

Class Weblog as an Online Community: Collaborative Learning through Blogging

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Abstract

The increased usage of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in foreign language classrooms underscores the need to analyze learner interactions through research methods specifically created for computer-mediated discourse (CMD). However as Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger (2008) note, CMD has lagged behind other areas of discourse studies. Nevertheless, Herring's (2004) computer-mediated discourse analysis (CDMA) offers a promising framework for researchers investigating virtual communities. This paper uses Herring's (2004) CDMA framework to demonstrate how a group of L2 English learners interacted via a class weblog to form an online community. In addition, aspects of Wenger's (1998, 2001, 2006) community of practice are discussed to illustrate the participants' capacity to learn collaboratively on the weblog. Moreover, the author examines the effect that active participation on the weblog had on L2 writing development as it pertains to organizational structure. The findings indicate that only one learner on the weblog illustrated a shift towards a more native-like textual organization, thus highlighting the need for explicit instruction regarding L2 writing conventions.

Keywords

computer-mediated discourse, online community, collaborative learning, L2 writing

Introduction

The rise of the Internet has given researchers the opportunity to explore how people behave in

online interactions. This has important implications for second language teaching and research as computer-assisted language learning (CALL) becomes more widespread in the classroom. However, Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger (2008) assert that research into computer-mediated discourse (CMD) has lagged behind other areas of discourse studies. In their article, the authors point out that researchers must adapt their methods to suit the specific settings and environments of CMD. Given this, Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger praise Herring's (2004) CMDA framework which provides researchers with an approach to studying online behavior. This paper uses Herring's (2004) framework to illustrate how a group of L2 learners of English interacted to form an online community via a class weblog. Moreover, aspects of Wenger's (1998, 2001, 2006) community of practice are discussed to illustrate the participants' capacity to learn collaboratively on the weblog to develop their L2 writing and intercultural awareness. Finally, the author examines the relationship between active participation on the weblog and L2 writing development as it pertains to organizational structure.

Background

Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis

According to Herring (2004), CMDA is an attempt to systematize previous goals, understandings, and procedures related to the study of CMD. As opposed to being a method, Herring describes CMDA as an approach that tests theories about CMD. As Herring notes, CMDA is best understood as applying to five domains: 1) structure, 2) meaning, 3) interaction, 4) social behavior, and 5) participation patterns. Because it may be difficult to analyze each area depending on the online community, researchers must select the domains that best suit their data and research questions.

Similar to discourse analysis in other disciplines, CMDA assumes that discourse exhibits recurrent patterns produced either consciously or unconsciously. Moreover, it is assumed that discourse involves speaker choices which are largely influenced by cognitive and social considerations rather than linguistic factors. Furthermore and exclusive to online communication, CMDA assumes that the technological features of computer-mediated systems may affect CMD. Stockwell (2012) reiterates this when explaining how technology influences the learning process: “The same technology used by two people will not necessarily be used in the same way, and depending on experience, skills, and knowledge of what the technology can do may lead to very different results” (p. 8).

It is important to understand the role that community has on communication when using CMDA as a research approach. However, given its highly subjective nature, it may be difficult to define the concept. As a result, Herring (2004) identifies six sets of criteria from literature that can be used to objectively assess the notion of a virtual or online community:

- 1) active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants
- 2) shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values
- 3) solidarity, support, reciprocity
- 4) criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution
- 5) self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups
- 6) emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals

As Herring (2004) points out, not all the features listed above will be exhibited in a given context; therefore, some features are more useful than others as potential indicators of an online community.

Organizational Structure

According to Matsuda (1997), “textual organization is one of the areas with which ESL students have most difficulties” (p. 58). These challenges can be partly attributed to the role that culture plays in shaping how learners view written text. As Greenleaf et al. (2001) point out, “Each act of reading or writing involves socially developed and culturally embedded ways of using text to serve particular social or cultural purposes” (p. 87) and as a result, L2 learners may struggle to learn written discourse conventions unless explicit instruction is provided.

