

# Process Writing and the Internet: Blogs and Ning Networks in the Classroom

In contrast to the product approach to writing, which is based on studying and replicating textual models, the process approach involves multiple and repeated steps that compel the writer to closely consider the topic, language, purpose for writing, and social reality of an audience. Although there are variations on how to use the process approach in the writing classroom, most share the basic principles of prewriting, peer and teacher feedback, and revision (Ferris and Hedgcock 2005). The process approach to writing is advocated by researchers and educators who teach writing in the first language (Calkins 1994; Boscolo 2008) as well as by English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) professionals (Grabe and Kaplan 1996; Raimes 1998; Campbell 1998; Reid 2001; Liu and Hansen 2002; Nation 2009).

According to Ferris and Hedgcock (2005, 8), “as a transactional activity, writing represents a process that must

be undertaken with the reader’s background knowledge, needs, interests and ideologies in mind.” The process approach reflects the fact that writing involves a relationship between the writer and his or her audience that produces an awareness of authentic social situations and an affinity to collaborate with others. Therefore, the process approach fits in with the *socioconstructivist* view of education that suggests successful learning is enhanced when it is based on the needs, worldview, and sociocultural background of the learner. In other words, student-centered teaching that makes learning relevant to students and their social realities results in greater interest, involvement, and confidence in language learning. For this reason, it is important to structure a writing curriculum around the discourse genres that correspond to those situations where students will use English communicatively in their personal, academic, and professional endeavors (Reid 2001).

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Among the many strategies and tools to incorporate meaningful activities into the writing curriculum, the use of the Internet stands out for its ability to create conditions for idea generation, research, and collaboration, especially with teenage learners who are accustomed to interacting online with social media. Social networking that is targeted to ESL/EFL writing instruction also offers great potential to integrate the additional skills of reading, speaking, and listening. Some examples of software that allows people to connect, to communicate, and to collaborate online are blogs, wikis, and podcasts (Dudeney and Hockly 2007). These platforms are interactive and multimodal by nature and place texts, images, videos, and audio recording in one location visited by a community of language learners.

In addition to discussing the benefits of the process approach to writing, this article will illustrate how teachers can take advantage of some of the latest Internet technology to promote writing tasks in the ESL/EFL classroom. Two specific lessons that were applied in an advanced skills-integrated English course will exemplify how to supplement regular classroom activities with the interactive and multimodal features of two online social media platforms—a blog and a Ning network.

### **The process approach to writing**

A major goal of ESL/EFL writing pedagogy is to engage students in interactive and social, rather than individual, processes of planning, drafting, and revising texts of different genres that will serve authentic communicative purposes. According to numerous second language researchers and educators, ESL/EFL writing pedagogy should include (1) a large amount of writing practice, (2) several varieties of texts and motivating tasks, (3) opportunities for revision and feedback, and (4) models of acceptable texts (Grabe and Kaplan 1996; Raimes 2002; Grabe 2001; Kroll 2001; Reid 2001; Seow 2002; Sokolik 2003; Nation 2009).

According to Hedgcock (2005), the procedural aspects of writing instruction for students are often insufficient. In particular, the writing assignments in textbooks published by international publishers do not always

provide the information students need in order to develop effective writing strategies. Teachers should therefore plan their instruction to encompass all the stages of the writing process: brainstorming for ideas that are related to students' lives and about which they will have something to say; pre-writing that uses graphic organizers and outlines to show students how to plan their writing; drafting, revising, and asking for feedback through peer review; and using assessment rubrics that are shown to students before they produce their texts to make expectations clear. Instructors should always keep in mind that writers do not perform these stages linearly, but rather like in a pinball game (Campbell 1998), in which the ball moves back and forth.

### **Modeling written genres**

According to Hyland (2003), the identification of different writing genres with specific social contexts complements process writing. According to Bakhtin (1992), genres have forms that are quite fixed, which indicates that ESL/EFL students must receive explicit instruction regarding the discourse genres or types they will have to produce (Cope and Kalantzis 1993). Therefore, the introduction of written genres should include *scaffolding instruction*, which consists of strategies to make the writing process more accessible, especially for students who are learning the skill for the first time. This is accomplished by clarifying the purpose for writing, relating the topic to the student's interests, using graphics to create a visual context, and establishing a context for free expression and collaborative peer review.

