6 Pedagogical Blogging for University Courses

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ABSTRACT: *Various forms of computer-mediated communication have resulted in the formation of multifarious online communities. Blogging is one such form that is now used widely within the university for educational purposes. This paper gives an overview of pedagogical blogging and discusses the way it was implemented in two university courses. It also proposes that because students and their teacher facilitators develop and share common interests and goals, they evolve into what Lave and Wenger (1991) have termed a "community of practice" (CoP). Following that, the paper explains how blogging in these two course CoPs extended teaching and learning out of the classroom into a class-centered "blogosphere." A theoretical justification for utilizing blogging is also provided as is a description of the manner by which a systematic approach to blogging can broaden learner-learner and learner-teacher interaction. Finally, the paper shows how students following a strict blogging regime positively view blogging as an opportunity to refine various writing skills within the context of their "real world" writing tasks.*

Introduction

At the advent of the Internet, Warschauer (1996) suggested that computer-mediated communication would provide learners with a way "to share not only brief messages, but also lengthy (formatted or unformatted) documents—thus facilitating collaborative writing—and also graphics, sounds, and video" and that it would enable them "to publish their texts or multimedia materials to share with partner classes or with the general public." When we look at the Internet today and consider the impact on the world of over 50 million weblogs (known as blogs) (Weybret, 2010) as well as websites such as the social networking site Facebook, the video sharing site YouTube and the collaborative encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, Warschauer's foresight was not only accurate but arguably visionary.

The popularity of these various forms of computer-mediated communication has resulted in the formation of multifarious online communities. In these communities people exchange gossip, stories, ideas, advice, insights and goods as well as various media and files, mirroring the communication that occurs between members in physical communities. This is a major reason why blogs have become popular teaching-learning platforms among educators. A blog is an easy-to-create website where anyone with a computer and an Internet connection can create, present and archive content, written or otherwise, and receive feedback from site visitors. Within an educational setting, having blogs enables learners to create, as Lee (2009) notes, a social workspace where, while adhering to group-generated values and norms, they work to collaborate in sharing knowledge and exchanging ideas. In this way, blogging provides both teachers and learners with more opportunities for meaningful interaction, ultimately helping them forge vibrant online communities.

This paper gives an overview of pedagogical blogging and discusses the way it was implemented

in two university courses. In addition, it suggests that since members of pedagogical blogging communities share common values and norms, interests and goals, they evolve into what Lave and Wenger (1991) have termed a "community of practice" (CoP). Following this, the paper explains how blogging in these two course CoPs extended teaching and learning out of the classroom into a class-centered "blogosphere." Of course, any learning activity in a course should be theoretically justified and systematically implemented. To that end, this paper explains the theory underpinning institutional blogging, how learner-learner and learner-teacher interaction is enhanced in the process, and how students following a strict blogging regime positively view the activity as an opportunity to refine various writing skills within the context of their "real world" writing tasks.

Blogging and its main elements: The blog, the blog post and reader comments

Blogging is the act of bloggers communicating on blogs. After a writer has set up a blog, using one of any number of freely available blog sites—www.blogger.com and www.wordpress.com are among the most well-known—they can then write and upload the post, and if need be, attach other files. Posts are archived in reverse chronological order, with the most recent post listed at the top of the main blog page. With each post, the writer can also receive comments. When writing is being shared within a particular group of bloggers, such as a class of students who have common interests and goals and who are working through similar writing tasks, the individual is given an opportunity to see how others have written on the same theme, articulate a critical response, and while reflecting on both the process and the various products, return to their own post and, if so inclined, reshape it.

The students' individual blogs then becomes a place where they can post and archive blog entries, whether written discussions on various topics, responses to questions, free writing and/ or draft assignments; include photographs, songs, video clips and accessible web-links; receive critical feedback, not just from the teacher, but from anyone in a class and from other interested online parties; and analyze, evaluate and then comment on the post of others. The result is informal peer teaching and learning, which can be highly motivating as each student negotiates new understandings and develops an identity as a valued member of the learning community.

In this way, blogging serves the teacher as a means of having students interact with each other in a highly meaningful context via regularly posted assignments on course-related themes. Additionally, it can serve a teacher as a means for monitoring each student's communication within a community of practice and enable them to intervene and guide practice where necessary.

Communities of Practice (CoP)

In a CoP, people who share a common interest, profession or goal are bound by what they do together, whether that is having lunch or discussing solutions to problems. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group (or community) that the members learn from one another, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally. Toohey (1996) suggests that the CoP perspective offers a new framework for looking at second language learning, arguing that in a CoP

> ...the second language learner is seen not as internalizing the second language, but rather as a newcomer beginning to participate in the practices of a particular community. (p. 553)

Within this framework, language learning is considered a process of increasing participation in the performance of community practices.

CoP and learning

Wenger (1998, p. 2) suggests that any CoP should identify itself along three dimensions:

- *What it is*—its joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members
- *How it functions*—the relationships of mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity
- *What it has produced*—the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time.

