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Accepting the blogging challenge: Modern Greek Language Teaching at Tertiary Level

The late 1990s and the early 2000s marked the advent of Web 2.0, also known as the read/write web, which enabled web users to generate and share their own content online. Blogs were one of the first tools which made it relatively easy to publish on the web in this way (Gillmour, 2006). They came into existence during the late 1990s and were initially referred to as weblogs until the shorter version 'blog' was introduced in 1998 (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008).

Since the early 2000s, the educational merit of Web 2.0 authoring in the format of blogging has been widely promoted. In the higher education context, blogs have been used successfully for a wide range of purposes including to develop learner autonomy and intercultural competence (Lee, 2011); to increase student motivation to learn from peers via online interaction in the form of blog comments (Yang & Chang, 2012); to support students during internships and placements (Chu, Chan & Tiwari, 2012); 'to develop literary, communicative and digital skills' (Neira-Piñeiro, 2015: 555); to create an inclusive, communicative learning environment (Kim, 2012); to achieve reflective learning (Muncy, 2014) and as part of an assessment process in which student blogs were tracked 'with the aim of improving self-reflective processes and providing feedback'(Ion, Cano & Ferrer, 2014: 238).

With regard to university foreign language courses specifically, blogs have been incorporated into courses for a variety of purposes. They have successfully complemented traditional face-to-face environments by providing a 'parallel asynchronous learning space' (De Andrés Martínez, 2012: 209); contributed towards the enhancement and improvement of writing skills (Vurdien, 2013; Jiang, 2012; Cordella & Normand-Marconnet, 2011) and increased students' motivation to write for a broad audience and improved their writing fluency (Lee, 2010).

Our approach to blogging

'The application of blog technology itself does not guarantee the success of learning outcomes' (Lee, 2010: 225). There is no one approach to blogging which has effectively achieved the outcomes listed above. Each instance of blogging in an educational context takes on its own identity according to why it is the chosen tool. Blogs are a very flexible online environment which can be configured to meet a wide range of learning needs.

Flinders University in South Australia offers a fully online Modern Greek program which includes twelve language topics. Within these language topics we have chosen to trial a learner-centred approach to blogging as a means of authentic assessment. We encourage students to write reflectively in their weekly blogs. Our decision to assign an element of assessment to the blogging task is supported by the approach of De Andrés Martínez (2012) who found that it was 'advantageous to assign an element of assessment to the reflective [blogging] task as an incentive for participation' (De Andrés Martínez, 2012: 210). In further support of this approach, a study conducted by Asoodar et al. (2013) found that two of the factors which encouraged students to blog in an English language course were that it was an assessment requirement and that the course facilitator provided comments on the students' blog posts. Taking into account that 'an educational blog is always the result of a teacher-initiated request'(Alm, 2009: 208), with students being asked to produce or participate in a blogging activity as part of their studies, it may be considered somewhat of a challenge to put the learner at the centre. At Flinders University we accepted that challenge and what follows is a description of the characteristics of a learner-centred approach to blogging and its use in our context as an authentic assessment tool. Positive results and identified challenges will be described in the context of a third-year Modern Greek language topic and suggestions for the future will be made.

Learner-centred blogging

The results of a study documented by Lin (2015) support the effectiveness of learner-centred blogging for language learning. But what exactly is a learner-centred approach and how can it be linked to authentic assessment? Kang et al. (2011) describe a learner-centred approach as one in which learners have more control over classroom content with the balance moving away from the teacher making all the decisions about content and towards the student. By involving students in writing about what they think and receiving feedback, learner-centred blogs can empower students (Kang et al., 2011). According to Avci & Askar (2012) it is a characteristic of learner-centred blogging that the instructor gives positive feedback to students regarding their comments and posts comments for discussion. De Andrés Martínez (2012) reminds us that learner-centred principles are linked to experiential learning and personal reflection and can lead to lasting knowledge transfer. This further supports a learner-centred approach to blogging in which the student controls the content and the teacher takes on the role of facilitator.

