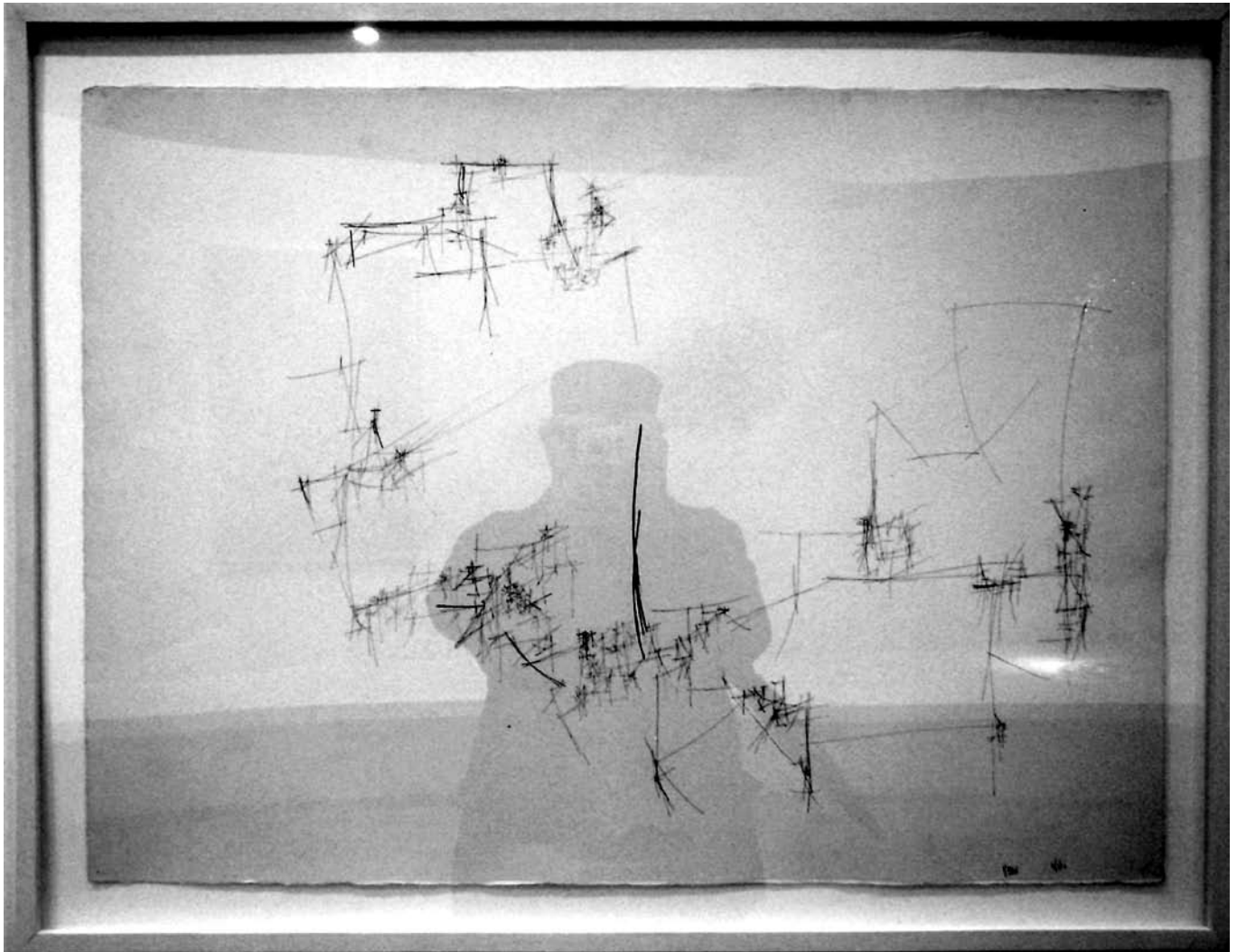


Language learning and ICTS: Blogs and Forums as mediators in collaborative language learning environments

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R E S U M E N

Este artículo presenta algunas aproximaciones teóricas respecto al tema de la tecnología en el aula de clase de lenguas extranjeras. Se exhiben múltiples puntos de vista sobre comunidades de aprendizaje en línea y cómo éstas conllevan al aprendizaje colaborativo. Igualmente, se realiza una discusión sobre tecnologías de la información y la comunicación (TICs) tales como aulas virtuales, blogs y foros como herramientas pedagógicas para la promoción de la interacción entre estudiantes. Finalmente, se introduce el proceso de escritura como una alternativa para promover la escritura con propósitos reales en el aula de clase de lenguas extranjeras.