The educational focus of a CoP centers upon the talents and skills, and goals and achievements that members value. For example, in a business CoP, letter-writing skills would be seen as important. In order to effectively communicate with customers and colleagues, members would be encouraged to develop such skills, a talent for writing would be highly valued, and anyone who had won a contract through writing a series of persuasive letters would be lauded. Members of a student business CoP would also see refining of letter writing skills in English as an important goal as well as a form of professional development. While external directives and conditions may influence this understanding of what is important, the student business CoP itself, and within that, any teacher and student members themselves, would be essentially self-organizing and self-determining, setting their own goals and judging how well those are achieved. In short, the individual CoP determines what is important and why.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), new CoP members acquire skills and pursue activities by actually engaging in the practices together with expert members rather than being explicitly taught. They suggest that participation in the activities of the group is not only a condition of membership in a CoP but also "is itself an evolving form of membership" (p. 53). The same authors use the term "situated learning" to describe the learning that happens in a CoP and argue that situated learning takes place in multiple and varied ways. The learner's role in a CoP is not a single role; in fact, the learner usually participates or engages in several roles within a CoP.

In a second language or communications skills class CoP, these roles might include a learning practitioner, aspiring expert, peer tutor, least experienced member, member with the greatest IT know–how, community grammar/vocabulary/writing expert and so on. When the members of a CoP such as this interact, be it one to one, in a small group or all together, the role each plays depends on the task at hand, the personalities involved and the social dynamic of the setting. To pose an example, if students in the language class are assigned to do situational pair work, and in their pairs, need to develop answers to a reading activity, the member of the pair with the better reading skills might well take over, guiding the other toward more reliable answers. In some situations, this member might be younger and even less socially mature than the one being guided. However, within the confines of this particular task and its required skills, she or he acts as the expert of the moment. As Hanks (1991) notes, learners switching roles in this manner implies a "different sort of responsibility, a different set of relations, and a different interactive involvement" (p. 23).

It is in this context that the idea of pedagogical support being provided by a CoP is especially relevant. Similar to the concept of the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978) and in line with the tenets of social constructivist learning theory (MacMahon, 1997), the CoP framework stresses the importance of social interaction in enhancing the educational process. Within the CoP framework, the processes for learning a second language or developing communication skills are not just viewed as a matter of acquisition but of participating in the social world. For that reason they become enhanced when the learner has an opportunity for playing various roles while engaging others in practice-based activities within related practice-focused communities. This reflects the sort of interaction learners experience in authentic situations, which Haneda (2000, p. 14) sums up as follows:

> The concept of a 'community of practice' in the foreign-language-learning context can therefore be best understood as applying to students who are simultaneously members of multiple communities, ranging from the classroom-bound community of teacher with student

to broader professional and recreational communities that include fluent speakers of the target language.

In short, the CoP offers learners today what they have found in specific learning situations since time immemorial, a chance to gain learning experience in a contextually rich, socially vibrant environment.

CoP and Web 2.0

By 2003 the Internet and Web 2.0 technology extended the reach of CoPs further, freeing learners in educational settings from being "bound" to the classroom in the way that Haneda (2000) describes. Students can now readily engage one another and the teacher outside of the classroom. Along with near ubiquitous access to the Internet, the increasing array of Internet devices such as cell phones, laptop computers and iPads has also facilitated greater acceptance of learning theories and pedagogical practices with a CoP orientation. Long past are the times when learning was viewed as the simple acquisition of knowledge in isolation. Today, students living in regions throughout the world and studying at all levels in various education systems participate, share and collaborate in work groups and broader learning communities, often times interacting with peers with greater frequency online than face to face. Accepted as members in these multifarious groups and buoyed by the support of numerous communication channels, they not only acquire knowledge and understanding unavailable in their own homes (and sometimes not provided in their schools), they develop skills and tool sets unfamiliar to their parents and teachers.

Modern curricula around the world emphasize collaborative, task-based, student-centered learning, whereby students learn through working together in CoPs to complete tasks and activities as they would in any other community. For example, if one goal of a language class is to learn and practice new grammar points, teachers nowadays will have different groups present on different grammar points. Each group may initiate discussion on the grammar presentation inside class, and then most probably continue work outside of class: researching content, sharing what is found, and then organizing it as a presentation. The group will be doing some work face-to-face and some of it online.

It is in this context that Lave and Wenger's idea of "situated learning," born in the pre-Internet early 1990s, has been supplanted by Jones and Jo's term "ubiquitous learning," or u-learning. Jones and Jo define u-learning environments as "any setting in which students can become totally immersed in the learning process." In the modern world, this setting can be extended to almost anywhere, with the potential only limited by Internet access or the availability of a device to connect to it (2004, p. 469).

The university-level blogging group as CoP: A rationale

Pedagogical blogging has been increasingly embraced by language educators as a platform that redefines the space of the classroom and enhances student-student interaction. Indeed, Davis (2004) lists thirty potential uses for blogs to complement coursework, from the now standard reflective journal to a portfolio of student work, where they post assignments based on literature readings. In fact, blogs and associated blogging activities have been used effectively for pedagogical purposes in a variety of post-secondary instructional contexts. Blogging has proven attractive to language and communication skills educators and learners alike (Blackstone, Spiri & Naganuma, 2007; Blackstone & Wilkinson, 2011; Jones, 2006) because it

- encourages course content-based discussions out of the physical classroom and beyond class time (Stanley, 2006; Williams & Jacobs, 2004);
- supports both individualized and broadly interactive communication (Cottle, 2009; Pinkman, 2005; Shifflet, 2008);
- motivates students to engage positively in the writing process (Barrios, 2003; Cottle, 2009; Shifflet, 2008; Trammel & Ferdig, 2004).