Blogging as authentic assessment

According to Gray et al. (2010), Web 2.0 authoring must meet the expectations of good practice in assessment generally to be acceptable as part of learning and teaching in universities. Thus, at Flinders University, we have trialled an authentic assessment approach which is characterised by focusing less on the product of learning and more on the process (Lam, Williams et al., 2007; Blake, 2009; Oskoz, 2005; Liang & Creasy, 2004; Leone, Leo et al., 2010). Ishihara (2009) includes reflective writing as one of the characteristics of a learning environment in which the instructor uses authentic assessment tools. Learner-centredblogs which encourage students to reflect on their learning are included in the Modern Greek language topics as a means of authentic assessment. Each student's blog counts towards the 15% allocated for participation. Students are asked to keep a learning journal in the format of a blog and expected to demonstrate quality and consistency of learning reflection and evidence of regular review of learning activities and learning materials. Each student is asked to provide their teacher with a link to their blog. At third year level students are expected to practice writing in Modern Greek to help develop fluency and it is suggested that each blog entry should be at least 3 or 4 relevant sentences.

Reflective blogging in the context of Flinders University Modern Greek language topics supports an authentic assessment approach by facilitating the sharing of information and expectations, providing a platform for written communication with a purpose and by facilitating individual teacherstudent interaction and feedback. The blogging platform also allows the teacher to observe student progress towards the educational aims of the Modern Greek language topic both in terms of the development of their ability to produce complex written texts and by considering how each student reflects on their understanding of the learning materials and their ability to complete the learning activities. This reflective writing can also provide information which is useful when evaluating learning activities and materials.

Positive observations

Dynamic assessment is an authentic assessment approach which is of specific relevance to foreign language learning as it allows for intervention during assessment (Antón, 2009). This intervention can take place synchronously, as is practiced in Flinders University Modern Greek language topics when assessing speaking during virtual classroom sessions² or asynchronously, as is appropriate for the assessment of writing in blogs. Dynamic assessment in our blogging context is focused on improving student learning, using each individual student's knowledge as the starting point and providing individualised feedback to take each student to the next level of language understanding and use. This assessment approach is characterised by the teacher commenting on each student's blog individually. The teacher's comments do not take the format of marking the student's writing as correct or incorrect. Instead, with the intention of taking the student to the next level of understanding, the teacher writes using more advanced grammar, syntax, style and register than the student is currently demonstrating. This encourages the student to move towards a more advanced writing style in the next blog entry and provides a model for him/her to do so.

In order to evaluate the dynamic assessment approach to writing we used the blogs of six students of a third-year Modern Greek Language topic (Beginners level) at Flinders University. In the context of this particular topic, the dynamic assessment approach to writing was successful in im-

proving the grammatical and syntactical structure of some students' writing.³ The individual oral and written feedback increased student motivation and confidence resulting in them becoming more motivated to maintain their reflective blogs without being reminded. This is consistent with the findings of Alm (2009) whose study indicated that reflective blogging increased the learner's sense of autonomy and improved their perception of language awareness and development.

Challenges

It is widely thought that it is important for blogging activities to have a purpose which aligns with course objectives and allows students to demonstrate their progress towards expected learning outcomes (Gray et al., 2010; De Andrés Martínez, 2012 and Lee, 2011). In the context of our Modern Greek language topics the blog is not a place to complete writing tasks or assignments. Students are not assigned a topic to write about or asked to use certain vocabulary or write in a particular genre other than the reflective style. The reflective blogging task is learner-centred because it involves students in writing about their own personal learning and opinions. The task aligns with the expected communicative outcomes of the topic according to which students have the opportunity to reproduce learned writing patterns and structures to reflect on their learning and express their opinions. The criteria by which their reflective blogs are assessed towards each student's 15% for participation in the topic are as follows:

- Quality and consistency of learning reflection.
- Evidence of regular review of learning activities and learning materials.