However, no feedback was given in regards to improving the learners’ organizational structure. Therefore, it is surprising that improvement was seen in how the writing of one of the students was organized. This suggests that she was able to internalize L2 discourse conventions by observing and imitating the researcher’s posts in order to move towards a more native-like textual organization. Yet as Lantolf and Thorne (2007) note, imitation as defined by Vygotsky (1978) is not simply copying the actions of others, but rather “it involves goal-directed cognitive activity that can result in transformations of the original model” (p. 207), thereby making it a more conscious mental process.

Research Questions

Based on Herring’s (2004) CMDA framework, this paper seeks to demonstrate how interactions on the class blog illustrated features of an online community. This is an important factor to consider as the learners as well as the researcher voluntarily participated in the blog for over a year. Consequently, the blog can be seen as more of a community of practice than just an online community. As defined by Wenger (2001), a community of practice is “a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavor and engage in a process of collective learning

that creates bonds between them” (p. 2). I posit that the learners’ shared interest in the L2 and their sustained participation in the blog served to facilitate their own L2 writing development as well as foster intercultural awareness. As a result, the following research questions are addressed in this paper:

1. What features from Herring’s (2004) criteria concerning online communities did the blog exhibit?
2. What effect did active participation have on the organizational structure of the learners’ writing?

Methodology

Participants

The participants consisted of seven Japanese adults who worked at a large company. The learners were enrolled in at least one of the two English courses which were taught by the researcher. Weekly face-to-face classes were held from March 2012 to August 2012 and again from November 2012 to January 2013. The group met once a week with the researcher for two hours in the face-to-face classroom located at the students’ company’s office.

The decision to create a class blog was based on two reasons. First, the students had few opportunities to use the L2 outside of the classroom. Therefore, the blog provided an outlet for them to use English in a meaningful setting. Second, the class primarily focused on the development of listening and speaking skills; thus, reading and writing were only used to support conversation in the L2. Given the success of blogs in developing L2 English writing (e.g. Armstrong and Retterer 2008, Vurdien 2012, Wu 2006), the researcher proposed the creation of

a class blog in order for the students to improve their L2 writing skills. The learners gladly accepted this proposal and began writing on the blog in April 2012.

As opposed to focusing on form, the researcher encouraged the learners to focus on meaning to communicate with the other blog members. However, when feedback was given, it primarily consisted of pointing out errors that affected comprehension. As a result, any L2 writing development made by the learners with respect to organizational structure may be attributed to participation in the blog rather than a direct result of the researcher's feedback.

Data

The data for this paper consisted of posts and replies that were written on the class blog between April 2012 and April 2013. (See Table 1 below for a complete breakdown of the number of posts and replies). A post refers to a blog entry that was published on the blog's homepage, while a reply refers to a comment that was left on either a post or another reply. Rather than being given specific topics, students could write about topics that were relevant to their own lives and interests, thereby giving them more authority over the blog.

Although two students contributed regularly to the blog, writing development with respect to textual organization was only demonstrated in the writing of one of them. As a result, the organizational structure portion of this analysis focuses solely on that student's writing. Two of her blog posts are analyzed for improvement in relation to textual organization. These texts were chosen because the posts reflect the organizational development that she made through sustained participation in the blog. In the analysis, each post is divided into paragraphs to illustrate organizational strategies more clearly. A paragraph refers to whenever she used a hard return to start a new line of writing. Subsequently, characteristics of her discourse strategies in each post

are contrasted to show writing development.

Results and Discussion

RQ #1: What features from Herring's (2004) criteria concerning online communities did the blog exhibit?

The blog exhibited features from four of the six sets of criteria created by Herring (2004) to assess an online community. In terms of the first set involving participation, six *core participants* including the researcher were identified. These participants wrote at least two original posts excluding the introductory post at the outset of the blog, as well as replied to a minimum of four posts or replies. Two students (S1 and S2) in particular were highly active on the blog, accounting for four-fifths (79.4%) and over three-fourths (76.4%) of the student-generated posts and replies (Table 1).