Palabras clave: comunidades de aprendizaje en línea, aprendizaje colaborativo, aulas virtuales, blogs, foros, proceso de escritura.

A B S T R A C T

This article intends to present some theoretical insights regarding the issue of technology in language classrooms. We present multiple views about e-learning communities and how they entail collaborative learning. Similarly, there is a discussion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) i.e. virtual rooms, blogs and forums as pedagogical tools to promote interaction among students. Finally, we acknowledge process writing as an alternative to encourage real writing in foreign language classrooms.

Key words: e-learning communities, collaborative learning, virtual rooms, blogs, forums, process writing, EFL learning.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the fast growth of technology, our lives are more and more dependent on it to perform different tasks in our multiple roles within society as social beings.

Technology has invaded all fields of knowledge to the point that not many tasks can be achieved without it. Even, the manner in which people learn a language has evolved and it is now more accessible to those willing to learn because of the facilities that technology provides. In fact, learners have benefited from using multiple electronic and technological devices such as mobile phones, multimedia, software, internet, etc., to develop their communicative abilities. In this sense, it is imperative for teachers to keep up with the latest resources to generate more meaningful learning experiences and sceneries. A key element in designing new learning environments is the interest in building communities of learning as it is now seen as the result of a collective construction. Technology offers the possibility to create communities of learning on the cyber space that advocate for more collaborative practices.

E-LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

As mentioned above, technology has played a crucial role in the latest learning trends and approaches. A while ago, technology mainly offered an Instructional System Design (ISD), which viewed learning as a rather passive, linear activity (McConnell, 2006). According to this author, using technology in an isolated way does not provide the necessary input for learners to build up their own knowledge. You (1993, as cited by McConnell, 2006) suggests that technology used isolated can be seen as deterministic (specific learning objectives determine what is to be learned), closed (courses allow students to act within set boundaries) and negative in their feedback (if the predetermined goals are not achieved). Clearly, this approach to technology does not support critical or reflective thinking, viewing learners

as passive users of these tools. Therefore, ISD learning is often considered in terms of cognitive processes and conceptual structures (McConnell, 2006).

However, new trends in technology offer network-based communication tools such as e-mails, electronic mail list, user groups, MOOS, chat programs, blogs and wikis, among others (Robert & Chun, 2008) that aim at promoting more communicative and interactive experiences among users. Thus, in order to make the most out of what technology offers, it is necessary to see it as a methodological tool instead of the methodology to improve students' learning process.

In this line of thought, E-learning community is an approach that not only focuses on students' cognitive aspects but also helps them to learn how to learn. Before moving to the advantages of E-learning groups and communities, it is relevant to define what constitutes a learning community. McConnell (2006) defines it as "a cohesive community that embodies a culture of learning. Members are involved in a collective effort of understanding. The learning community attends to issues of climate, needs, resources, planning, action and evaluation. A key feature of the idea is that responsibility for learning is 'shared' among community members" (p.19). The common characteristic in these communities is that members share knowledge in a particular way for specific purposes. The result of this interaction where members exchange information, expertise and experiences is an approach to collaborative learning.

WHAT IS NETWORKED COLLABORATIVE E-LEARNING?

McConnell (2006) defines Networked collaborative e-learning as "the bringing together of students via personal computers linked to the Internet, with a focus on them working as a 'learning community', sharing resources, knowledge, experience and responsibility through reciprocal collaborative learning" (p.11.). Similarly, Goren-Bar & Koubek (2002) as cited by Laister & Kober assert that collaborative learning is understood as any kind of group learning in which the-

re are meaningful interactions among learners, thus in virtual environments these interactions take the shape of virtual collaborative learning. Bruffee (1984) and Whipple (1987) in McConnell (2006) coincide in saying that knowledge is seen as a social construct in virtual contexts, where the educational process is assisted by social interaction in an environment that facilitates peer interaction, evaluation and cooperation.

