

A blog as an innovative tool in literature courses: a collaborative learning experience

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Abstract

The academic essay has been the technique of choice of most literature professors to assess the progress of their students. Yet, technology provides new tools today that might benefit the process of teaching/learning literary elements. One of such instruments is the blog, a free online sharing space that instructors can use to upload material and allow their students to share reactions, impressions, questions, and points of analysis.

Key words: blog, literature, essay, writing, innovation, collaborative learning, motivation

Resumen

El ensayo académico ha sido la técnica preferida por la mayoría de profesores de literatura para evaluar el progreso de sus estudiantes. No obstante, la tecnología actual provee nuevas herramientas que podrían resultar beneficiosas al proceso de enseñanza/ aprendizaje de elementos literarios. Uno de estos instrumentos es el *blog*, un espacio en línea gratuito para compartir que los profesores pueden aprovechar para colgar material y permitir al estudiante que comparta sus reacciones, impresiones, preguntas y puntos de análisis.

Palabras claves: blog, literatura, ensayo, escritura, innovación, aprendizaje colaborativo, motivación

Antecedents

The formal academic essay stands as the most highly regarded technique to assess the progress of undergraduate students who enroll in literature courses. As a didactic technique, one can see few objections

toward its merits, for essay writing provides students with an opportunity to make a functional use of some meta-cognitive strategies, such as brainstorming and outlining, strategies that are normally introduced as part of the pre-writing process. In addition, essay writing becomes a fertile ground to appreciate the growth of the writing skills of students, such as language command, word choice, and format handling. In other words, essays make it possible for the instructor to assess a variety of elements that sometimes elude the evaluation process in other more specific courses which have a narrower scope.

However, and despite all the merits essay writing has as a didactic technique, one should be aware of the anxiety that essays generate and their time consumption. I do not intend to argue that those traits are necessarily something instructors should remove from the learning experience, for such an assertion is nonsense: students require challenges to grow both in experience and ability. My observation is directed more to the case in which the factors afore mentioned stand as a hindrance of the learning process of some students who, because of a variety of reasons, have less writing ability than the average. In such a case, the anxiety levels that essay writing generates pair up with the time that writing an acceptable academic essay demands and, consequently, some students who lack the writing expertise feel overwhelmed by the task and resort to unethical behaviors, such as plagiarism.

One can speculate that plagiarism is fostered by one characteristic of essay writing: individual work. Since students know that their essays are evaluated on an individual basis, that is, the instructor will pay attention only to the product submitted, students disregard all the meta-cognitive techniques and, time-pressed, they look for quick solutions to the problem that an essay represents to them. Of course, literature professors attempt to discourage the practice of plagiarizing ideas by having students interchange their impressions about a given literary work in class or by conducting interviews with students prior to the writing of the essay. Concerned students, on their part, try to have their work peer-corrected before submitting it to the professor who, most of the times, is aware of this extra-official practice and endorses it. However, those possible ways to approach the task do not discourage a frustrated student from plagiarizing. Denise E. Murray questions the value of peer correction and other techniques under the scope of individual work:

While peer responses are encouraged, often they take place in limited ways; ultimately, the single writer is responsible for his or her final text. While teachers engage in conferences with students, these conferences are non-directive, the student is responsible for both content and language. (1992, p. 114)

The reason that Murray suggests for the ongoing problem of plagiarism seems to be individual work. It makes sense: if a less-able student knows that he or she is going to receive a grade solely based on the final version of an essay he or she submitted as individual work, the student is less likely to feel motivated to engage in peer correcting activities or look for the guidance of the professor.

How can instructors, then, motivate those students and, at the same time, discourage plagiarism? There is not a clear cut answer, of course. Ágota and Schabó (2000) claim that it is the teaching approach that creates this negative outcome: “Such behaviour very often stems from one common cause: the learners’s over reliance on the teacher. Even otherwise motivated learners may assume a passive role if they feel the teacher should be in charge of everything that happens in the classroom” (p. 1). In the constant battle against plagiarism, instructors can benefit from today’s technology and the resources that are now available, provided that one is willing to experiment with different teaching/ learning methodologies that crack up the paradigm of individual work as the most functional way to assess the progress of students and, in turn, discourage unethical tyepes of behavior. Among such methodologies, I advocate collaborative learning as a possible way to reduce the occurrence of plagiarism and help unresponsive students to participate and cope with their writing problems.

