and incorporate links for further reading. This means that they cannot be exhaustive, but they provide some first valuable information and encourage further study. Blog posts can be read very fast. Out of experience (*My English Journal* blog statistics) readers take about two minutes for a quick scanning. The HTML text editor can insert links, images and videos and create powerful hypertexts.
- b. The blog roll, the favourite links lists and other complementary resources on the blog periphery, which provide even more information, which is automatically updated.
- c. The references to new software and resources that are usually commented in the post: new resource sites, new gadgets, new online resources.
- d. When there is participation, the comments of the different correspondents.

In terms of the development of learning competences, apart from the specific content of the information, browsing blogs is good practice in: 1) scanning written information (also in listening when there are videos or recordings), 2) searching for information and potentially in 3) applying that knowledge to personal and creative purposes by sharing items with circles of friends. Further, there is also the possibility of acquiring confidence in expressing oneself publicly on the web when sending comments to different posts. All this with respect to the standard open blogs I know of course.

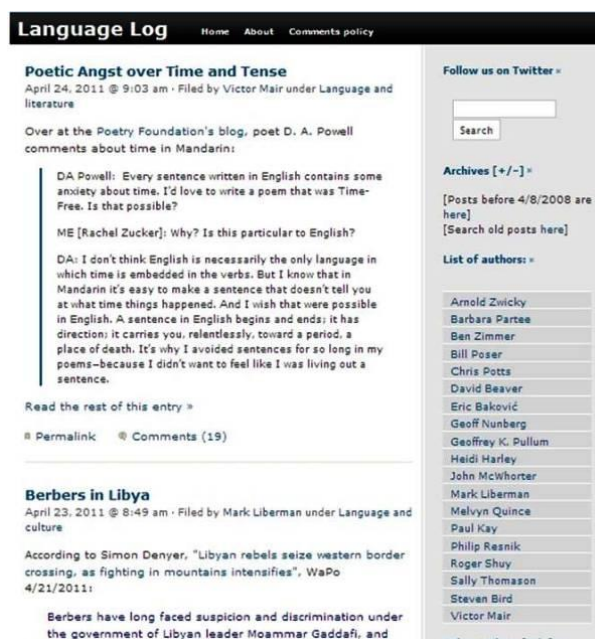


Illustration 2: Language Log: Linguistics

3. Using blogs for the design of activities: Main advantages

With respect to the specific advantages blogs present for the design of activities for teaching and research in English, these are the points I consider most important:

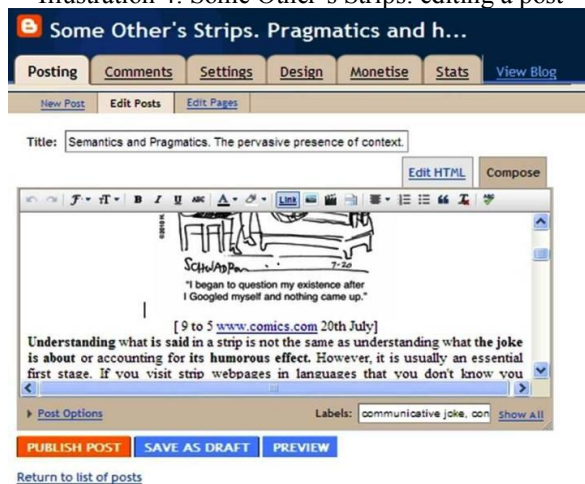
1. A blog can be kept open or restricted. The main editor can create a list of contributors and co-editors who can have access to the site and post their own entries. This means:
 - 1.1. The instructor can create a list and groups or subgroups of students for the activities to do.
 - 1.2. The instructor can keep the students informed and combine personal online work with contact classes by sending them the instructions and comments that may be necessary.
 - 1.3 The course teacher can keep the records of the activities and ask the students for regular contributions. The students must prove to be organized and engage in collaborative work (development of interpersonal and transversal competences)



Illustration 3: Grammar and Pragmatics: restricted access

2. With respect to the posts:
 - 2.1. Each post (text and hypertext) is susceptible of proof reading, correction, completion and comment by the students, not only with respect to what has been written. The hypertext can also be enlarged with more links and information. The original hour and date of the post remains unless we introduce a change in the heading and create a second post.