What learners gain in collaborative groups can be seen at the 323 studies that were carried out by Johnson and Johnson 1990, 2003; McConnell 2000; Sharan 1990; Slavin et al. 1985; Slavin 1995; Thousand et al. 1994; Stahl 2002 as cited by McConnell (2006), who highlight the achievements of collaborative communities and cooperative work over individualistic learning efforts. They focused their findings on the following indices of achievements; the first aspect is *the mastery and retentions of material*. The results of the studies, previously mentioned, show that the 'pure-collaborative- methods consistently produce significantly higher achievements than those from individualistic learning methods. In addition, McConnell (2006) points out that the *Network collaborative e-learning is based on principles of action learning and action research*, since the focus of study is problem-centred and the students have the possibility to choose how to direct their learning.

A second index is *the quality of reasoning strategies*; the group focuses on strategies to solve a problem and therefore, it is solved faster. Furthermore, individuals working in cooperative work also use elaboration and meta-cognition strategies such as showing awareness and self-control of learning.

Process gains is the third index; the production of new ideas and solutions are generated through group interaction. McConnell adds that collaborative learning is based on critical reflective learning in a social context. The fact that collaborative learning has a social and conversational context makes it possible to clarify ideas and concepts through discussions. It provides validation of individual's ideas and ways of

thinking through conversation, multiple perspectives and arguments. Students can take control of their own learning. It also develops critical thinking and communication skills.

Finally, the last index is called transference of learning and it refers to transferring the knowledge that individuals have acquired in a cooperative environment to situations where they have to work on their own.

In addition, Laister and Kober (2002) point out some other advantages of collaborative learning such as the organisational climate, since each member brings in his/her expertise in order to get the group to learn and work together. Also, long-term learning of a subject-matter is more effective as it is enhanced by collaborative learning of cognitive skills (Vygotsky, 1978; Bossert, 1990) and self-esteem (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Slavin, 1995). Furthermore, they assert that

“research shows that collaborative learning compared to individual and competitive learning scenarios brings students to a higher achievement level, raises their problem solving- abilities, offers cognitive advantages to learners and also has positive influences in enhancing the development of personality traits that are beneficial for future learning or future autonomous or co-operative learning and working” Tozer, et.al. 1995; Webb, N. 1984; Bargh and Schul, 1980 as cited by Laister and Kober, 2002.

Lastly, the authors affirm that collaborative learning allows people to live more autonomous and satisfying lives but still within co-operative environments.

As in every approach, there are factors that influence the performance and success of it. Cooperative learning is not the exception and McConnell considers that there must be a willingness by students to participate in this form of learning; also, learners and teachers must understand the benefits of this kind of learning; the assessment system must support and rewards cooperation, collaboration and active involvement of

the students in their own assessment; finally, the learners have to see in practice that they have power to control their learning (Hodgson and McConnell 1992 cited by McConnell, 2006).

Besides these four factors, Laister and Kober (2002) suggest four critical points. These points, far from been seen as disadvantages, must be taken into account by teachers and tutors when starting a course based on collaborative learning. First of all, teachers may feel that they are not the primary learning process contributor (Kimber, 1994 cited by Laister & Kober, 2002); there is not a suitable evaluation system that fits collaborative learning process, especially the cognitive skills which are emphasised in open and reflective collaborative learning models (Sheridan, 1989 cited by Laister & Kober, 2002). The pressure on the more introvert and those who have difficulties in interacting in groups may cause a falling contribution to the collaborative learning processes. Moreover, it could decrease the level of self-esteem, readiness and capacity for further learning (either collaborative or individual). Additionally, there is danger of opportunism and groupthink to conform with authoritative leaders or to group pressure (Janis, I.L. 1982 cited by Laister & Kober, 2002).

