A Rationale for Introducing a Wiki and a Blog in a Blended-Learning Context

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Abstract

An increasing number of language teachers are using wikis and blogs to enhance the teaching process. This paper describes the future use of a wiki and a blog as online collaborative environments in blended learning. The applications will be used to complement problem-based learning sessions of English for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. The paper outlines the teaching/learning context and discusses both applications in terms of pedagogy, content, design, use, and potential risks.

Introduction

The paper aims to show how the future introduction of a wiki and a blog in a blended-learning context will facilitate peer-to-peer, student-teacher and teacher-teacher interactions and the sharing of knowledge. The paper begins by outlining the learning context, continues by describing the pedagogical approach, and then goes on to consider how the wiki and the blog will be used in problem-based learning (PBL).

The Learning Context

The wiki and the blog tools presented here are intended for four classes of about fifty full-time second-year Sociology students at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana in their English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. They have advanced English and good Internet skills. The teacher uses communicative methods including discussions, group presentations, and PBL.

With PBL, students work in groups of five to resolve a real-life problem. They carry out research, hold meetings where they follow certain steps, produce certain products by determining deadlines, and finally submit a report and present it in class. Apart from the language teacher, a subject teacher is involved and both act as facilitators of the process. Since PBL is still a novelty at our faculty, subject teachers will start to fully participate in PBL in the next academic year.

In PBL the teacher identified problems with:

- participation in group learning;
- motivation to create quality products;

- sharing of knowledge;
- learning to be responsible;
- assessments of their work; and
- communication with teachers.

Pedagogical Approach

PBL is based on the social constructivist belief that learning occurs when students are meaningfully engaged in social activities (Kim, 2001). It also fits the radical constructivist view according to which students construct knowledge from their personal experience because new concepts can only be formed in one's experiential world (Glasersfeld, 2000; Boudourides, 1998). By solving problems similar to real ones, students learn to tackle real-life situations.

To maximise favourable conditions for students' knowledge construction from personal involvement in social activities, the teacher will use social software (Connell, 2005) available on the Internet - a wiki and a blog - to enable students to learn and develop collectively (Thorne & Payne, 2005, p. 389). The wiki's provision of scaffolding in the form of templates will aid students in their reflective thinking and metacognition, help better co-ordinate knowledge construction (Ruschoff & Ritter, 2001, p. 227), and increase meaningful learning (Gordon, 1996).

The tools will be used in blended learning that is believed to be the most efficient approach (Alonso et al., 2005, p.234; Gregorio-Godeo, 2005). Learning will take place in three environments:

1. in face-to-face classroom learning students will receive weekly input from the language and the subject teachers. For example, in the first PBL English class session, students will get acquainted with the tools' features, receive instructions on editing, learn to behave responsibly, learn where and how they will receive help, etc. (see the PBL timetable (http://fdvenglish2pbl.pbwiki.com/ PBL%20Timetable);
2. in face-to-face group meetings students will follow the PBL steps to solve the problem. The tasks started in class, will be finalised in groups or individually and published in the wiki; and
3. in the virtual environment of the wiki and blog groups will meet if they cannot or do not wish to meet face-to-face due to time or space constraints. In the wiki, they will write, edit and publish their products, reach decisions, follow the hyperlinked guidelines, or visit useful resources. In the blog, they will post questions, ideas, or suggestions.

The next two sections explain how each of the tools will enhance learning in the given learning context while outlining the reasons behind the choice of the tool, its content, design and use, and its potential risks.

The Wiki

The reasons behind the choice of the wiki

Wikis are said to substantially improve the teaching/learning process (Augar et al., 2004) and the wiki to be used for PBL (http://fdvenglish2pbl.pbwiki.com/) has been created for the following reasons:

1. to promote peer-to-peer, teacher-teacher and student-teacher collaboration: many students have problems attending group meetings because they live in geographically distant locations. The wiki will offer them a virtual place for collaboration promoting equal contribution to written products and decision-making. Collaboration between the two teachers involved and their communication with the students will be facilitated because they will have constant access and an overview of the process.
2. to increase motivation: experience shows that students are more motivated to work if they know that a larger audience will see the result of their work. Displaying group products in the wiki will generate a greater effort and consequently better products. Another source of motivation will be the tool itself because students like using new software.
3. to facilitate the sharing of knowledge among students and teachers: in large classes, it is only the teacher who has an overview of what the groups are doing. The wiki will enable all the students to see how the groups are tackling problems and receive ideas from everyone. Group products will thus reflect not only the shared knowledge of one group but also of all second-year students. Moreover, the experience will be easily shared with other teachers within and beyond the faculty.
4. to empower students with authority to construct their knowledge: by having all the necessary resources and help available in the wiki, students will no longer have to depend exclusively on the teachers but will be responsible for creating their own knowledge.
5. to enable the teachers to better assess a student's progress: the assessment of individual contributions is sometimes difficult despite the students' self-assessment and peer-assessment. The wiki's display of the history of the process will enable a better assessment of a student's work and participation.