- enhances critical thinking and increases learner autonomy (Richardson, 2006);
- gives students the chance to "maximize focused exposure to language in new situations, peer collaboration, and contact with experts" (Dieu, 2004, p. 26); and
- facilitates student collaboration within a "community of learners" (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004; Nelson & Fernheimer, 2003; Stanley, 2006).

No matter what the justification for using blogging activities and assignments as a complement to existing coursework is, any teacher who implements a blogging component usually discovers that the "mutual engagements" taking place within this particular CoP can take on a life of their own. Given encouragement to not just post but also to interact with classmates through reader commentary, many of the student bloggers give more time to the activity than required, while the numbers and length of the blog posts usually exceeds expectations. The nature of comment responses shows a range of types from social to instructional, and thanks to the ubiquitous nature of the blogging platform, student-student interactions can take place 24 hours a day. In much the same way that among a group of Facebook friends, a member will usually be online, updating a status, uploading new photos, chatting, or simply checking the status of one's friends, within a class of bloggers, members can access and input content on their own blogs and/or the blogs of others at any time. Autonomous, asynchronous "interaction" becomes routine for the blog group CoP.

Blogging and learner autonomy

Over the last 20 years, the concept of learner autonomy has risen to prominence and modern pedagogy promotes the idea that learners should be more independent. To encourage learner autonomy students should have a role in planning, controlling and evaluating their own learning (Wenden, 1991). Blogging activities are a way of moving students away from teacher dependence towards independent learning. When used appropriately, they encourage learners to negotiate understanding and meaning about ideas and concepts through collaboration. In effect, students use each other as a learning resource and in the process begin to take charge of and take responsibility for their own learning.

Swain (1995) refers to this kind of practice with English-learning peers as "comprehensible output." She argues that this is nearly as important as comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003) because learning takes place when the student encounters a gap in her linguistic knowledge of the second language (L2). Swain believes that by noticing the gap between what they want to say and what they are able to say, learners notice what they do not know or know only partially in a language. By then hypothesizing and testing what could be lexically, grammatically or contextually possible, they are able to modify their output so that they learn something new about the language. Consequently, learners reflect on the language they have learnt, and their output enables them to make sense of and internalize linguistic knowledge.

Pedagogical blogging is a good way for learners of English to receive and produce comprehensible input and output because it incorporates many of the principles underlying cooperative learning. For example, student bloggers could be asked to watch a short film clip and critique its content in a blog post about it. They could also be instructed to comment on each others' posts regarding the film. This activity would involve both collaborative and interactive learning, two key elements of cooperative learning.

Pedagogical blogging: Two university-level course CoPs

Next, two studies from the National University of Singapore (NUS) English Language courses are considered. How blogging was integrated into each course is discussed as well as why establishing web-based CoPs beyond the classroom in both of these courses were an effective means of enhancing the educational process.

Blogging in EM1201: A basic English skills course approach

At the start of Academic Year (AY) 2009–10, testing at the National University of Singapore (NUS) revealed that some of the recently matriculated Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YSTCM) students had a reasonable understanding of basic grammar but many had difficulty applying their understanding to contextualized grammatical errors in longer texts such as their own or other students' paragraphs. The ability to self-correct grammatical errors in longer texts is essential for non-native English speaking students studying in English as this skill is necessary for them to progress to their next level of inter-language competence.

This section of the paper briefly discusses why the blogging platform is a useful pedagogical tool for lower level university students and reports on how a blogging component was integrated into the YSTCM curriculum of the Basic English course (EM1201) at NUS to enable students to practice grammar-editing skills. It also presents and interprets findings from an attitudinal survey of a class of student bloggers about their learning experience using blogs and discusses these findings with a document analysis of the students' blog posts and comments made during the course.

YSTCM was founded in 2001 and is rapidly becoming a world-renowned music conservatory. The selection criteria for new students to the conservatory are related specifically to their musical ability. As a consequence, many of the students recruited from China, Korea, Thailand and Vietnam require supplementary English language courses to enable them to study and learn in English at university level. Most students are aged between 18 and 22 years old and 70% are from mainland China and fall between A2 and B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) for the four skills. The students can generally write simple connected sentences, which are on familiar or personal topics and can produce spoken phrases sometimes connected in a simple way. Their listening and reading skills are a little stronger but overall they have a low level of English competence.

Classroom-based action research was carried out in a class of 10 EM1201 students (nine Chinese, one Thai). As stated earlier, the students had a reasonable understanding of basic English grammar but many found it difficult applying their understanding to contextualized grammatical errors in their own texts. The challenge was how to use the blog platform to enable students to generate written comprehensible output and use this output to improve their grammar editing skills, while at the same time fostering cooperative learning and encouraging the students to be more independent in their learning outside the classroom.

Setting up and managing the EM1201 blogging CoP

To give students the opportunity to practice analyzing, synthesizing and presenting information using a modern writing platform, a blogging component was introduced to the course to generate contextualized extended texts. Students used blog posts to introduce themselves and their musical influences, review concerts, discuss composer's abilities and reflect on their learning. The majority of homework assignments for the course involved writing and commenting on blog posts.

The students were partnered with a blogging "buddy" and assigned to a blogging group of four to five students within the class. Blackstone et al. (2007) note this is an effective way of guaranteeing that each member regularly receives comments on their posts and prevents "popular" students from dominating blogging activity. Each student was required to comment on their blogging buddy's posts and encouraged to comment on other members' posts within the blogging group. Students were told that their posts should be in formal English. However, to encourage more "friendly" feedback, their comments and suggestions to each other were allowed to be informal.