NETWORKED COLLABORATIVE E-LEARNING, A NEW PARADIGM?

The ISD, the advantages of collaborative learning, the concept itself and the crucial factors to bear in mind in this approach make us think that E-Learning in collaborative groups and communities seems to be a new paradigm in the teaching-learning process.

McConnell (2006) provides further details about the characteristics of collaborative learning. First, *collaborative assessment is a necessary component* since it should involve the student, their peers and a teacher. Also, it *involves a community of students because they are responsible for managing their own*

learning and for helping others in theirs. Thirdly, it *supports just-in-time knowledge*. According to McConnell, there are at least two processes that support the development of just-in-time knowledge. The first is 'communication' because the objective is to foster knowledge-building through social interaction. The focus, however, is still on personal learning. The second process is 'knowledge-building', and the focus here is on collective knowledge building from exchanges between students and tutors, and students and students. McConnell (2006) asserts that "this builds on the concept of communication but requires some specific conditions:

- a shift from trivial conversation to an organized debate.
- The expertise of others should be acknowledged
- The debate should not be concerned with taken-for-granted patterns of interpretation or routines.
- The debate requires an incentive in terms of intellectual commitment. Participation in a collaborative task helps maintain efforts to keep up the level of exchanges in the debates.

Lastly, collaborative learning *requires collective responsibilities by the students and teachers*. Students and teachers need to attend to the process of the community.

It is our view that E-learning communities and collaborative learning bring together technology, learners' experiences and expertise to build, not only, meaningful knowledge in members of the community, but also to strengthen and develop personality traits that make them competent in further learning and working environments. However, the success of the approach greatly depends upon students' willingness to interact, learn and share knowledge as well as on teachers who must generate the necessary motivation in students to be active members in the community.

USING VIRTUAL ROOMS, BLOGS AND FORUMS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING PURPOSES

In this section, we define virtual rooms, blogs and forums and present some of the advantages and disadvantages of each web tool so that readers have a real perspective on the ideal way to use them in classrooms.

The growth of internet has generated new types of teaching and learning spaces where teachers and students do not need face-to-face sessions. Some of these spaces are denominated virtual classrooms. They have acquired an important role in the teaching-learning process. Generically, the virtual classroom is a teaching and learning environment located within a computer-mediated communication (CMC) system.

A virtual Classroom is a special synchronous/asynchronous collaborative training and working environment. It provides necessary tools for teachers and learners to conduct training sessions with highly sophisticated, adaptable, extensible and collaborative training strategies. They also allow the distribution of online materials within reach of students in standard formats to print, to publish or to keep (Helic, Maurer and Scerbacov, 2002).

