Blogghiamo!
Engaging Students through Autonomy, Authenticity, and Community
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Why Teach Communicative Writing?

How does writing change when we move online? And how do we situate new technologies and their attendant forms of writing within the larger context of teaching students how to communicate through the written word?

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes authentic interaction in the target language as the primary means to promote student language development. In practice, teachers often focus on listening and speaking to the exclusion of writing, as they are often deemed to be less conversational than verbal and aural activities. Blogging serves as a natural addition to the CLT model because it involves authentic, written communication.

Defining “Engagement”

Engagement in writing in the students’ own words:

“Blogging] gave me the chance to write about something I was invested in [and] just practice [what] I’d be looking up in Italy.”

“I liked reading everybody else’s [blogs] … I learned a little bit from everybody’s.”

“The assignments made me do it, but then I got into it and discovered it.”

“This was more about what I found than writing for the sake of writing”

“I liked the blog cause you got to choose [the topic and material] you wanted.”

“I was actually learning, not writing just to prove I can.”

(Focus group comments on Blog Project experience)

To recap: As evidenced by these student comments and the pre- and post-test online surveys, engagement in communicative writing began high and stayed that way over the course of the semester’s work. Analyzing quote content pointed to three key themes that students associated with engagement.

Advantages of Blogs: Autonomy, Authenticity, Community

In describing engagement, students’ comments clustered around these interrelated themes:

• Autonomy: student choice of topic, material, tone; having “their own” blog, strong connections with…
• Authenticity: exposure to Italian materials written in slang and dialect, writing online felt “natural”
• Community: learning culture and vocabulary from classmates, contributing to Italian online forums

Student Responses to Exit Survey Statement:
I consider audience when making grammar, vocabulary, and register choices in my writing.

Student Responses to Exit Survey Statement:
Writing connects me with others.

Cultivating Blended Literacy

Student blog content highlighted what blended literacy looks like in practice: cultural, linguistic, and technological considerations intertwined.

These literacies took the following forms:

• Cultural Literacy: comparisons between American and Italian culture, denotation of frequency, rarity, or absence of cultural forms. In Blog Response B, two students discuss spaghetti westerns filmed in the USA and in Italy with reference to English and Italian titles.
• Linguistic Literacy: interest in non-standard vocabulary, questioning the pervasiveness of Italianized English terms, emerging awareness of punctuation, sentence length as markers of emotion. In Blog Post A, the student voices her interest in the Italian etymology of the word “graffiti,” meaning “little scratches.”
• Technological Literacy: continued blog posting after the project’s conclusion, independent research into other Italian Internet realms (Twitter, Wikis), interest in Italian blog maintenance and computer terms

Objectives

• Characterize students’ evolving conceptions of blogging as a form of communicative writing
• Determine what “engagement” means for students learning this form of writing
• Match blogging with outcomes in student engagement, cultural, linguistic, and technological fluency
• Explain how blogging fits within the traditional frame of communicative second-language skills such as listening and speaking
• Point to the unique affordances that blogging provides within the larger context of writing skills

Methods

As both teacher for ITAL 2090: Intermediate Italian Composition and Conversation and GTRF Researcher, my Spring 2013 class of 9 students, ages 18 to 22, 3 women and 6 men, participated in this case study which included the following:

• Pre- and post-Blog Project online survey, compared means with a paired T-test and thematic coding
• mid-semester focus group semi-scripted interview, analyzed with thematic coding
• blog content, analyzed with thematic coding

“Blogghiamo!” (“Let’s Blog!”)

To start the Blog Project, I asked the students “If you could be an expert in any topic in Italian culture by the end of this class, what would it be?” Choices ranged from contemporary street art to sustainable agriculture to film.

Students then followed that theme across four “realms” of the Italian Internet (blogs, Podcasts, Youtube, Facebook) to craft four different blog posts. They then commented on classmates’ blogs and responded to posts on their own blogs, ultimately writing 4 200-word posts and 8 100-word responses.

Using the rubric below, I assessed their writing for personal input, originality, and consideration of audience.

Conclusions

While the primary goal of the assignment was not necessarily to teach tech literacy, the fact remains that, when we move writing online, traditional conceptions of literacy take on pluralistic forms involving culture and technology as well.

Indeed, a key aspect of increasing technology literacy lies in teaching students how to write with increased attention, as the Internet projects their voices on a far wider stage.

Many returned to descriptions of authentic voice and its effect. Students reported that writing online made them feel as though their voices mattered more and that they were more engaged. It also motivated them to immerse themselves in the technology as a means to achieve the goal of authentic communication.

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