Also, each student was required to review his or her blog posts after in-class grammar awareness sessions (see below) and try and correct mistakes. For example, students were asked to focus on correcting article errors following article input sessions, pronoun errors following pronoun input sessions and so on. They were also asked to try and correct other mistakes related

to the organization, structure and cohesion of the text and when possible comment on these problems in their blogging buddy's posts. This kind of personalized and contextualized text editing practice was precisely what the students needed to improve.

To provide students with appropriate models of feedback and to show them that their blog contributions were being monitored, the teacher posted comments about student posts and made blog entries as well. This was an essential pedagogical and administrative element as he was able to praise suitable student suggestions and prevent misunderstanding occurring with incorrect suggestions. The teacher's participation also seemed to have motivated the students to participate more because it demonstrated he was engaged in the blogging process with the students. Indeed, one student blogger gently 'reprimanded' the teacher in a post when he did not post any comments one week.

In-class blog editing

To further practice correcting contextualized grammatical errors in long texts, the music students were given the opportunity to edit their blogs in-class in a computer classroom. Blogging buddy pairs were instructed to review each other's blog posts and consider their organization, cohesion and grammar. They were asked to discuss any mistakes or problems and edit their posts where necessary and to post comments about some of the observations they were making. This was done to support the teacher's observations of the process in the evaluation of the activity. To encourage the students to be more independent in their learning, when they asked the teacher questions, he opened the question up to the class and encouraged peer correction as much as possible. It was thought this would promote learner autonomy and enhance learning outcomes by allowing students to negotiate meaning and understanding themselves and also provided good practice in the self correction skills that needed to be improved.

Grammar awareness

It was necessary to ensure that students received classroom input and practice of the kind of editing skills they would be required to reproduce on their blog posts for homework. Table 1 below shows how this was timetabled. Course EM1201 ran for 12 weeks with two-hour classes twice a week. Grammar awareness sessions were written into the curriculum and were taught in the two classes prior to the grammar editing homework. For example, in week three, the students reviewed the guidelines for the use of pronouns in class and were given opportunities to check their understanding of them in both discreet item and freer practice activities.

During the in-class grammar awareness sessions, the music students demonstrated a good basic understanding of grammar and performed well with the discrete item practice. However, when they tried to look for grammatical mistakes in the longer texts, they started to question their understanding of grammar and began discussing the subject in more depth, asking each other what they thought was right and wrong, and why. They also started to refer to the grammar guidelines that had been reviewed earlier in the class. This initial guided practice was essential scaffolding for the homework, where they reviewed and edited their own blog posts for grammar errors.

Table 1: Blogging schedule (grammar editing)			
Week	**Tutorial 1**	**Tutorial 2**	**Homework**
3	Paragraph Writing (1) **Grammar: Pronouns (1)**	Presentation Skills (1) **Grammar: Pronouns (2)**	Tutorial 1: 2nd Write blog post Tutorial 2: Comment on blogging partners' post and **edit blogs for pronoun errors**.

EM1201 blog impressions and student feedback

To evaluate the effectiveness of using blogs to practice grammar editing skills, the following methodology was used.

In order to monitor the correction process, the initial blog posts were copied onto a document. Once student editing had taken place, it was possible for the teacher to compare the initial post with the edited version. Next, each edited section was briefly looked at to determine if the student had improved the text in the editing process; whether, for example, students had successfully edited the tense, article and pronoun errors or whether they were still negotiating meaning about the grammatical forms they had written. It was thought that this activity would both provide an insight into the usefulness of the in-class grammar awareness sessions and evidence of the students' use of the blog platform to edit their texts and practice their grammar editing skills. A selection of these text comparisons is given in Appendix 1.

In addition, the comments students posted to each other with grammar editing suggestions about their blog posts were also collated by the teacher to determine if the learners gave each other useful suggestions and feedback about their English language skills. A selection of these comments and suggestions is presented in Appendix 2.

To gather and record student perceptions and beliefs about blogging and grammar editing on the course, the music students were asked to complete a survey at the end of the semester. The survey used a Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) to assess student responses to 26 questions about writing in general, as well as blogging on the course. A summary of the survey findings is provided in Appendix 3.

EM1201 blog impressions: Findings and discussion

The students' perceptions of their learning and the use of blogs were very positive. One hundred percent agreed blogging helped them find mistakes in their work. One hundred percent also agreed that looking for grammar mistakes in their blogs made them think a lot more about grammar. Eighty percent said they had learnt grammar from their classmates and 90% said they had helped correct their classmates' English. Furthermore, 100% of students agreed that receiving feedback from a blogging partner was an effective way of improving their posts, of which 60% strongly agreed. This supports the idea that blogging is a student-centered, peer focused activity (Glogoff, 2005).

These figures are particularly encouraging when the educational background of the sample is considered. All the students had previously been taught English in a teacher centered-classroom using the grammar translation method. As Wu (2004) notes, culturally Chinese learners perceive their teachers to be an authoritative and domineering source of knowledge. Generally students are obedient and respectful and feel that they should learn from the teacher rather than from one another. The student feedback from the questionnaire indicates the EM1201 students altered these perceptions about learning. It shows that students believed they learnt from each other and that blogging facilitated this student-centered learning. It also suggests that students were now adopting practices about meaning, understanding and learning from this new CoP in Singapore and comparing them favorably with the practices they had left behind in their educational CoPs in their native countries.