Table 1

Number of Student Posts and Replies

Student	Posts	%	Replies	%
S1	31	49.2	110	51.9
S2	19	30.2	52	24.5
S3	5	7.9	4	1.9
S4	6	9.5	20	9.4
S5	2	3.2	26	12.3
Total	63		212	

Table 2

Number of Researcher Posts and Replies

Posts	Replies
26	145

Table 2 above shows the participation patterns of the researcher. His posts consisted of written blog entries, audio podcasts, and links to YouTube videos with typed-out scripts. His role on the blog was to ensure that all student-generated posts received replies. Moreover, he attempted to facilitate intercultural awareness by creating posts which would stimulate critical thinking. An example of this is shown below in an exchange between him and two learners about the Boston Marathon bombings which occurred on April 15, 2013. (Pseudonyms are used hereafter):

Researcher: What are your thoughts on this tragedy? Do you think this kind of attack could happen at a sporting event in Japan? Does this terrorist attack change your opinion about traveling abroad?

Anna: I was saddened by this event too. I have never run a marathon but I could imagine how does runners feel at the goal line. I think this kind of attack could happen at anywhere in Japan especially major metropolitan areas. But this terrorist attack doesn't change my opinion about traveling abroad right now. Because I think this kind of attack can happen anywhere in the world. Why can we live in peace??

Jun: I was also shocked by this news and can't imagine why the criminals did such a

tragic crime. As far as I know, such event didn't occur at a sporting event in Japan. However, it could happen in Japan too. These days I feel shocked that random attacks frequently happen in daily places like station in Japan. Such things are hard to expect and if I care too much, I can't go anywhere. So, this event didn't change my opinion about traveling abroad.

By posing the preceding questions, the researcher was able to engage the learners in a critical discussion of terrorism and its effect on people's lives. Thus, the learners were able to share their honest opinions about the possibility of such an attack occurring in their native country, illustrating their ability to make connections between world issues and problems that could arise in their own lives. One of the learners even linked the events in Boston to "random attacks [that] frequently happen in daily places" in Japan. This exchange demonstrates the importance of connecting global events to students' lives as a way to promote intercultural awareness, thereby empowering learners to become critical thinkers about the interconnected world we all live in.

Concerning the second set of criteria, the group's *shared history* as employees of the same company was extended on to the blog, in which they participated for over a year (as of April 2013). Furthermore, *norms* could be seen in how they replied to each other's blog posts. Rather than beginning with the desired message, the majority of replies began with the first name (FN) or title and last name (TLN) of the author of the blog post. Examples of this are shown below:

1. Jun, I think so too! I want to keep on good terms with old friends through my life.
2. Mr. Suzuki, I am sorry to hear that you couldn't talk to her. How many her books have you ever read?

Additionally, the students' usage of emoticons in their writing illustrated *solidarity*, the

third of Herring's (2004) criteria. Tokaji (1997) found that the use of emoticons was perceived to make communication more intimate, whereas the exclusion of emoticons was viewed as communicating a more serious tone. Below are examples of the learners' usage of emoticons to create solidarity:

1. Yes, I went there last year! You remember well :-D
2. I felt very proud for the honor of the reward and I had many beers with the contributors. :)
3. I didn't go to travel anywhere :-(- but I enjoyed relax time in Obon vacation.

Moreover, the learners' writing reflected *support* in how they used cooperative discourse to promote interaction. In their description of the collaborative learning model, Soller et al. (1998) state that "learning collaboratively means knowing when and how to question, inform, and motivate one's teammates, knowing how to mediate and facilitate conversation, and knowing how to deal with conflicting opinions" (p. 188). In this regard, the students' usage of questions to encourage discussion illustrated their capacity to learn collaboratively as an online community.

Below are two excerpts that demonstrate this:

1. What are your favorite movies? Please recommend them!
2. Does anyone have hay fever? If you have, what do you do to prevent hay fever?

And does any countries have the hay fever season in the world??

The question and request for advice in excerpt six concluded a post about movies. As a result of the learner's cooperative discourse as well as the familiar topic, the thread received four replies, thus demonstrating *reciprocity*.