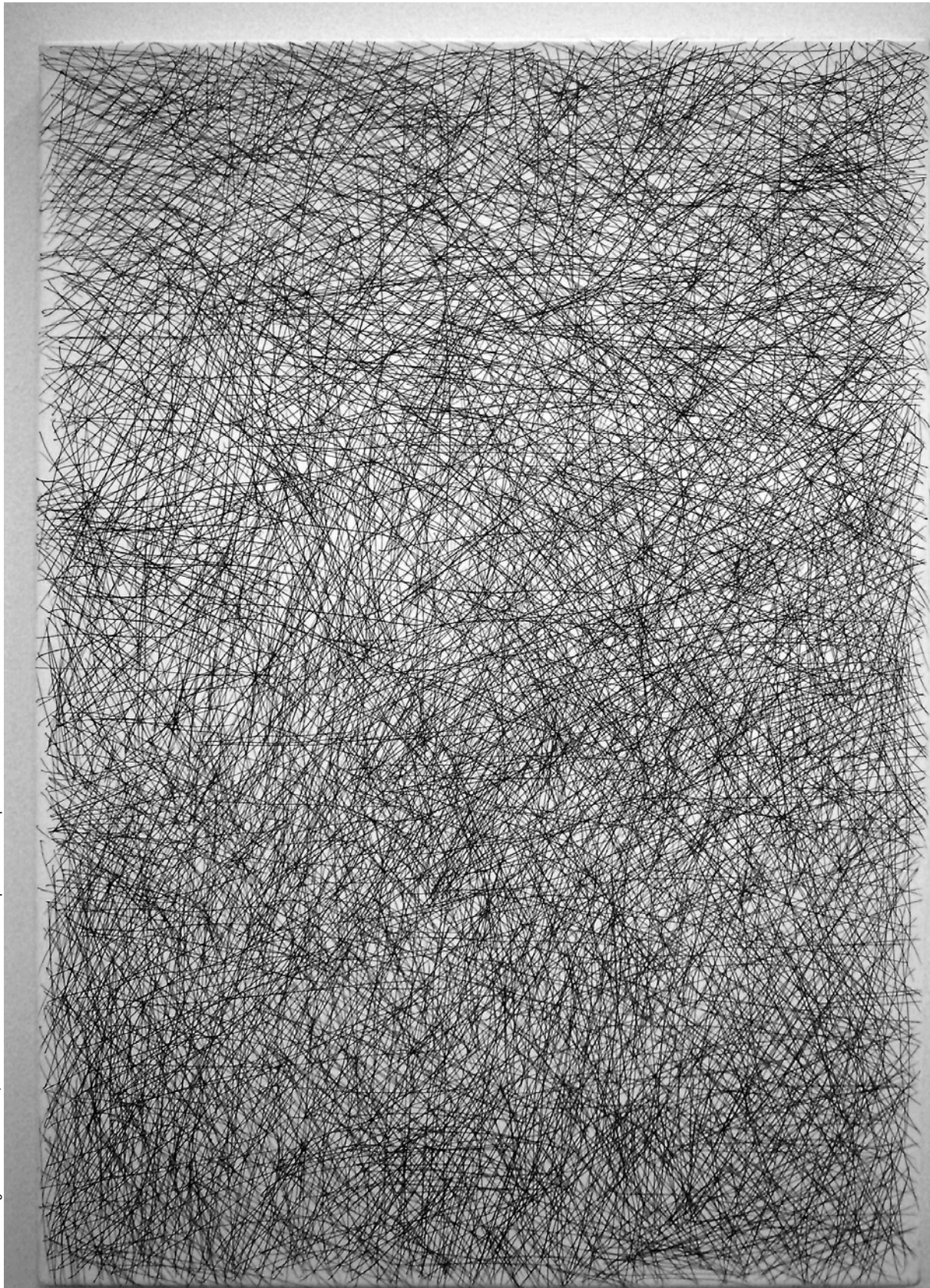
Mohanty and Samanta (2007) present four principles to take into account for successful teaching in the virtual classroom such as dealing with media richness, timely responsiveness, organization and interaction. They also describe some merits of using virtual rooms. Among those, we can find the freedom of expression that virtual environments offer and the promotion of critical skills, leadership, communication, problem solving and ethics. Very often students prefer the delivery mode, and work at their own pace and time to analyze and synthesize learning materials.

Similarly, virtual rooms offer students meta-learning environments. According to Eisenstadt & Vincent (1998: p 64) these environments should provide:

- Orientation: Give structure so that students always know what they should be doing.
- Understanding relationships between tasks and resources: at the global level give an understanding of the overall role of different learning resources in order to use them effectively, and at the bridging level support in bridging between general task-oriented goals and specific activities in various resources
- Tools to establish and maintain new study habits. Support specific needs.
- Confidence building: make things easy to understand, easy to use. Alleviate students' lack of confidence.
- A communication environment enrichable and annotatable by students themselves
- Feedback
- Help students take control of their learning process.

Hiltz (1997) asserts that virtual environments serve the individual needs of the learners according to their age, gender, religion, nationality or disability. A virtual classroom environment can be used for different purposes: Added to face to face sessions to enrich on-campus courses conducted on traditional means, used in distance courses where system use is supplemented by one or two face-to-face meetings, virtual classrooms as the sole means of delivery, with the use of print media in the form of text books or course notes, and multi-media i.e. virtual classroom plus video, audio or audio-graphic media.