This positive feedback was supported by comments the students made to each other when blogging. Eighty percent of students posted more than the required number of posts and comments and gave and received a lot of useful grammatical suggestions, such as, "I think you should change *chosen* to *choose*" as well as advice on content such as, "I think you need write [sic] something about how this piece makes you feel and not only introduce it". (More examples are given in Appendix 1.)

Other comments unrelated to the coursework are also noteworthy. They provide an insight in to the kind of social and learning interactions that occurred in the web-based CoP. Students

asked for help, empathized, praised and requested more information much like members would in any community. Below are some examples taken from the EM1201 blog posts.

"It's very nice blog. Would you like to teach me how to add the audio file, please?"

"That's amazing that you can play three different instruments. I wish I can play the cello also!!!"

"....your blog is looking great - I understand the freedom you enjoy in game music...."

"....could you post a link that he is playing?"

(From the blog musicisum2, 2010)

These EM1201 student comments are an indication of the influence of the blogging community to act as a social lubricant in educational contexts. Indeed, before and sometimes during classes, the students were observed discussing topics that had started online and were brought to the physical classroom and vice-versa. This sped up the class bonding process and made classroom discussions and interactions more intimate and personalized. It also provided live documented evidence of the usefulness of web-based CoPs in facilitating and supporting learning.

In previous semesters trying to persuade students to practice grammar editing skills outside the classroom was very difficult. The music students are very busy with their core modules as well as the practicing and rehearsals they are involved with for live performances. The fact that most students posted more than the required number of posts indicates that they were highly engaged and found the activity useful. This is supported by student survey findings that show that 100% of students thought receiving feedback on written posts was positive and believed blogging was a good way to learn from other students.

Another benefit of this kind of written interaction was that students became more comfortable correcting one another verbally in class. For example, when the students worked on an essay using *process writing*, the learners in the class that had been doing the grammar editing using blogs were much more willing to give critical feedback to one another than the learners in classes which had not blog edited. This was because they had practiced giving and receiving feedback in their blog posts and were transferring these skills to the process writing activity in class.

Appendix 2 gives a selection of the type of student grammar editing completed on the course. It illustrates the kinds of errors that were corrected and provides some examples of attempted corrections. The in-class grammar awareness sessions proved to be extremely useful for the students as many of the corrections were related to the grammar topics discussed and practiced in-class. Furthermore, after analyzing the students' grammar editing in the first week, it became apparent that they were identifying and correcting many more errors than the ones that they were asked to primarily focus on. For example, Appendix 2, comment 8 shows a student edit of the modal *must* to the modal *have*. This is a significant self-correction at this basic learner level and shows a real negotiation of meaning and understanding of modality took place. In addition, comment 9 is an edit of noun choice replacing *sound* with *melody*. This shows the students reflected on their word choice, realized they needed to be more specific and managed to select a more appropriate noun. It also suggests that the blogging activity encouraged learners to take charge of their own learning, becoming more autonomous in the process.

Another advantage of keeping a record of student's original posts and the edited versions was that it was possible to identify, for example, grammatical misunderstandings in the meaning and use of definite articles (see Appendix 2, comment 2) and clarify understanding with the students individually during the course conferencing sessions.

Observations of the in-class blog editing were also very positive. The students were lively and engaged throughout the class and enjoyed reading, commenting and correcting each other's posts. It was noticeable that the students were immediately comfortable exchanging advice and suggestions with each other. One possible reason for this is that, prior to the in-class blog editing

session, they had given each other written feedback about their work as part of their blogging homework. This practiced written feedback gave them the confidence to voice their suggestions to their blogging buddy in class. As with the in-class process writing of the essay referred to earlier, the blogging activity enabled students to transfer skills honed on the blogging platform outside the classroom to face-to-face communication in the classroom.

Using blogs to support student learning was very successful with the EM1201 class at NUS. The students improved their grammar editing skills, showed an increase in motivation and became more autonomous learners. Clearly, blogs can be a very useful and adaptable learning aid that can promote student-centered learning through the establishment of online CoPs. The challenge for educators is to determine how to appropriately integrate blogs into curricula to best meet their students' needs.

Blogging in ES2007S: A professional communication course approach

"Professional Communication: Principles and Practice" (ES2007S) is offered as an elective to upper-level science and engineering students at NUS. ES2007S has the stated goal of enabling the students to become more effective communicators within various social settings, especially in the workplace. By the end of the course, they are supposed to be able to (a) know and apply the principles of communication to develop strategies for a successful exchange of ideas with others, and (b) plan, construct and express spoken and written messages clearly, convincingly and professionally, which are fitting to audience, context, and purpose. Each of these proposed learning outcomes is in line with the communication skills described as essential in a survey of 104 Silicon Valley employers who were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with newly hired employees (Stevens, 2005).

To achieve the relevant communication skills objectives in ES2007S, the students read about the fundamentals of interpersonal, intercultural, nonverbal, business communication and associated communication theories, review strategies for active listening, effective writing, speaking, presenting, and conducting survey-based research, and work through related class activities and skill builders. Using these processes as a foundation, they then practice effective communication through several series of tasks: going through an application process, including writing an application letter and a resume and doing a mock interview; evaluating faulty business letters and writing effective ones; and doing a survey-based research project within a small group, which involves conducting a formal meeting in order to reach consensus on a research topic, writing meeting minutes, planning primary and secondary research, developing an online survey instrument and interview questions for the primary research, analyzing data, describing the research in a written report, and finally, presenting the research project orally.