Illustration 4: Some Other's Strips: editing a post



2.2. A blog is very easy to use in evaluation because the instructor can check the regularity of the contributions and can correct the posts according to the course rubric.

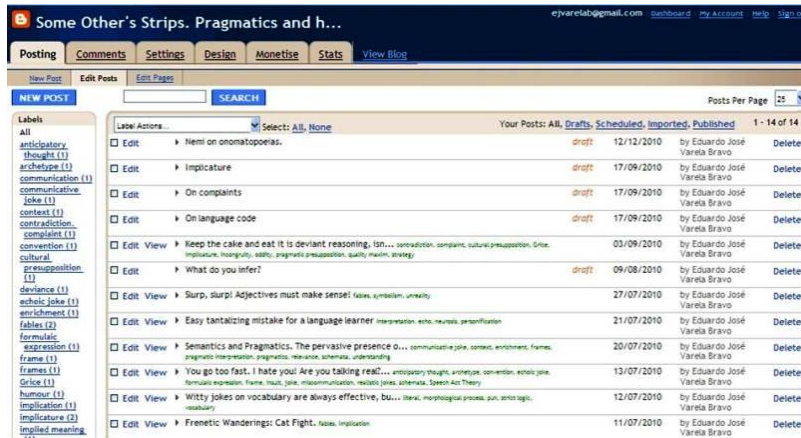
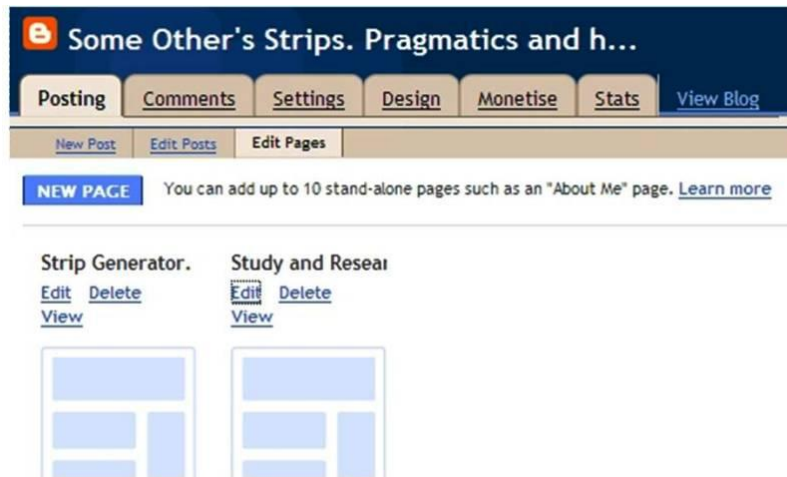


Illustration 5: Some Other's Strips: index

2.3. The key words of each post are indexed and a web of key words is created. This helps to check whether the content of the posts correspond to the original goal of the project.

3. There is the option of keeping a number of complementary pages which can be used to publish instructions and relevant information.

Illustration 6: Some Other's Strips: creating pages



4. The complementary resources in a blog can be used to create the bibliography, organize links, contact other groups, and so on. More limited than a web page but enough for a course project. The amount of classified information can be quite high.



Illustration 7: Grammar and Pragmatics: references on the side bar

5. A blog can be combined with other kinds of publications online. They can be linked to a web page or Tic and be accessed from there.
6. A blog can be used at different levels of difficulty and detail.

Summing up, using blogs for our university courses can be highly rewarding: an attractive and versatile online resource useful in developing competences. Faster than websites, more flexible than wikis are especially suitable for complementary online activities focused on one particular topic or subject.

4. Some Other's Strips: A blog designed for some complementary activities on my Grammar and Pragmatics Seminar, Fifth Year English Philology

Some Other's Strips. Pragmatics and humour

A collection of those strips -by others- that have interested me...on pragmatic grounds.