From the student perspective there is not a lot at stake if they choose not to blog; part of 15% of their total marks for the topic is not a lot to forgo. Thus, it is a challenge to engage students in creating and maintaining the reflective blog. The challenge is to make them realise that blogging in this way has advantages for them, that they are not blogging for the teacher, or to get good marks, but rather to improve their own writing and to have a record of their improvement throughout the duration of their studies. Frequent and meaningful feedback makes students feel supported and encouraged in online environments.⁴

It is early days for many of our students with regard to blogging and it is hoped that they will become more widely engaged in our learner-centred approach to blogging once they come to realise that it is an environment in which they will receive regular individualised feedback. Whilst such intrinsic motivation is preferable in the university setting it cannot be overlooked that students could also be motivated to participate in the reflective blogging activity by increasing the part of their total marks for the topic allocated to the blog. For example, students in Chinese foreign language course responded positively to the 20% assessment weighting allocated to a webdiary task (Jiang, 2012). Likewise, Cordella & Normand-Marconnet (2011) acknowledge that blogging in a foreign language is a complex task for which 20% might even be considered too little to allocate for assessment.

In the early stages of including blogs in Modern Greek language topics students have not been keen to share their blogs with each other or to make their writing public. Blogging in an educational context is a new experience for many of them. They are understandably tentative about receiving feedback from other students. Consequently, in the initial stages, each student's blog has been shared only with the teacher. Students also appreciate receiving the teacher's feedback externally to the blog, as a personal email or, at times, in the face-to-face environment. They were reluctant for their writing to be publicly corrected as comments attached to the blog. A study conducted by Domalewska (2014) indicates that we should not be surprised by the students' reluctance to share their blogs and welcome feedback from each other. The study was conducted in the context of a foreign language course in which blogging was being examined as 'a technologically enhanced support to develop interaction and interrelatedness among learners' (Domalewska, 2014: 1). It was found that students were not motivated or confident to interact with each other in the foreign language and that they felt uneasy about commenting on other students' blog posts, preferring to use their native language to comment, share experiences and develop rapport (Domaleska, 2014). Findings such as this will need to be taken into account as we consider the future of blogging in our Modern Greek language topics. Should students be asked to share their reflective blogs and encouraged to read and make comments on each other's blog entries or would a class blog with shared access and a different purpose be a more appropriate platform for this? The findings of Lee (2011) are useful in this regard

and indicate the value of different kinds of blogs for different purposes. Lee (2011) found that 'students perceived that contributing to different types of blogs empowered them to become autonomous learners as they made the informed choice of being self-regulated by working individually and collaboratively with others' (Lee, 2011: 96).

Many of those who write about blogging in the higher education context acknowledge that some students might have a limited knowledge of blogging technology. Gray et al. (2010) make the point that, despite being of the NetGeneration, some students might need practice and support to begin using tools such as blogging websites and that deeper learning, such as that which is required in a university setting, cannot take place if students are required to spend a lot of time learning the basics of a tool. Given that some students of Flinders University Modern Greek topics were reluctant to blog online and preferred to submit a paper version of a reflective journal we must consider it a possibility that some of our students need more practice and support to create and maintain a reflective blog.

An analysis of the content in each of the six students' blogs suggests that they were challenged by the task of writing reflectively in Modern Greek. It is possible that their linguistic proficiency was not sufficient for them to do so confidently. Thus, it is a challenge to provide the guidance they need to be able to do this. Most of the students wrote recounts of what happened in face-to-face sessions or described the learning materials used (See Appendix 2). This was in response to the guidance provided by the teachers and was seen as an appropriate starting point. Some students wrote more detailed reflections, recounting what they had learned and describing what they could now do as a result of their learning (See Appendix 3). There was little reflective writing in terms of what the writer enjoyed, found difficult or was looking forward to and only one student reflected on the standard of his/her performance, writing about mistakes and suggesting how practice might improve his/her performance (See Appendix 4).

Discussion and recommendations

Reflective blogging is definitely worth pursuing as a means of authentic language assessment. Flinders University aims to produce graduates who can apply knowledge, communicate effectively, work independently and collaboratively and connect across boundaries. Reflective blogging,

as described in this paper, can go a long way towards developing these qualities. However, blogging as an assessment task poses many challenges. The expectation that students would blog reflectively, writing in Modern Greek, is one of these challenges. We discovered that blogs were not highly effective as an assessment tool because many students did not create or maintain them. With the blogging task only worth part of 15% of each student's total marks for the topic it is probable that the students who did not participate preferred to focus on other more highly weighted assessment tasks.