Additionally, a virtual classroom grants an integrated working environment for all of its participants. A teacher can create a virtual classroom with a particular goal and a particular teaching strategy for any communicative learning session, which he/she is going to lead. Furthermore, learners participating in the virtual classroom are provided with all the necessary tools to maintain communication with other learners and to work together to fulfill specific tasks. In that sense, learners develop a strong classroom feeling that might in turn promote collaborative learning.



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While virtual learning environments have a vast amount of advantages, there are also some disadvantages described by Mohanty and Samanta (2007). They are as follows:

- Learning in a virtual classroom is not natural and spontaneous, it is rather artificially created.
- Students seem frustrated from the inability to have face-to-face interaction with teachers.
- Learners should be matured, self-motivated computer literate and well versed with the components of virtual classrooms.
- The differences in learning styles and aptitudes result in further discrepancy.
- The system of virtual classroom education is based on technological advancement and any technical fault will create chaos in the education system.

We consider that virtual classrooms should be designed for students to have the possibility of being exposed to similar situations of practical knowledge, so that they can experience learning and become more than simple objects of a qualification or exam.

Alternatively, blogs have become increasingly popular over the last years due to their high accessibility to all kinds of readers and writers and the increment of people wanting to let their views known to others. Its use in classrooms, however, we might say is recent, especially in language classrooms. With regard to blogs in academic courses, Kirk & Johnson (2010) developed a study about blogs in twenty-two combined courses and they reached the conclusion that weblogs (blogs) can be used as an effective pedagogical tool to increase efficiency by the professor, enhance participation and engagement in the course by the students, and create a learning community both within and outside the classroom. Based on the results of their study, they conclude that blogs can be an integral part of course design in order to contribute to both explicit and tacit knowledge.

In a similar fashion, O'Donnell (2005) talks about blogs as pedagogical and disciplinary practices and focuses on evaluation of blogging as a communicative technique in teaching and learning. He goes onto saying that the use of blogs offers new ways of doing and new ways of thinking and that they are not merely a technological tool since they can be used to achieve better results across the curriculum.

O'Donnell (2005) affirms that if students were encouraged to create blogs at the beginning of their studies and continued to use them throughout their academic life, this would become a unique and powerful teaching and learning tool. Likewise, he presents some aspects in which blogging can contribute to students' learning process. First, the blog evolves together with the student's learning and practical experience. Second, students grow into blogging and gradually figure out what it is best for them to blog and how. Next, blogging can become a meta-learning tool that allows students to make connections across subjects. Finally, it has the potential to contribute to the construction of a learning community. We consider that as they become part of various learning communities, they share information, evaluate knowledge, and construct new learning paradigms for themselves.

Adding to this experience, Kirk & Johnson (2010), in their study "*1, 2, 3, Blog: Using Weblogs as a Knowledge Management Tool in the Classroom*", present some of the advantages and disadvantages of introducing blogs into the classrooms (Table 1).

When using blogs, students develop and gain self-confidence to interact with others using a new language, because they can talk about topics they are interested in and use many resources like videos, photographs, audios, etc. to enrich their blogs. However, the success of this activity largely depends on the students and teachers' willingness to interact with one another.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent of institution-run software issues and maintenance schedules • Provides communication medium between in-classroom experiences • Allows “quiet” students a forum for expressing themselves • Format allows instructors to disseminate information quickly and accurately outside of the classroom • Information is available electronically for students to access from home • Lower cost than making hard copies • High comfort level with blogs among • Generation Y students • Promotes learning community between and among students and gives them a feeling of ownership • Students may put more effort toward their writing knowing it will be read by their peers as well as the professor • Gives students skills in obtaining and evaluating knowledge found on the Internet • Allows for teachable moments that might not take place in physical classroom • Students perceive a “cutting edge” factor in their classes from using blogs as a powerful communication tool 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many instructors lack a comfort level with blog technology • Can create more work for the instructor (developing content, reading student blogs and comments) • Students may be uncomfortable sharing information through this medium • Instructors may not understand how to use the blog effectively • Student writing might be more casual and sloppy compared to turning in hard copies • May be seen as not as useful in classes that do not require discussion • Students may resist commenting if it is not made part of their grade • Students must have access to computer and Internet to participate • May be difficult to keep students focused on topics they are to discuss • Students may write what they think professor wants to see rather than their own thoughts and feelings

TABLE 1: ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES TO USING CLASS BLOGS

WE BELIEVE BLOGSHIGHER EDUCATION

Study beyond the level of secondary education. Institutions of higher education include not only colleges and universities but also professional schools in such fields as law, theology, medicine, business, music, and art.