Content, design, and use of the wiki

The wiki will be accessed from the teacher's home page (http://www2.arnes.si/~vzorko/) following the link to English 2 and Problem Based Learning. Its welcome page contains a greeting, the aims, and links to group pages. Group pages are templates with boxes that will be personalised, modified, and filled in by groups, for instance, by adding pictures or more boxes for writing things that students find relevant. Individual pages can be edited by one user at a time. Each wiki page contains a sidebar that functions as scaffolding and contains everything the students will need to complete the project from, for example, formatting tips to guidelines for writing reports.

The wiki uses the Pbwiki software with a simple design that will support improvements in learning according to Alonso et al.'s (2005, p.227) psycho-pedagogical prescriptions. Students' perception processes will be facilitated by maintaining the same structure which will enable an easier focus on the context. The highlighting of important material, simple text, and established learning objectives will help optimise students' attention. To minimise the cognitive load, there is no redundant material. The wiki will also improve student metacognition with links to useful resources where students receive support and ideas.

The two teachers will act as facilitators. They will offer guidance, look for problem areas, and discuss them in class or in the blog. They will check whether the assignments have been completed on time and assess their quality.

Potential risks

Some potential risks such as editing under a false identity, deleting content, or publishing inappropriate content will be prevented by upgrading the wiki with extra protective features, checking the pages, and following Augar et al. (2004, p.101) practice of making regular backups and teaching netiquette.

The Blog

The reasons behind the choice of the blog

Blogs provide effective learning support (e.g., Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Thorne & Payne, 2005) and the PBL blog (http://fdvenglish2pbl.vidazorko.edublogs.org/) was created to complement the classroom and the wiki environment. It will be a place to ask for help and receive daily support for students who are too shy to ask questions in the classroom or who cannot think of any because questions arise outside of class. The blog will be an unthreatening place where students can ask questions as they appear and receive daily help from the two teachers and from all their peers who will be encouraged to share useful information. The blog will bring all second-year students together.

The blog will complement the wiki in two ways:

- it will provide a separate environment in which students will feel free to write in more informal English without worrying about being assessed; and
- unlike the wiki, the blog will enable the teachers to completely control the environment by, for instance, starting new posts or deleting comments.

Content, design, and use

The blog, which relies on the Edublogs.org software, will be accessed from the wiki's sidebar. It has a simple visual theme that will be kept throughout the project. New posts will be highlighted with a photo that will symbolically relate to the content of the post. The number of links is minimal to reduce the cognitive load.

In the first PBL class session, students will learn about the blog's features and receive instructions on adding comments. They will use it individually or in groups to post questions, express problems, look for already posted comments containing advice, etc. New posts will be added weekly and will relate to the corresponding PBL steps. The teacher will be informed of the posted comments by email.

Potential risks

There are some potential risks and ways to deal with them:
- students' reluctance to post comments - if this happens, the teacher will encourage the use of the blog;
- inappropriate or offensive comments - these would be deleted and netiquette will be taught to prevent this; and
- spam - this is a real risk, if it became too annoying then a page in the wiki would be started to take over the blog's function.

Conclusion

The paper has described a wiki and a blog that will be used in blended learning. It has explored their appropriateness for the given teaching context and outlined the pedagogical approach involved. It has shown that the use of the wiki and the blog can have many positive effects on the students' learning experience. It is expected that the tools will turn out to be a very good way of improving group collaboration, increasing motivation, promoting knowledge sharing, empowering the students with authority and responsibility for more autonomous learning, facilitating assessment as well as enhancing communication with the teachers. It is believed that the teaching practice will improve and become better suited to meet the needs of the students and teachers.

The public nature of the wiki and the blog will enable the teacher to easily disseminate the idea among other faculty members and also among ESP teachers who do PBL. The sharing of the experience and receiving feedback will help the teacher further improve the present wiki and the blog and create a solid template to be used and shared with other language teachers who conduct PBL.

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