Bartlett-Bragg (2003) describes a 5-stage blogging process which provides a useful framework for considering the future of reflective blogging language topics. These steps can be summarized as follows:

Step 1 – Create a blog

Students create a blog in class and start recalling and recording learning events and expressing their feelings. Teachers encourage participation and provide structured questions as guides. Students share the addresses of their blogs (optional). Writing is not assessed in terms of quality or quantity but the teacher 'drops by' to read blogs occasionally.

Stage 2 - Introspection

Some class time is allocated to blogging. Students continue to record learning events. They begin to pay more attention to their feelings and start to evaluate their learning experiences. The teacher provides structured questions as a guide. The students start to move away from consciously writing for the teacher and start to consider a wider audience.

Stage 3 - Reflective monologues

Students become more aware of the reflective process and are less reliant on the structured questions. Students take more responsibility for their entries based on suggested topics for consideration, and are encouraged to predict future learning based on past experiences. Some class time is still allocated to blogging but students begin to make more frequent entries to their blog during the week. Some students will resist reflection and deep learning. This may be noted in their blogs. The expression of emotions relates more to learning events and is not directed to the teacher and other readers. Students show signs that they are writing for themselves and some students start to write very thoughtful short paragraphs, sometimes posing questions.

Stage 4 - Reflective dialogue

No classroom time is allocated for blogging but classes discuss possible blogging topics and issues. Students learn to reflect more deeply taking into consideration their style of expression and intended audience. They are expected to be self-directed bloggers and responsible for their own content. As a result, some students stop blogging and might need to spend more time at Stage 3. Students have developed their own blogging voice or style.

Stage 5 – Knowledge artefacts

Students no longer publish personal knowledge only but are able to reflect on knowledge and provide guidance to others to enhance their learning. Students start to read and comment on each other's blogs and are aware of the broad reach of blogs as authors and readers. Their writing shows critical thinking and deep reflection.

Reflecting on our blogging experience and considering the literature about blogging and this five-stage process in particular, the following recommendations can be made for the next trial of reflective blogging in Flinders University Modern Greek language topics.

- Allocate at least a 20% assessment weighting to the reflective blogging task.
- Continue to provide individual personalised feedback to students.
- Make sure students are familiar with blogging technology i.e. they are able to create and maintain a blog.
- Provide students with learning activities and materials to increase their proficiency to write reflectively in Modern Greek.
- Allocate some class time to blogging for most of the semester.
- Provide structured questions to guide students in the initial stages
 of their blogging experience and facilitate discussion of possible
 blog topics and issues once questions are no longer required.
- Encourage students to read and comment on each other's blogs once they are blogging at an advanced reflective level.

It is anticipated that an approach incorporating the above elements and keeping in mind Bartlett-Bragg's (2003) 5-stage blogging process as a framework will result in a more effective use of blogging as an assessment tool and will also enhance students' written skills in Modern Greek.

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Appendix 1

Thursday, 26 March 2015

Week 4

Τέταρτη εβδομάδα

Αυτή την εβδομάδα, αρχίσαμε ένα νέο θέμα που ονομάζονται φυσικά φαινόμενο Μάθαμε για τσουνάμι, ηφαίστεια και άλλες φυσικές καταστροφές. Νομίζω ότι τα ελληνικά μου έχουν σίγουρα βελτίωση αλλά έχω ακόμα πολλά να κάνω πράξη.

Week 5

Late post again! I am falling way behind with these ... -_-

Πέμπτη Εβδομάδα

Αυτή την εβδομάδα συνεχίσαμε να μελετάμε τα φυσικά φαινόμενα. Μιλήσαμε για τα δάση και τα πολλά είδη φυτών και δένδρων που έχουν εκλείψη πλέον. Συζητήσαμε για τις δασικές πυρκαγιές και πως αυτές επηρεάζουν την Γη. Μάθαμε επίσης για τα καιρικά φαινόμενα που ονομάζονται Ελ Νινιο και Λα Νίνια. Αυτή την εβδομάδα η γραμματική ήταν δύσκολη.