It is also important to raise awareness by exposing students to one or two model texts so they begin to identify the rhetorical features of different genres, such as persuasive, expository, and narrative texts. Instructors should not assume that students will pick up rhetorical patterns and conventions incidentally, and so they should be taught. One way to accomplish this is through the technique of *noticing* (Schmidt 1990), which can be used to stress linguistic aspects of a text by underlining, highlighting, or using another emphatic method to ensure that students focus on and learn the rhetorical features of a certain genre.

### Social use of the Internet

The Internet can be used in a variety of ways to support process writing as students develop their writing skills in various genres. Although the Internet is a naturally motivating tool and many young learners are familiar with using information technology, it is important for teachers to be active facilitators when the Internet is used for language learning. Since the Internet is multilingual, an obvious issue is how to make sure that students use English for their online tasks. In addition, teachers who have never used blogs or social media for the development of process writing might feel lost about what steps to take to make the activities interactive and motivating. Fortunately, these instructors can consult widely available and user-friendly online resources to make the technology accessible. For example, blogs and Ning networks are two widely used online platforms that can be easily researched and adapted to all stages of the process approach.

### Blogs

A blog (a blend of the words *web* and *log*) is a web page with regular diary or journal entries that incorporates different postings by authors and responses to these posts by an audience. According to Bloch (2008), blogs are an ideal resource for the teaching of writing because they:

- are easy to create and maintain;
- encourage students to be more prolific writers;
- make writing easier to share;
- support group work, feedback, and collaboration;
- provide opportunities to write outside of class;
- can link to related texts and multimedia;
- provide students with a sense of authorship; and
- can be used in various ways by the instructor.

Blogs are easy to set up and posts are simple to comment on. Two websites that support the free creation of blogs are [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) and <http://wordpress.com>. (Richardson [2006] is an excellent resource for teachers who need help setting up and using blogs.)

### Ning

An alternative to a blog is a group social networking site such as Ning ([www.ning.com](http://www.ning.com)). Ning provides more tools than a blog; it is a place where smaller groups of users can create their own profiles, upload videos and photos, and write their own blogs. Originally, Ning was free of charge, but now (after a free trial) there is a small monthly fee for a site with up to 150 members. A free alternative to Ning is Grouply ([www.grouply.com](http://www.grouply.com)), which offers social networking tools similar to those provided by Ning.

### Two writing tasks using blogs and Ning

Following are two writing tasks for separate genres that were carried out during a semester with two groups of teenage students in an advanced EFL course. Both tasks illustrate how to combine the process approach to writing with the multimodal features of Internet technology.

#### Writing task 1: Blogging an argumentative essay

The first writing task uses a class blog in a collaborative effort to compose a short argumentative essay.

#### Step 1: Topic selection

The curricular guidelines of the course required students to write a text in the argumentative genre. It is well known that Brazilians are great fans of soccer; therefore, this sport topic was selected both for its motivational appeal and to quickly activate the students' abundant background knowledge of the subject.

#### Step 2: Pre-writing activities

For purposes of developing a controversial topic related to soccer, a blog was created with the title "The Best Soccer Players and Their Salaries." The blog post contained links to three additional Internet texts about the topic. Pre-selecting the links enables the teacher to monitor how students paraphrase the research. Eventually, the teacher can encourage students to search on their own for additional information; however, it is always important to teach students to judge the authenticity and reliability of the material they find on the Internet.

Providing links to different articles is important because *intertextuality* is associated

with the advancement of reading and writing development (de Beaugrande 1997). This principle asserts that the introduction of multiple texts related to an overall theme offers different perspectives and deepens understanding. Therefore, students were required to read the different texts to find out how much the most popular soccer players currently earned. After reading, students received a handout and worked in pairs to complete the following activity: "Talk with your partner about whether you think the most popular soccer players *do* or *do not* make too much money for what they do. Write "Yes" or "No" below and then provide three pieces of evidence to support your point of view."