In excerpt seven, the student wrote about hay fever, an allergic reaction which is fairly common in Japan. Although this post did not receive as many replies (only one), the questions

that were posed invited responses and made it easier for others to engage in discussion. As Wenger (2006) states, this is one of the aspects of communities of practice that differentiates the concept from other groups: “members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other” (p. 2).

The fifth criteria, *self-awareness of a group*, was not exhibited in any of the interactions on the blog. According to Herring (2004), self-awareness “can be manifested in its members' references to the group as a group, and in ‘us vs. them’ language” (p. 353). However, the students’ unanimous decision to make the blog private from other readers suggests that they were cognizant of their identity as an online community. Thus, their choice to restrict outsiders indicates they did have an ‘us vs. them’ mindset, despite the fact that this was not demonstrated in their written language.

Lastly, *emergence of hierarchy*, one of the features in the sixth set of Herring’s (2004) criteria, was reflected in how the members addressed each other on the blog. When replying to a post, the younger members addressed each other using FN only, but they addressed the older members using TLN. According to a study by Brown and Ford (1961), asymmetric use of TLN indicates an unequal relationship, while the use of FN by both parties reflects feelings of familiarity and equality. The following is an interesting example of TLN usage:

1. Suzuki-san, Were all sessions conducted in English?? Anyway, to learn English is so valuable in your work!

Rather than using an English title such as “Mr.” or “Ms.”, the writer chose to use the Japanese honorific “san”, which is used in formal and informal contexts. In this particular case, it could index politeness due to the age difference (over ten years) between him and the learner who wrote the post.

RQ #2: What effect did active participation have on the organizational structure of the learners' writing?

While S1 and S2 both participated frequently in the blog, there was a contrast in how their textual organization developed. As the two excerpts show below, S1's writing demonstrated a shift towards a more native-like organizational structure. On the other hand, S2's textual organization remained relatively consistent, similar to how S1's writing is organized in the following example, which was posted on the blog in April 2012:

S1's 3rd Post from April 2012:

Paragraph 1: I traveled to Shirakawa-go and Takayam[a] in Gifu in this 2 days with my friend from graduate school.

Paragraph 2: Shirakawa-go, which is one of world heritages in Japan, is the place I've been longing for, so I'm very happy to realize my dream :D

Paragraph 3: In Takayama, I enjoyed local food, Hida beef, trout, edible wild plants and so on. Hida beef with Houba Miso was most delicious for me and if you go to Gifu, I recommend you to eat this!

Paragraph 4: I spent very wonderful two days with my friend and now I'm wondering where should I go next!

Only one of the four paragraphs in the post contains more than one sentence. As a result, nearly each sentence in the post is organized as a paragraph. This is in contrast to how S1's writing is organized in more recent posts. Below is S1's 27th post from the blog written in April 2013.

S1's 27th Post from April 2013:

Paragraph 1: I spent very wonderful two days with my friend and now I'm wondering where should I go next!

Paragraph 2: Last week, I went to Nagoya with my friend from high school. Just ten years have passed since we became friends, so this was anniversary trip! We stayed at Nagogyia Marriott Assocai Hotel, which is located above Nagoya Station. We reserved a high grade room, so we could spend really luxurious time! Our room was on 48th floor, so we could enjoy spectacular view from the window. We had drink and some appetizers for free on the concierge floor.

Paragraph 3: We were completely satisfied with the hotel!

Paragraph 4: During this travel, we enjoyed local food in Nagoya. Nagoya has many delicious local foods, so we decided what to eat and where to go in advance. We ate Hitsumabushi at Atsuta Houraiken, fried chicken wings at Torikai, pork cutlet at Suzuya and kishimen noodle at Yoshida.

Paragraph 5: We ate all what we wanted to eat! All dishes were nice and in particular Hitsumabushi at Atsuta Houraiken was perfect! This hitsumabushi was more delicious than any other hitsumabushi I've ever had.