Monday, 11 May 2015

Week 6

Έκτη Εβδομάδα

Αυτή την εβδομάδα συζητήσαμε για την διατήρηση της άγριας ζωής και πως την αντιμετωπίζουν οι άνθρωποι στην γή. Επίσης, μάθαμε για τους σεισμούς και τι πρέπει να κανουμε αν γίνει ένας σεισμός. Είχαμε και το δεύτερο τέστ αυτή την εβδομάδα. Δεν ήταν δύσκολο αλλά μου φαίνεται έκανα ένα ηλίθιο λάθος. Σε ένα ερώτημα, έπρεπε να αλλάξουμε το ρήμα στον μέλλοντα χρόνο. 'Αλλαξα τα ρήματα σωστά αλλά δυστυχώς τα άλλαξα όλα στο πρώτο πρόσωπο. Κατάλαβα το λάθος μου αφού τελείωσα το τέστ!

In this example, it is obvious that the length of the entries is increasing every week.

The student was encouraged, both orally, in class, and in writing, with comments on the actual blog.

The interesting thing about this blog is that by week 6 the student is reflecting on his/her learning process and makes notes on things he/she should and could do better.

Appendix 2



In this blogging the student is mentioning and writing mainly about what he/ she learned each week and was taught during the lecture. He/she also mentions his/her feelings about the learning process.

Appendix 3

Posted on November 3, 2015

Αυτή την εβδομάδα στα Νέα Ελληνικά, Μάθαμε για τη σημερινή τέλεια, τέλεια το παρελθόν και το μέλλον τέλεια τεταμένη. ΕΧW που χρησιμοποιούνται στην παρουόσα τέλεια εταιμένη. ΕΧW που προηγούμενες τέλεια και fa eixa στο μέλλον τέλεια τεταμένη. Στη συνέχεια πήρε σε ξεύγη και έγραψε ένα διάλογο χρησιμοποιώντας λέξεις από το λεξιλόγιο. Στη συνέχεια πέρασε από το λεξιλόγιο και την εξοικείωση με τις λέξεις που μπορεί να μην γνωρίζουν. Στη συνέχεια έπρεπε να κάνει τους διαλόγους χρησιμοποιώντας διαφορετικές λέξεις. Έχουμε τελειώσει το μάθημα με τις συνεχείς προπόσεις Αν thylosei ο Γιάννης fa

Posted in Uncategorized I Leave a reply

Semester 2 Modern Greek Week 10

Posted on October 13, 2015

Αυτή την εβδομάδα στα Νέα Ελληνικά, μπορούμε εν συντομία μίλησε για τρία συνεχή αξιολόγηση. Στη συνέχεια κοίταξε μια συνομιλία ανάμεσα σε δύο ανθρώπους να μιλούν για διακοπές και πού πάει. Μάθαμε επίσης για την προ Χριστού και μετά Χριστού στα ελληνικά. Έμαθε για πρώτη, δεύτερη, τρίτη αποδεχθεί τις ελληνικές παραλλαγές. Κοιτάξαμε ένα πέρασμα για την πρωτεύουσα της Μακεδονίας, Πετράλωνα. Μάθαμε επίσης για το Δίον τον τόπο όπου ο Μέγας Αλέξανδρος έκανε sacrifices. Spilaio petralovnan ένα αρχαίο σπήλαιο στην Ελλάδα και κοίταξε. Κοιτάξαμε των Ολυμπισκών Αγώνων και πήγε μέσα από το λεξιλόγιο. Στη συνέχεια ανέφερε αν το κάναμε ή δεν θέλουν οι Ολυμπισκοί Αγώνες να συμβεί στην Ελλάδα. Ακούσαμε ένα ελληνικό ροκ μουσικό βίντεο, ήταν ιδιαίτερης σοβαρότητας. Έχουμε τελειώσει το μάθημα, κοιτάζοντας την γραμματική, fa exeis, fa ΕΧW. Όπως και στο παρελθόν ενεστώτα και το μέλλον ενεστώτα. Σε συνέχεια με μερικά παραδείγματα σε ποινές.