..... Click the link for more information. can promote critical thinking due to the opportunities students have to To create a whole or complete unit from parts or components. See synthesis.

..... Click the link for more information. adopt a position or view about an issue and communicate it clearly to others, making their contributions in multiple forms

such as forums and/or emails. Regarding the forum, it can be said that it is an opportunity to communicate with others without having to agree on the time or place and it does not require face-to-face interaction.

Corich, Kinshuk and Hunt (2004) state that “the discussion forum is one of the more popular technologies used in the delivery of online learning, which has its origins in the early days of the Internet where it was used by academics of American universities to promote discussion and collaboration” (p. 2). They explain that, “unlike text, audio and video conferencing, the discussion forum is an asynchronous technology, which does not require all participants to be online simultaneously. One of the strengths that the discus-

sion forum provides to the online learning community is the ability to allow learners from a variety of time zones to interact at a time that suits the individual learner” (p.2).

Forums are a great alternative to collaborate on projects and problems. Members of a group can post messages and reply to them on the group discussion board. This board is exclusively accessed by the group. When used in classrooms, students can read their partners’ participation and respond, and react to the comments according to their interests, points of view and previous experiences. Nowadays, virtual rooms offer this alternative to encourage students’ communication and collaboration through virtual environments.

Regarding the use of forums for language learning purposes, Clavijo, Hine & Quintero (2008) developed an international collaborative project supported by the virtual forum in which it is seen as an alternative to enhance language learning. They used the virtual room as a learning environment that provides students and teachers with new opportunities to use language to learn, mediated by ICTs. They agree on the premise that language structures need to serve a real purpose for language use in order for it to be learned. The pedagogical activities were done by two groups of initial preparation courses in Colombia and Canada during an academic year. A group was made up of Colombian teacher trainees who were learning English and the second group was learning Spanish in Canada. They exchanged dialogues over seven months. The selection of topics was made by the

students, who arrived at this decision together. Among the topics they discussed were local culture, music and natural disasters.

In that experience, four spaces were created for students to promote learning and interaction: personal blogs, theme-based wikis, social forums and online debates. The students had asynchronous dialogues using different hypermedia such as words, pictures, video, audio clips, music, etc. Students shared information related to culture and personal interests that motivate the creation of communities of interest and practice.

PROCESS WRITING: WRITING TO BE READ IN EFL CLASSROOMS

Writing has been part of English lessons since memorable times. However, some English teachers still have doubts regarding the best way to approach this skill. Regarding this idea, Nicola Holmes explains that even though writing has evolved along with the new teaching approaches, and its role and status have changed in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, it still remains as one of the most difficult areas for teachers and learners to tackle. In this sense, Rogers (2008) points out that writing has been perceived as a static rather than an interactive activity. He adds that students write without having a purpose or an audience to focus on. This statement might become real in some English lessons across different classrooms, when students are asked to write only with the intention of grading their writing performance. It seems like there is not a real purpose

WHY ARE WE NOT USED TO WRITE FOR AN AUDIENCE OTHER THAN THE TEACHER? WRITING CANNOT BE UNDERSTOOD AS AN ACTIVITY JUST FOR TESTING, MEASURING OR GRADING, ESPECIALLY IN LANGUAGE LESSONS. WRITING SHOULD BE SEEN AS A TOOL FOR SELF-EXPRESSION.

for students to write and no clear objective for the teacher as to what to do with such texts; and quite often, the products reach their end in teachers' hands. Tribble (1996) as cited by Holmes affirms that few people can be expected to produce structured texts without going through pre-writing and drafting stages. Tribble (1996) also affirms that this fact is not always made clear to EFL students and many times they are assigned writing tasks with little advice or support on the process to complete such tasks.