Student pairs used the school computer lab to access the websites, discuss the question with their partner, and post three pieces of evidence on the blog to support their argument. This task required students to synthesize the ideas in the three linked texts and to find evidence to back up their "Yes" or "No" conclusion.

### Step 3: Drafting an introductory paragraph

During the next class, students split into pairs and received two handouts; the first one contained the student-generated evidence from the blog posts made in the computer lab during the previous class, and the second one was a description of various ways to structure an argumentative text. The students were asked to sort the arguments into two categories, depending on whether they agreed with (PRO) or disagreed with (CON) the statement. At this point students were ready to begin drafting an introductory paragraph for their argumentative essay.

To help students write an essay, instructors should provide guidelines on how to write the introduction, the body of the paper, and the conclusion. For example, the evidence of an argumentative essay typically appears in the body of the text, and students need concise information to understand the rhetorical patterns of this particular genre. Helpful instructional material about all types of genres is available from the online writing centers of various educational institutions. This information also makes the assignment more authentic because students feel that they are obtaining guidelines from the same sources used by ESL students in the United States.

(It is suggested that only educational website links with the ".edu" domain be used for this step, due to their greater reliability.) Figure 1 contains the information that was posted on the blog regarding (1) the development of the introductory paragraph and (2) the structure of an essay in the argumentative genre.

#### 1. Composing Your Introductory Paragraph

First, you are going to write the introduction to your argumentative essay. To write an effective introduction, check out the tips in these websites:

- <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/GRAMMAR/intros.htm>
- <http://homeworktips.about.com/od/paperassignments/a/introsentence.htm>
- <http://elc.polyu.edu.hk/cill/eap/essayintrotype.htm>
- [www.writingcentre.ubc.ca/workshop/tools/intro\\_p.htm](http://www.writingcentre.ubc.ca/workshop/tools/intro_p.htm)

#### 2. The Structure of an Argumentative Essay

You have already thought about and listed the PROS (agree) and CONS (disagree) concerning the statement that soccer players make too much money. You have also considered three ways to organize your argument, provide evidence, and refute opposing ideas in an argumentative essay. Here is the link to the complete version of the handout you received:

[www.buowl.boun.edu.tr/students/types%20of%20essays/ARGUMENTATIVE%20ESSAY.htm](http://www.buowl.boun.edu.tr/students/types%20of%20essays/ARGUMENTATIVE%20ESSAY.htm)

**Figure 1. Internet sources that support the composition of an argumentative essay**

At this point, students drafted their introductory paragraphs following the suggestions provided in Figure 1. These suggestions included examples of how to use the introductory paragraph to establish a clear position one way or the other, and to reserve the following paragraphs to offer evidence for their argument and to refute the opposite claim.

### Step 4: Peer review of the introductory paragraph

After composing their introductory paragraphs, the students formed pairs and exchanged papers for peer revision. Peer revision is a critical element in process-writing pedagogy because it (1) makes the writing process interactive and collaborative (Liu and Hansen 2002); (2) gives the writer a sense of audience (White and Arndt 1991); (3) allows feedback that is different from the teacher's (Campbell 1998); and (4) orients students to accept constructive criticism (Grabe and

Kaplan 1996). If enough computer resources are available, students can post their introductory paragraphs, and peer review can take place on the blog itself. However, because my institution has one computer lab that is shared by around twenty teachers, it was not practical to monopolize the lab for two classes in a row. Another alternative is to ask students to give peer feedback at home, but this is not always feasible if students do not have computers or if parents limit the number of hours a day their teenagers can use them. Therefore, students used the traditional “paper and pencil” mode to write their introductions and exchange them for peer revision.

Effective peer review activities need to be guided (Kroll 1991); therefore, the reviewer was told to pay attention to two aspects:

1. Did the writer make it clear whether he or she is agreeing or disagreeing with the thesis that soccer players make too much money?
2. Did the writer refrain from presenting his or her arguments in the introduction, the purpose of which is to introduce the topic and state the thesis?