Paragraph 6: We had a great time in Nagoya :-D

While S1 still divided three sentences into separate paragraphs, these sentences served specific purposes rather than simply acting as paragraphs as in the previous example. Paragraph one introduces readers to the topic of the blog post (i.e., a trip to Nagoya), paragraph three sums up S1's positive impression of the hotel, and paragraph five serves as a closing statement about the trip. The rest of the paragraphs (two, four, five) are organized in a logical manner with each having its own clear topic: paragraph two, the hotel; paragraph four, local dishes; and paragraph

five, hitsumabushi.

Although S1's writing development through the blog reflects the impact that web 2.0 tools can have on learner autonomy and L2 writing, the lack of organizational improvement in S2's writing highlights the importance of explicit instruction and feedback in order to improve writing in the L2. The discourse conventions of L2 learners are often significantly different from those in the TL. As a result, students must be given clear and scaffolded instruction regarding not only *what* to write but also *how* and *why*. Doing this gives learners the tools they need to succeed in the classroom, as well as more confidence interacting in the TL culture: "If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier" (Delpit, 1988, p. 283).

Conclusion

As the preceding examples illustrate, the class blog developed into an online community where the learners were able to use the L2 in an authentic setting. According to Matsuda (1997), this is important because L2 writing tasks must "be placed in a real context of writing, involving a discourse community shared with real readers" (p. 58). Therefore, regardless of whether or not teachers choose to incorporate CALL, learners must be given meaningful opportunities to use the L2 with a real audience.

Moreover, the blog displayed characteristics of a community of practice in which the learners were able to share their opinions and experiences and develop their L2 writing as well as intercultural awareness. As Wenger (2006) points out, "This takes time and sustained interaction" (p. 2). As a result, teachers must be aware that a group of learners may not develop into a community of practice unless a significant amount of time is invested in order to cultivate

relationships between the students and create a shared sense of purpose.

At the time of the class blog's conception, the researcher did not envision it continuing beyond the completion of the face-to-face courses. However, the learners' initiative, particularly the active participation of S1 and S2 motivated him to continue contributing to the blog. Consequently, the core student-participants along with the researcher developed into an online community that served as a catalyst for the learners' own L2 writing development and intercultural awareness.

The impact that the students had on the researcher cannot be overstated. Through the blog, he was given his first opportunity to experiment with web 2.0 tools such as the blog itself, podcasts, and YouTube, thus serving as a reminder of how much teachers can learn from their students about second language learning. Although this statement might seem evident, teachers may overlook all the resources, language-related or otherwise, that students bring with them into the classroom. Given this, teachers must provide balanced instruction that incorporates students' strengths and discourse practices while also providing explicit instruction regarding the discourse conventions of the L2.

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Appendix

S1 Blog Posts

April 2012 Post

I traveled to Shirakawa-go and Takayam in Gifu in this 2 days with my friend from graduate school.

Shirakawa-go, which is one of world heritages in Japan, is the place I've been longing for, so I'm

very happy to realize my dream :D

In Takayama, I enjoyed local food, Hida beef, trout, edible wild plants and so on. Hida beef with Houba Miso was most delicious for me and if you go to Gifu, I recommend you to eat this!

I spent very wonderful two days with my friend and now I'm wondering where should I go next!

April 2013 Post

I spent very wonderful two days with my friend and now I'm wondering where should I go next!

Last week, I went to Nagoya with my friend from high school. Just ten years have passed since we became friends, so this was anniversary trip! We stayed at Nagoya Marriott Assocai Hotel, which is located above Nagoya Station. We reserved a high grade room, so we could spend really luxurious time! Our room was on 48th floor, so we could enjoy spectacular view from the window. We had drink and some appetizers for free on the concierge floor.

We were completely satisfied with the hotel!

During this travel, we enjoyed local food in Nagoya. Nagoya has many delicious local foods, so we decided what to eat and where to go in advance. We ate Hitsumabushi at Atsuta Houraiken, fried chicken wings at Torikai, pork cutlet at Suzuya and kishimen noodle at Yoshida.

We ate all what we wanted to eat! All dishes were nice and in particular Hitsumabushi at Atsuta Houraiken was perfect! This hitsumabushi was more delicious than any other hitsumabushi I've ever had.

We had a great time in Nagoya :-D

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