Collaborative Learning: A Definition

Collaborative learning, or cooperative learning, is a methodology that was created around the 17th Century. However, it was not until 1990 that it gained more respect in education circles, after careful observation of how it contributed to solve persistent problems in learning, such as unresponsiveness or reluctance to participate:

Most language teachers have experienced the frustration of investing endless amounts of energy in their students and getting very little response. We have all had groups who never did their homework, who were reluctant to use the target language in pair or group work, who did not learn from their mistakes, who did not listen to each other, who did not use opportunities to learn outside the classroom, and so on. (Ágota and Szabó, 2000, p. 1)

As a methodology, it advocates the fostering of autonomous learners (that is, students who become less dependent on the instructor and who engage in collective activities to generate knowledge and sharp up their skills) while it acknowledges the differences in attitude that a group of students might show:

Responsible learners do not have to be especially keen on team work, but they are *willing to cooperate with the teacher and others in the learning group for everyone’s benefit*. Cooperation does not mean that they always obediently follow instructions: they may ask about the purpose of the activity first, or they may even come up with suggestions on how to improve an activity. (Ágota and Szabó, 2000, p. 3)

This autonomy, that Ágota and Szabó (2000) define as “the freedom and ability to manage one’s own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as

well” (p. 4) is a particularly significant ingredient of collaborative learning, for it fosters student responsibility and active involvement in the classroom and outside-classroom activities, which are clear deterrents of plagiarism.

Use of a Blog: An Experience in Collaborative Learning

I selected a blog for this innovation experience not merely because of the influence that ICTs currently exert on education, but because my Web observations indicated to me that these kinds of open spaces generate a large volume of writing. The question that remained was: Can the writing response be directed to a specific purpose in a literature course, as to motivate student participation and improve their performance on a test? A basic concern regarding the evaluation of the use of the blog sprang up as well. However, I will not discuss the latter problem yet since the former question bears the greatest significance for this innovation project. Thus, by means of creating a blog specifically directed to one of the contents of the U.S literature survey course I taught from August to November, 2008, I intended to gather some data about the impact this tool can have on literature courses. The title of the blog was “20th Century Literature” (<http://uslitsurveycourse.blogspot.com>) and access to it was totally open; that is, students did not have to register or do anything to be able to post comments in an attempt to minimize objections to their participation.

The choice of the blog as a teaching/ learning technique was also justified by the approach of collaborative learning that I wanted to implement in the course. Since ICTs propitiate networking of information and knowledge, a blog can create the environment for a successful experience in collaborative learning. Also, a series of guidelines was given to them to establish clear rules, which included the frequency, quantity, and type of participation expected in the two threads that constituted the blog: reactions toward literary works covered in class each week or their progress concerning the reading of the two novellas assigned. Valid responses had to be posted under the appropriate thread, but students had the liberty of posting anything that they deemed useful, be it their comments, aesthetic reactions, or questions. They could also reply to a post by a classmate, follow up a comment, or introduce a new idea of discussion. This apparently disorderly configuration served a larger purpose: I wanted students to read all the posts on the thread before they could post something, so that the input they received from their classmates was as high as possible. I also decided to participate on the blog occasionally to spawn more comments when student participation became weak or students turned unresponsive. Furthermore, I distributed a survey toward the end of the course to collect the impression that students had of several learning strategies I used during the course, which included the blog, as a way to measure the reception of the technique.

The introduction of a blog instead of an academic essay posited a problem: justification of the teaching/ learning technique in a paradigm in which the only valid method of assessment is a piece of formal writing. Ágota and Schabó (2000)

describe how collaborative learning, when first introduced, may generate friction due to a clash of expectations:

The school where you teach, the community of teachers, ..., and the students themselves will have expectations about what roles a teacher is supposed to perform. These expectations may be very different from the teacher roles that facilitate learner responsibility, and if this is the case, changing them will require much patience and caution (p. 5)

To justify the use of a blog as an innovation in the U.S. Literature survey course, I had to analyze closely the educational intentions of the essay as a method of assessment. In the individual approach of learning, formal academic writing is perceived both as a means and as an end in itself. In other words, it is not easy to establish if instructors use the essay as a method to evaluate the progress of their students or if the purpose of a literature course is to train students to write acceptable essays on literature. I decided that the program of the course drew the line. Since the course, as its name indicates, is not a writing course per se, the essay should be treated as a learning technique aimed to achieve a goal. Therefore, I concluded that, by shifting the educational intention of the essay to render it as a tool, the use of the blog could achieve the same purpose: to prepare the students who were taking the course to analyze literary texts with more proficiency and ease in the exam.

Implementation and Results

When I first distributed the guidelines on how I expected students to participate, the notorious reaction was one of bewilderment. Students, I suspect, did not understand why they were not going to be evaluated with the traditional tool, the essay. I had to specify that it was an exercise on collaborative learning and that, therefore, their participation was paramount. After this brief explanation of the educational intention, they seemed more relaxed. However, the second problem to cope with was a well-known side effect of ICTs: some students were not computer-literate or had never been exposed to a blog previously. Consequently, I asked those students to come with me after the session and I modeled how to locate the blog online and how to post comments, which solved that potential challenge.

Interestingly, the first posts appeared only two days after the guidelines had been distributed. Subsequent posts also manifested the eagerness of the students to participate, along with their concern about their writing skills (for instance, they apologized if they misspelled a word), which I consider a beneficial, although unexpected, result since I clearly stipulated that I was not evaluating their formal writing skills.