This peer review activity made the students much more aware of the role the introduction plays in an argumentative essay and also raised their awareness to the fact that introductory paragraphs in English are more to-the-point than in Portuguese, a romance language with a more indirect rhetorical style.

#### **Step 5: Drafting and revising the argumentative essay**

After writing their introductory paragraphs and obtaining feedback from their peers, students were now ready to write their argumentative essays. Students used the handouts and the information that was posted on the blog (see Figure 1) for guidance on how to pattern their argumentative essays. This information contains examples on how to defend a thesis, and it illustrates three patterned formats to support an opinion and refute opposing ideas with concrete evidence, which could be facts, statistics, or expert opinion. If time permits, a draft of each student’s essay should undergo the peer review process. This allows a partner to assess the strength of the evidence and refutation, and will help students produce convincing essays for the teacher, who will com-

ment on and return them before the final draft is produced for a grade. When the essays were finished, they were posted on the class blog.

#### **Step 6: Sharing written production**

An aspect that jeopardizes writing assignments in schools is the fact that the students’ audience is often only the teacher. Therefore, as a way to provide more authenticity to this writing task, a post-writing stage was added. After students posted their essays on the blog, they returned to the computer lab and each student commented on his or her partner’s essay. Because the drafting process had already ended, the purpose of the comments was to focus on the content of the essay, and not the form. For example, peers commented on whether they agreed or disagreed with the point of view stated by the author. As students become more familiar with peer revision, it is appropriate to give feedback on both form and content and make helpful suggestions about how the writer could improve the text.

This writing activity can be easily adapted to different cultural contexts and topics. For example, in a country where basketball is more popular than soccer, the focus can be on basketball players’ salaries; or, in a lesson on celebrities, the teacher might want to follow the same procedure to help students develop an argumentative text about movie stars’ salaries.

#### **Writing task 2: Using Ning to compose an expository paragraph**

The second writing task used Ning in a collaborative effort to compose a short expository compare-and-contrast paragraph.

#### **Step 1: Topic selection**

For this lesson, students were required to study a technology topic. The writing assignment proposed in the book was a paragraph stating the advantages and disadvantages of using RFID (radio frequency identification) chips on people. Since this topic would likely lead to boring paragraphs that were too similar, a decision was made to replace it with a more stimulating and relevant topic on the comparable advantages and disadvantages of different types of smartphones.

#### **Step 2: Pre-writing activity**

For this class I created a Ning social network website and used a discussion forum to post my intention to upgrade from an old and outdated

cell phone to the iPhone, the must-have gadget at the time. I chose the iPhone because this particular smartphone is very expensive in Brazil, costing almost five times more than in the United States. However, I could also have chosen other types of expensive smartphones, such as a BlackBerry or a sophisticated type of Android phone, or asked the students to determine the most sought-after smartphone.

As in the blog activity, I also linked to three articles from different websites that discussed advantages and disadvantages of iPhones so that students could research the issue and develop their own ideas about the benefits of purchasing this product as opposed to another smartphone model. Students worked in pairs in the computer lab to do their research on the topic, and were also allowed to expand their research beyond the three websites provided. By the end of the class, each pair posted three advantages and three disadvantages of buying an iPhone in the comments section of the Ning blog.

### Step 3: Drafting the expository paragraph

During the next class we logged onto Ning and students read all the comments from the previous day. As a group, the class then agreed on the three most frequently mentioned advantages and disadvantages. Next, I elicited the following topic sentence of an introductory paragraph from the students: "There are many advantages and disadvantages to buying an iPhone." The whole class then considered examples of cohesive devices from the textbook ("one advantage is," "another benefit is," etc.) to describe the advantages of buying an iPhone. For each advantage, I had the students give a detailed explanation of why it was an advantage. At the end of class the half-written paragraph looked like this:

Buying an iPhone has advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is the touch screen because it is easier to use than a regular cell phone and it is more modern. Another benefit is that it has a Wi-Fi connection. This is good because you can log on to the Internet faster and anywhere you want. In addition, the sound quality is superior to that of other cell phones. However, there are also disadvantages.