Posted in Uncategorized | Leave a reply

Semester 2 Modern Greek Week 2

Posted on August 5, 2015

Αυτή την εβδομάδα στα Νέα Ελληνικά Διάβασα δύο διαφορετικές passsages του κειμένου και έγραψε κάτω από λέξεις που δεν κατάλαβα. Μάθαμε κυρίως για την τρίτη ηλικία, όπως σε άτομα που είναι ηλικιωμένοι και τα προβλήματα που περνούν από εκείνη την ηλικία. Έγραψα επίσης μία πρόταση χρησιμοποιώντας τρία λόγια για τους ηλικιωμένους και έγραψε πολλά νέα λέξεις που δεν ήξερα. Εξετάσαμε επίσης δύο βίντεο σχετικά με το Λόττο και τη γραμματική για την εβδομάδα.

Posted in Uncategorized | Leave a reply

Semester 2, Modern Greek Week

1

Posted on July 31, 2015

Αυτή την εβδομάδα στη σύγχρονη ελληνική, Ήμουν το μόνο άτομο στην τάξη δεδομένου ότι ήταν μόνο εγώ, έχω διαβάσει τις σκέψεις για δύο ανθρώπους να συνομιλεί, και ζήτησε Αντωνίου για οποιεοδήποτε λέξεις που δεν ήξερα Πήρα επίσης να κάνετε ερωτήσεις όπως το πώς να πω τα εκατοντάδες, τα στοιχεία και άλλες λέξεις που δεν ήμουν σίγουρος για τότε που ήμουν η μόνη στην τάξη. Ας ελπίσουμε ότι την επόμενη εβδομάδα θα υπάρξει ένα υψηλότερο ποσοστό συμμετοχής

In this example the student seems to be very keen from the beginning. The entries are long. From the first entry, he/ she reflects on the difficulties he/she found. The problem is that even though there is a bit of progress in language, he/she did not pay a lot of attention to the comments. The result is that there was no dramatic progress grammatically and syntactically.

Appendix 4

Monday, 11 May 2015

Week 6

Έκτη Εβδομάδα

Αυτή την εβδομάδα συζητήσαμε για την διατήρηση της άγριας ζωής και πως την αντιμετωπίζουν οι άνθρωποι στην γή. Επίσης, μάθαμε για τους σεισμούς και τι πρέπει να κανουμε αν γίνει ένας σεισμός. Είχαμε και το δεύτερο τέστ αυτή την εβδομάδα. Δεν ήταν δύσκολο αλλά μου φαίνεται έκανα ένα ηλίθιο λάθος. Σε ένα ερώτημα, έπρεπε να αλλάξουμε το ρήμα στον μέλλοντα χρόνο. 'Αλλαξα τα ρήματα σωστά αλλά δυστυχώς τα άλλαξα όλα στο πρώτο πρόσωπο. Κατάλαβα το λάθος μου αφού τελείωσα το τέστ!



Week 5

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In this example, we can see the progress both in syntax and in grammar within a week. The student started uploading lengthy entries reflecting on his/her learning.

Posted in Uncategorized | Leave a reply

Notes

- 1 At Flinders University a topic is a subject that forms part of your course. A full-time first year student will normally enroll in 4 topics in each semester, depending on their course requirements.
- 2 This approach to speaking assessment is explained more fully in our previously published paper (C. Wright, A. Litinas, M. Palaktsoglou and M. Tsianikas, 2015) Modern Greek at tertiary level: applying innovative methods of effective assessment and delivery online, in: M. Tsianikas, G. Couvalis and M. Palaktsoglou (eds), "Reading, interpreting, experiencing: an inter-cultural journey into Greek letters", Modern Greek Studies (Australia and New Zealand), 251-274.
- 3 Refer to Appendix 1 for an annotated student work sample.
- 4 Brooke, 2013; Deusen-Scholl, 2015; Ernest, Heiser & Murphy, 2013; Liu, 2013; Tudini, 2015 and Zumor & Wahed, 2015.
- 5 Asoodar et al., 2013; Bartlett-Bragg, 2003; De Andrés Martínez, 2012 and Lee, 2010.
- 6 Net Generation is a term used to refer to young people who have grown up in an environment in which they have been constantly exposed to computer-based technology.

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