After teaching this course for AY 2007–8, the teacher felt that student engagement with two course elements, discussions of the course content and effective writing practice, could be better supported by a more comprehensive writing/discussion regime. Having successfully used pedagogical blogging in an English for Academic Purposes course for first-year engineering students, the teacher asked this question: might blogging serve learners in ES2007S equally well?

It was within this context that he decided to implement a term-length series of blogging activities with the goal of providing each student with more opportunities to share ideas with classmates and the teacher on the course content, to reflect on what was being learned, and to practice and refine written communication skills. After being used for two semesters in AY 2008–9, the blogging activity seems to have fulfilled these goals and provided students with a meaningful collaborative learning experience.

This section
- describes pedagogical blogging as it was used with 20 tutorial groups of 336 students conducted by six teachers during two semesters at NUS;
- describes two novel components: the blogging buddy and the blogging group;

- summarizes the ES2007S blogging process and content topics;
- provides a brief description of how these own students' blogs were evaluated; and
- relates impressions of the blogging activity from various viewpoints, including those filtered from a term-end anonymous attitudinal survey of all ES2007S students.

Blogging in ES2007S: A rationale

Blogging was used in ES2007S as a way of having the students further explore in more detailed discussion the communication principles they had been learning, apply these principles to authentic communication situations, and reflect on their learning. For this reason, the blogging activity was listed in the course syllabus as an "e-portfolio." What differentiated the blogging activity from a paper portfolio, however, was the fact that reader commentary was regularly provided by, first, each student's personal editor, or blogging buddy, then by members of a subgroup of the class, the blogging group, and eventually by other classmates and the course instructor. Another value-added difference in the blogging was that each student's posts could be accessed by anyone with the student's blog address.

The blogging buddy and the blogging group

As mentioned earlier, previous pedagogical blogging experiences have shown that when students are free to make comments on posts by anyone in a given class, the most popular students receive many comments while others receive few or none (Blackstone et al., 2007; Cottle, 2009). Assigning each student in a class a blogging buddy and a blogging group, which is a subset of the class at large, is an effective means of guaranteeing that each member regularly receives comments on their post. By creating groups of five to six students in a class of 15 to 18 and then requiring each group member to comment on at least two or more of the group members' posts, a teacher can create conducive conditions for all students to gain meaningful feedback. Moreover, this system does not restrict a student's post commentary to being made only on the posts of blogging group members. Indeed, students usually make comments on nearly as many non-blogging group members' posts as they do on group members' posts.

In the ES2007S classes, each student selected her or his blogging buddy from within the assigned blogging group. The rationale for requiring a blogging buddy was that when each student in a class has someone acting as a first-draft editor, the "published" posts are of higher quality. "The blogging buddy is the initial peer reviewer, the first or final-draft reader, the one who acts both as the writer's good conscience—useful for motivational purposes—and as his/her proof-reader—in that way, also a surrogate teacher" (Blackstone et al., 2007, p. 9). The value that such editing practice has in the context of helping students develop better written communication skills goes beyond the blogging exercise itself. In reference to her findings from the survey of Silicon Valley employers, Stevens (2005, p. 5) states that the employer feedback she gathered makes the case "for more rigorous writing and editing standards in college courses. Establishing strong editing skills can make students more responsible for accuracy in the quantitative business subjects and help them develop into stronger writers."

Such editing need not be a laborious process. Students can be informed that the blogging buddy can make a quick read of the classmate's pre-post writing as long as they offer clear, concise suggestions for changes in content, organization and/or language use, if those are needed. The value of having such an editor was clearly recognized by ES2007S students. On an end-of-term anonymous survey evaluation of blogging in ES2007S, similar to the one used in EM1201, for Semesters 1 and 2, 2008/2009, 87.9% of the 108 students indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that "Receiving feedback from a blogging buddy is a positive learning experience."

The ES2007S blogging process and content topics

The process for the blogging component of ES2007S proceeded as follows:

- Each student created their own blog site.
- Each gave their blog address to the teacher and classmates, who included a hyperlink to that address in a list of classmate names on their own blog sites.
- Each was assigned a blogging group. From within that group, each chose a blogging buddy.
- Within the first week of classes, each wrote a post, which was expected to be a multi-paragraph response of 250 to 300 words to an assigned topic related to the course content. Before posting, each had their first draft read by the blogging buddy. After making any necessary changes, each posted their edited writing on the blog.
- Finally, within one week of the assigned due date for the post, each student was required to read and make comments on the blog posts of at least three classmates.

The ES2007S students were told that two of the classmates' posts read had to be from the assigned blogging group, while the third read could be from the class at large. Seven post assignments were required for each of the two semesters but students were encouraged to make additional posts if they desired. At least 50% of students voluntarily made more than the required seven posts. Nearly all students made more than the required number of comments on their classmates' posts, once again showing their enthusiasm as members of the class blogging community.

Blog post topics during AY 2008–9 included the value of effective communication skills, an interpersonal communication problem, an intercultural observation scenario, a critique of a business communication, an autobiographical/personal statement for use in a job or graduate school application, an open topic related to any communication issue, and reflective posts, one on the course research project or the oral presentation and another on overall learning throughout the course.