Does this happen in your office? [Pork, Seattle, 1917. Wikimedia Commons]

Illustration 8: Some Other's Strips: cover

A blog for a seminar on Grammar and Pragmatics can be a good example. The students will have to publish grammatical and pragmatic comments on the blog as a compulsory assignment for the course. The assignments will be evaluated by means of a rubric. They will be written and posted in the blog. The students must also list the references and sources they have used and provide links. They will be made joint editors. Each student will be evaluated by means of: 1) the comment, 2) the references and materials he/she contributes with, 3) His/her degree of originality and creativity. The most salient characteristics of this blog are:

3.1. The blog will be dedicated to the grammatical and pragmatic comment of comic strips selected from web 2.0 sites. The students are to: 1) search and list interesting material, 2) justify their decisions, 3) write comment on one strip applying what they learn in the seminar in a creative way.

3.2. The comments will be corrected and edited until they are fit for publication. The first comment must describe the conversation in grammatical and conversational terms. The cartoon must be referenced and the link added. Key words must be supplied. The instructor will introduce corrections in further post until the work is considered satisfactory and therefore published. The blog remains restricted during the project.

Illustration 9: Some Other's Strips: a full post

The screenshot shows a blog post with a main title, a cartoon illustration, and several columns of text. The cartoon depicts a man reading a newspaper while a child asks a question. The text includes a detailed analysis of the cartoon's pragmatic implications, such as the child's strategy to avoid a punishment by using a logical-sounding but deviant argument. The blog layout includes a header with the date 'FRIDAY, 5 SEPTEMBER 2010', a main content area with the cartoon and text, and sidebars containing navigation links, an 'ABOUT ME' section for Eduardo José Varela Bravo, and lists of 'JOURNALS AND MAGAZINES', 'DR. SYNTAX: A SEARCH', and 'CARTOONISTS AND STRIP DESIGNERS'.

Illustration 10: Some Other's Strips: blogrolls

3.3. The original bibliography and the references will be listed on the right columns.

Especially relevant in the list are those resource sites that enable to embed and reproduce cartoons on blogs. Directories and collections of all

kinds of comics in the public domain are also interesting and useful in linguistic and cultural terms.

3.4. Some of the materials of the blog can be further exploited for other purposes: social sites, forums, discussion groups, blog collections:



Illustration 11: Some Other strips: links to cartoons sites.

When the course is over, and all the correction is done, the blog can be published openly and if it catches on, can lead to further activities involving the linguistic and cultural comment of comic strips. It can be an extra source of satisfaction and accomplishment for the students of the seminar. The blog will have been instrumental not only to develop the specific competences of the course, but also to foment sociability, interaction, participation and the ability to work together, which is very important in the new learning environment at university.

5. Conclusions

Designing and using blogs for our courses can play an important and useful role in the application of the new methodologies based on competences. Blogs can be easily integrated as online complements of mixed courses and can enrich what is taught in the contact classes in a quite effective, creative and therefore rewarding way. They are easy to use, reliable and fast. They can be used to foment the students' sociability, creativity and personal initiative while learning. That is, they can be instrumental in achieving the personal, social, interpersonal and specifically academic objectives of each course. They can also be functional to compile, organize and store a good number of materials and resources available on the web with respect to one aspect or topic which can lead to more ambitious research projects in the future.

This experience could lead in the future to the establishment and consolidation of a specialized academic network of blogs in our area of studies and would, of course, connect our linguistic, cultural and literary studies with the interests of the new technological world and with the educational demands of our society.

The example I have used for this paper together with the other items mentioned and listed in the references are good proof of the potentiality and first promising achievements of this new resource of the web 2.0. Besides, it is fun!

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THIS TEXT IS PART OF THE VOLUME:

Martín Alegre, Sara (coord. and ed.), Melissa Moyer (ed.), Elisabet Pladevall (ed.) & Susagna Tubau (ed.). *At a Time of Crisis: English and American Studies in Spain.* Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012. ISBN-10: 84-695-4273-7, ISBN-13: 978-84-695-4273-6. Available from www.aedean.org