However, Holmes asserts that with the development of a more discourse-based rather than grammar-based approach to language teaching and the gradual change to student-centered syllabuses, writing has acquired a higher status and an increase in class time devoted to developing writing practices that have shifted from an emphasis on accuracy (grammar and vocabulary) to a focus on content, genre and discourse.

But why are we not used to write for an audience other than the teacher? Writing cannot be understood as an activity just for testing, measuring or grading, especially in language lessons. Writing should be seen as a tool for self-expression. It is meant to present views, ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., and creativity should guide writers' hands. As Ruiz (2004), influenced by Goodman (1996), Hudelson (1994) and Clavijo (2001), define it, writing is a dynamic and creative process that takes place in context, giving writers the opportunity to express perceptions about their world and what happens around them.

In that line of thought, López (2006) proposes process writing as an alternative to break classroom barriers, as she mentions, and engages both teachers and students as writers and critical readers. Stone (1995 p. 232) defines it as follows: "Process writing is learning how to write by writing". This approach to writing focuses on the process of writing rather than on the final product and follows some stages to reach the end product (Tompkins, 1990 as cited by Stone, 1995). Such

stages are *pre-writing*, *drafting*, *revising*, *editing* and *publishing* (Gardner and Johnson, 1997; Tompkins, 1990).

In the *Pre-writing* stage, we plan and gather information. *Drafting* is defined as the time we spend composing drafts. In the *Revision* stage, we improve the draft. This stage is meant for reading and re-reading the writing piece and share it with a peer or a small group in order to receive feedback and make changes. During the *Editing* stage, we correct mechanical errors; that is, lexical, structural and spelling mistakes. Finally, *Publishing* is the time when we present our writing in its final form to the intended audience. These stages are not necessarily sequential, writers move back and forth among them according to their interests.

Bridging the gap between writing and ICTs

Rogers (2008) proposes that through the use of computer mediated communication (CMC) writing becomes a more socially interactive process where the writer and the reader are able to enter. He differentiates between two kinds of interaction when using technology: Interaction around the computer and interaction through the computer, which deals with CMC. For interaction around the computer to take place, he says, there must be collaboration¹ between peers. In this kind of interaction, students are in constant negotiation of meaning, clarifying, confirming, repeating and noticing (Beatty & Nunan, 2004 as cited by Rogers, 2008, p.203). According to Rogers (2008) these interactive situations around the computer often provide opportunities for scaffolding processes, and the production of comprehensible input and output. These aspects are also part of interaction through the computer (CMC) but on a different level since written conversations are different from oral engagements, depending on whether they are synchronous (chat) or asynchronous (email, blogging, etc.).

In the latter type of written conversations, learners have the opportunity to read and understand the information presented to then draft, edit and produce a response (Rogers, 2008). This type of communica-

tion among peers provides sufficient opportunities for reflecting and interacting due to the length of time they have to reflect and produce a message using the writing stages.

Rogers (2008) concludes that some types of technology, specifically WEB 2.0 technologies i.e. blogs and wikis, thought for interactional purposes, have the potential to facilitate language learning. However, they do not do this by themselves; it is good instructional designs and clear purposes, which make the combination of language learning and ICTs a successful experience.

Using blogs in language learning classrooms can be a two-folded successful activity. On the one hand, learners develop their writing skills using the process oriented approach to writing while constructing blogs, and on the other hand, blogs turn writing into a real activity that triggers interaction among students either around the computer or through the computer. Blogs are meant for interaction thus, learners might see them as an alternative to improve their language skills and at the same time socialize with others, which is the ultimate goal in learning a new language.

In sum, ICTs offer a wide range of opportunities for learning that awaits us to seize them and make them part of our everyday lessons. It is teachers' responsibilities to use them as tools to foster meaningful learning experiences, especially when learners use technologies in their everyday lives.

NOTE

1 For further information on collaborative learning, see the first part of this article.

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