Assessing the blogging process

Paraphrasing Kennedy (2003), Jones (2006, p. 82) states "blogs combine the best elements of portfolio-driven courses where student work is collected, edited, and assessed, with the immediacy of publishing to a virtual audience." In ES2007S, because the blogging activity, which constituted 20% of the course grade, was categorized as the "e-portfolio," students understood that their blog work—both posting and commenting—would be evaluated in total at the end of the term. At the start of each term a rubric was distributed to students (and other course teachers) describing ideal blogging behavior in terms of appropriate content, good organization and language use, and other variables such as the frequency of posting and the nature of effective comments on a classmate's post.

The evaluation and assessment of the blogs involved the teacher reading every student's blog post during the week after the post was made, usually allowing sufficient time for the student's classmates to make comments first. In addition to leaving brief qualitative comments on the posts regarding content, organization and/or language use, the teacher scored each post "holistically," along a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being "exceptional," 3 "very good," 2 "adequate," and 1 "mediocre." The assessment focus was on how clearly and completely the content responded to the assignment and how accurate the language use was. These marks were entered into a database but not shown to students to prevent them from being obsessed about their points.

At various times during the term, however, selected blog posts were discussed during class, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of each. In addition, self-evaluation forms were distributed to all students at the start of the term that required them to assess their posts using the same 4-level scale. The bloggers were also requested to estimate the number of comments they had made on their classmates' posts for each assignment and the number of comments others had made on their own. The form was collected at the end of the term. Throughout the

term notes were made about how well each student commented on their classmates' posts and these were factored in when allotting points for the blogging component.

ES2007S blog impressions: Preliminary survey of students, findings and discussion

As with any newly instituted teaching strategy or activity, various problems became apparent in the use of blogging on the course. These included the fact that some of the course teachers asked to utilize this activity as part of the course had never worked with blogs before and had difficulty in understanding how to best integrate them into their lessons. Some teachers also were not sure to what extent they needed to give students feedback. Another problem for teachers was determining the best means of evaluating the students' blogging while not becoming overburdened. Related to this was the fact that since ES2007S already included five marked assignments, students and teachers alike expressed some concern at the demands of having to do the bi-weekly blogging tasks.

Still, considering the scope of the blogging exercise and the potential benefits in light of the initial objectives, these problems seemed manageable. It was within that context that a preliminary research study of student attitudes toward blogging was conducted. The core research question was this: Had the blogging component achieved the goals of giving students more opportunities for sharing ideas on the course content, reflecting on what was being learned, and practicing and refining written communication skills? The answer voiced by a majority of the students in their blogs and in their opinions expressed on the end-of-term anonymous survey was yes.

The aforementioned survey was set up using surveymonkey.com, an online survey design site, and sent to all ES2007S students after the last tutorial session. Survey items were of various types. For the purposes of this paper, only student responses to a selection of the Likert-type scaling statements of agreement/disagreement have been considered. Key areas surveyed included those that are described below.

A key teaching focus of ES2007S is to give students an opportunity to put into practice, within a real world context, those communication principles read about and discussed in the course. It was therefore necessary to address "communication" as a survey item in the context of the blogging regime. To this end, for the statement "Blogging is a good way to communicate with classmates and the teacher," 85% of the 120 respondents who completed the survey over two semesters indicated that they strongly agreed/agreed. It is important to note that this agreement increased from 75% in Semester 1 to 96.4% in Semester 2. One possible explanation for this change lies in the extent to which teacher feedback was given on student posts. In the case where teachers neglected to give feedback to students, as was true in Semester 1, there was widespread student criticism. That practice changed in Semester 2. For this reason, it can be suggested the 21.4 point increase in the percentage of favorable opinions to the fact that as teachers developed more familiarity with blogging, they recognized that students expected their feedback.

Assessing student perception of the influence that blogging might have had on written communication skills development also seemed relevant. When asked to rate their agreement/disagreement with the statement "Blogging helped me improve my written communication skills," 81.6% of the 120 respondents answered in the affirmative. This increased from 75% in Semester 1 to 89.3% in Semester 2.

Because the blogging work entailed peer editing a blogging buddy's post and giving constructive feedback on the blog posts themselves, it seemed pertinent to include an item on collaboration. This item also might underscore the degree to which students felt that their CoP had supported their learning. For the statement "Blogging is an effective means of my collaborating with others in learning," 77.5% of the 120 respondents strongly agreed/agreed. This increased from 68.7% in Semester 1 to 87.5% in Semester 2. Clearly, the student blogger's sense of being a valued member of the CoP is reflected by these results.

In an effort to determine how students might view the commentary added to their posts, they were asked to rate their agreement with a statement related to the positive value of receiving

feedback. A convincing 96% of the 120 respondents—95.3% in Semester 1 and 96.4% in Semester 2—expressed agreement. Again, general student satisfaction with the way that their learning community supported the practice of them making blog commentary is exhibited by this item.

Of course, judging an activity by a limited number of students' perceptions is not a sufficient means of evaluating its efficacy. However, for a course in communication skills, impressions as evidenced by this quote from one student's final reflective post do offer a substantial testament to the power of blogging when used appropriately to establish a nurturing CoP:

> "What I enjoyed about this module was that I had the chance to present myself to an audience through physical interactions (e.g. the oral presentation) and... cyber interactions. Blogging, I feel, lessens many of the restrictions we impose on ourselves during face-to-face interactions. As I read the entries of my other classmates, I start to see the many facets of their individual characters. On my part, I loved the blogging activity even though I was rushed for time at certain times. It seems like blogging for ES2007S is the only time I start prodding my brain and truly reflect all kinds of issues. The challenge was to put all those reflections and thoughts into the most appropriate words and of course, in good grammar." (Suzuki, 2009)

Conclusion

For teachers who have seen how blogging extends CoPs beyond the classroom and the extent to which learning outcomes of the students engaged in pedagogical blogging improve, the question is no longer whether blogging is an effective learning aid or not but how to best implement it in curricula. Therefore, further research needs to address its implementation in to different courses to address the challenges that teachers face in areas such as assessment and time management. Further research should also investigate the nature of the feedback given by blogging buddies and the different CoP roles they assume that are inferred in the feedback. More studies on the relationship between blogging activities and specific skills development are also necessary. Only then will the full potential that the blogging platform has for enhancing student motivation, supporting student collaboration, facilitating language and communication skills development, and transforming the boundaries of any given learning community be fully realized.