For homework, which was worth extra credit, students were asked to use the collaborative list of disadvantages to complete

the paragraph. Again, students received guidance about appropriate cohesive devices from the textbook ("one drawback is," "another disadvantage is," etc.). Five students who completed the homework posted their work on the Ning network.

### Step 4: Collaborative review by whole class

The following day the whole class analyzed the five postings on the Ning network and selected the most complete one:

However, there are some disadvantages. Like one drawback is that, if some day your telephone battery goes bad, there's no way to fix it, or change it, so you have to buy another one (which is another disadvantage because one iPhone is expensive). And another disadvantage is that there's no wi-fi, so you can't send any photos and you also don't even have a camera. In my opinion, you shouldn't buy an iPhone, because it just looks modern.

In addition to providing the second half of the expository paragraph, this activity was a good opportunity to address errors, including the issue of using language that is too informal for writing, such as *like*; spelling issues, such as *soh*; and incorrect word choices, such as (in this example) *witch*. After correcting the text, the two half-paragraphs were joined together to create a complete paragraph on the advantages and disadvantages of the iPhone.

### Step 5: Drafting and revising an expository paragraph

For the next step, students worked in small groups to come up with a list of other technological gadgets that were trendy at the time, including the iPad, the Kindle, the iPod, netbooks, the Wii, and the Xbox, among others. Students were instructed to choose one gadget and write a paragraph about the advantages and disadvantages of purchasing it, just as they had done for the iPhone. After writing their individual paragraphs, students paired up and exchanged papers with their partners, who followed a checklist to review the content and organization of the text and also to comment on whether the advantages or disadvantages were convincing enough to influence a purchasing decision. Students revised their drafts based on feedback from

both their partner and the teacher, then handed in the final draft.

#### Step 6: Publishing the expository paragraph

As a final step, students prepared to publish their essays on the Ning network. However, this time, the idea was to explore the multimodal capabilities of social networking on the Internet and have students share their ideas online with a wider community. Teachers have many options in this regard. One possibility is to initiate a *talkgroup* about a specific topic and invite students to record and post their opinions in an audio format. This can be done with a free online voice recording tool such as Voxopop ([www.voxopop.com](http://www.voxopop.com)). The only disadvantage is that Voxopop does not allow images to accompany the audio presentation. Another alternative is to create a *slidecast*, which is a multimedia presentation complete with sound and images that can be established with a free Slideshare account ([www.slideshare.net](http://www.slideshare.net)). For example, students could upload a PowerPoint presentation with written details and images of the gadgets along with an *MP3 podcast* that can be recorded by using the open source voice recording software Audacity, which can be downloaded for free at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>.

When the students were asked to record their texts, they were initially reluctant, saying that they would be embarrassed to perform a speaking activity for a wider audience. It is not uncommon for students to be apprehensive about using their second language in front of an audience, especially in unfamiliar contexts. Even in the most prestigious private schools in Brazil, teachers have just begun to use computers and projectors, and have not reached the stage where students are generating content online. To overcome the students' objection, I proposed that we produce the recordings but not share them with anyone outside the class, to which the students agreed. Although publishing for a wider audience is an optimal goal, the negotiated solution made the exercise as meaningful as possible and also indicated the need to continue with similar projects until students acquire more experience and confidence. Students also respond to incentives such as a prize or extra points for the "greatest blog of the month" or "multimedia presentation of the year."

#### Conclusion

The activities described in this article exemplify how web-based social networking tools offer excellent opportunities to conduct the pre-writing, drafting, peer review, and revising steps of the writing process. In addition to developing important writing and other skills in English and learning to work collaboratively on projects, using the Internet for ESL/EFL instruction also advances students' digital literacy. When writing about topics that are relevant to their needs and interests, students are apt to respond enthusiastically and work collaboratively to craft written work in the types of genres that will benefit them in their academic pursuits and subsequent careers.

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