Another encouraging finding was participation. Students who barely participated in class wrote extensive analyses of literary texts in their posts. Not only

were their comments thoughtful, but some of them also asked other students to reply and, to my surprise, several students picked up the challenges to answer poignant questions about literary texts, challenge their peers' theories or explanations, and suggest new considerations for further analysis.

Although the positive results during the first week after the implementation of the blog were notorious, there were some negative incidents for which I was not prepared. The first occurred when an English-proficient student mocked at a classmate's obvious mistake and wrote a defying-toned comment directed to him. In online circles, this practice is termed "flame war engagement" and constitutes one of the main reasons why blog keepers restrict posts. A flamer can inflict severe damage in a blog aimed to education but I must confess I did not expect such an outbreak coming from a student in my class and, at first, did not have a strategy to handle the problem.

I decided to appeal to the sense of well being of the offending student in an attempt to discourage him from posting similar posts. Thus, I posted a message right after his telling the student that everyone had seen the mistake and asking him to be magnanimous. The student immediately posted an apology for his behavior, which restored the environment needed for the collaborative learning experience to take place.

The second problematic experience was related to some students who claimed that they had misunderstood the instructions I had given in print and, hence, missed the first post deadline. I therefore, in class, clarified the instructions again to make sure nobody else used the same excuse, but did not allow the students to make up for the missing assignment. Contrary to my expectations, strictness did not damage the environment in the blog and, the following week, those students also participated with their comments, although I could also notice few students whose participation was minimal.

After the three weeks that constituted the time allotted for this innovation project had passed, I summarized the positive outcomes as follows:

- **The blog generated an appropriate environment for collaborative learning**

The blog, as a technological platform, was flexible and offered freedom, openness, and enriching personal (not only academic) development opportunities to students. In the search for personal growth, the objectives of collaborative learning are consistent with the humanist formation that the University of Costa Rica champions.

- **The learning environment fostered positive interdependence.**

Students had to read what their peers had posted before adding something to the discussions. Sometimes, that input helped them clarify their interpretations or challenged them. Consequently, students depended on one another to analyze and review the texts. Jacobs (2006) argues that this desirable interdependence is fostered by what he terms "positive resource interdependence" (p. 41). The information that the blog generated

enabled students to collect bits of knowledge, jigsaw-like, from each other in a positive network.

- **The majority of students reported high motivation levels.**
The open and friendly environment in the blog invited students to share their views and their creative response. When students discovered that some peers shared the same opinion, they felt more assertive, which was also observed in class. Even shy students participated more openly during sessions. The impression of the students is also recorded by the survey that was given to them when the course finished. Students rated the blog as the second most useful tool for their learning experience in average. The first one was the explanations given by the professor.
- **The space generated 183 comments.**
The volume of writing, when compiled to a single document file, amounts to 135 pages, which is equivalent to an approximate 5.5 pages written per student. No one can dispute that some students wrote more than others, but the fact that students had to read the material others posted before enriched their analysis skills, which compensates, I believe, the lack of exposure to formal writing.
- **The amount of writing and constant reading showed a positive incidence in the performance of students in the final exam.**
This was the most encouraging finding of the whole experience. After the application of the final exam, students who had previously shown deficiencies regarding literary analysis skills grew more self-reliant, were able to defend their position successfully in an argumentative essay question and, in general, performed satisfactorily. The success rate can be shown on the fact that only two students failed the course out of the 25 that originally made up the group. However, these two students abandoned the class before the implementation of the blog.

Conclusions

After the implementation of the blog as a teaching/ learning activity, I could observe desirable outcomes in the U.S. Literature Survey group. I am aware that this experiment neither determines the applicability of the blog in all literature courses, nor offers significant proof on whether it is advisable to substitute all academic essay writing with online informal blogs. I, in no way, endorse online informal writing as a substitute of academic essays, for the lack of formal writing experience will certainly do a disservice to undergraduate students who enroll in literature courses.

In addition, one can also find some problems when dealing with the evaluation of student online participation. If the instructor is excessively concerned

with objectivity, the freedom that a blog provides is going to represent a disadvantage. Imposition of too many rules to make it a more “objective” tool, however, will doubtless sacrifice its open environment and will be counter-productive under the scope of collaborative learning. Yet, instructors rarely feel at ease with a teaching technique they cannot completely control, so, if they want to use blogs in their classes, they must find a way to keep a balance between objective assessment and the freedom needed for collaborative learning to take place. I personally believe that evaluation of blog participation has to be qualitative and not quantitative.

After my personal experience with this innovation project, I advocate the use of blogs if the instructor desires to foment student participation and help shy students become more outspoken and self-reliant when dealing with interpretations of literary texts. Furthermore, a blog gives students a closer view of the reality of writing as an act of cooperation, as Murray (1992) argues: “In ‘real-world’ contexts, writing is not a solitary enterprise; it is a social act” (p. 100). Nevertheless, the instructor must find a way to compensate for the lack of practice of formal writing skills, such as spelling and grammar use, and design an evaluation method that does not defeat the purpose of the blog as a technique to contribute to the personal growth of students.

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