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Appendix 1: Student comments and suggestions

1. I think that you want to use the word "join" but you write the other word "joy" down.

2. There are several problems in your essay: "What's the music means to me"—should be "what does the music mean to me"? and "he just sing with his memory"—is it "he just sing by his memory"? And, when you want to show a YouTube clap, you can copy the "Embed" then type it.

3. It should be "talent" not "talente". And—every moment with his should be "his every moment". Also I think "the musicians must trusted in him" should be "the musicians trusted him", "it not about how old is he" should be "it does not relate to his age".

4. I found some mistakes in your work, you can correct them then your journal will be better. The first one is "Ye I know your guys "maybe it is "Ye I know you guys". The second one is "can not" should better be "cannot" shorthand should better be corrected to normal typing. Such as "didn't" should better be "did not".

5. Maybe you can use "concern" instead of "consider" it has lots = there are lots difficulties informations = information

6. I think we can say the melody is very ordinary or it just has an ordinary melody rather than it is a ordinary melody.

7. However, I don't understand what you mean by extremely well. I know the meaning of it. But I feel this adverb is too affirmative. Conductors are learning pieces as well. Every conductor has their own perspective to one piece. It is hard to define which one is more close to the composer's will.

8. I found some mistake in your journal. 1st, I think you should change 'CHOSEN' to 'CHOOSE' 2nd, I think 'change something from ' is better than 'To'.

9. I think you also need write something about how this piece make you feel, not only introduce a piece.

10. I think you can write more specifically. Why it is a wrong era in 1970s? You can briefly introduce some of the information that you mentioned Suggestion: Trained strictly. No need "the" before "music". He was only 18. In those years, he led his orchestra...By his age = because of his age. He was also appointed ....in 2009

Appendix 2: Student grammar editing

	Original post	Edited post	Successful edit	Still negotiating meaning
1.	I have been study playing violin for 19 years	I have <u>been playing</u> violin for 19 years.	✓	
2.	When the children are over one full year old.	When <u>the</u> children are on their <u>one year old</u> birthday		✓
3.	I began to learn the composition.	I began to *learn composition*.	✓	
4.	I realized it is such important that can easily influence my mood.	I realized <u>how easily it</u> could influence my mood.	✓	
5.	He would warm up for half a hour.	He would warm up for half <u>an</u> hour.	✓	
6.	It seems that is all the memory it left.	It seems <u>like</u> that is all the memory <u>he</u> left.		✓
7.	How come a man wear a high-heeled shoes.	How can a man <u>wear high-heeled</u> shoes.	✓	
8.	I got new assignment, I must do it.	I got a new assignment, <u>that I have to do</u>.	✓	
9.	The sound is so smooth.	The <u>melody</u> is so smooth.	✓	
10.	In my opinion, this world can united because of this kind of music.	In my opinion, <u>the</u> world can united by this kind of music.		✓

Appendix 3: Student survey

Writing and blogging	(%) Strongly agree	(%) Agree	(%) Disagree
1. I like writing in general	40	60	
2. I like it when my teacher gives comments on my writing.	80	20	
3. I like it when a classmate gives comments on my writing.	70	30	10
4. I like making comments on a classmate's writing.	30	40	30
5. I found grammar editing my essay in class useful.	80	10	10
6. I learnt English grammar from my classmates.	40	40	20
7. I helped my classmates correct their English.	30	60	10
8. I like blogging as an activity.	30	60	10
9. I blog in my free time in my first language.	10	60	30
10. I like posting witing assignments on my blog.	30	60	10
11. I like reading my classmates' written posts.	30	70	
12. I like my teacher making comments on my posts.	90	10	
13. Receiving feedback on my written posts is a positive experience.	70	30	
14. Blogging is a good way to learn from other students.	60	40	
15. I would like to continue blogging.	60	40	

Blogging and grammar	(%) Strongly agree	(%) Agree	(%) Disagree
1. Blogging on this course was a good way to communicate with classmates and the teacher.	60	40	
2. Blogging in this course has helped me improve my writing skills.	70	30	
3. Blogging on EM1201 helped me find grammar mistakes in my work.	70	30	
4. Looking for grammar mistakes on my blog and my classmates' blog really made me think more about grammar.	50	50	
5. Blogging has been a positive learning experience.	60	40	
6. I like having a blogging partner.	30	50	20
7. Receiving feedback from a blogging partner is effective for improving my post.	60	40	
8. Having a blogging partner encourages me to write better posts.	60	40	
9. Receiving feedback from a blogging partner is effective for improving my writing skills.	40	60	
10. Receiving feedback from a blogging partner is a positive learning experience.	50	50	
11. Giving feedback on my blogging partner's post is a positive learning experience.	50	50	