

Writingmatrix: Connecting Students with Blogs, Tags, and Social Networking

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Abstract

This paper describes an extensive online project, Writingmatrix [<http://writingmatrix.wikispaces.com>], involving several key elements essential to collaboration in Web 2.0, such as aggregation, tagging, and social networking. Participant teachers in several different countries--Argentina, Venezuela, and Slovenia--had their adult students at various levels of English competency interact using blogs and other Web tools, including RSS feed readers and Technorati [<http://technorati.com>]. The teachers describe their respective settings, how they got their students started in communicating through blogging and social networking, and how in future they intend to expand the Writingmatrix experience.

Introduction

A working understanding of aggregation, tagging, and RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is key to collaboration as well as to filtering and regulating the flow of information resources online. Tags allow people to organize the information available through their distributed networks in ways that are meaningful to them, and social networking enables nodes in these networks to interact with each other according to how these tags and other folksonomic (for example, socially intertwined and personally meaningful) data overlap. Once productive tags are identified, then RSS (a script constantly updated with changes to certain Web content, such as blogs, which delivers a constant 'feed' of those changes) is used to monitor where Web artifacts containing those tags are accumulating, or being aggregated. Using an aggregator, or feed reader, users can then read the aggregated changes all in one place at any convenient time--and link directly back to those pages to make comments.

This article describes how the concepts associated with aggregating tagged content through tag search engines and RSS were applied in a worldwide collaboration project, Writingmatrix, involving bloggers in two countries in South America and one in Balkan Europe, who utilized tagging and social networking tools to enable their students to locate each other's blogs and then interact with individuals whom participants identified as being of similar age and interests. To achieve these communicative goals, students were encouraged to blog their interests and concerns, then tag posts with an identifier unique to the project. Technorati, a real-time search engine and organizer, was used to ferret out the posts of participants in other countries. This article takes the form of a narrative told from the perspective of the language teaching practitioners involved in the project. It describes how each became involved in the project and suggests where the participants are going with the project in the near future.

Vance Describes How the Project Got Started

In early 2007, I was invited to give a series of lectures in Spain on teaching writing over the Internet, and I accepted the challenge although my career focus had moved from ESL/EFL to computing and educational technology. With regard to the educational technology aspect, I was curious how tags in blog posts could be utilized in promoting collaboration, but I needed a testing ground in order to be able to discuss my ideas in the lectures I planned to give. At about this time, I became aware, through the English Virtual Community [<http://ar.groups.yahoo.com/group/inglesunlp/>], a list managed by Nelba Quintana, that a group of students and teachers in South America were using the list to discuss their summer reading, and I suggested, as a participant in the list, that those concerned blog their reflections and find each other's posts through tagging. Although the list did not follow up on my suggestion, Nelba herself was intrigued, and a message was sent out to the Webheads in Action list [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/] asking if anyone else would be interested in getting their students to blog and find each other's posts through tagging. Three teachers, Doris Molero from Venezuela, Saša Sirk from Slovenia, and Rita Zeinstejer from Argentina, decided they would like to learn how to help their students use blogs in this way to create a social network and encourage their students to discover and use each other as an authentic audience for their writing.

This team of four teachers all started their students blogging in April 2007, following guidelines which I invented just in time, not knowing much more than the instructors did. The project got off to a slow start, with observations about students not being interested at first in going beyond the confines of their own clique and culture, but the fact that all were learning and having the opportunity to interact with students from different countries made the experience very enriching. Carla Arena and other participants from the Webheads group also joined in with their comments on participants' blogs, and she has added her reflections to this article.

How Students Participated

Participating teachers had their students open blogs and write about their topics of interest. They showed the students how to tag their posts with the agreed anchor tag, writingmatrix, which allowed them to find each other's posts using a Technorati tag search to find blog posts with that tag. The technique is detailed as follows:

1. The students started blogs and made postings. It is very important in such postings that the students write on topics that interest them. If the same topic is given to a whole class and each student is directed to write on that topic, the reading of more than one or two blog postings for that class becomes redundant and is of limited interest to others. However if each student's writing is fresh and personal, others are more likely to be attracted to it, and reading a number of postings from students in the same class is not at all tedious. In keeping with constructivist principles, where each student creates meaning individually, writing in blogs should be more akin to freewriting or journal writing with free reign given regarding content, rather than "assignment writing," subject to evaluation and assessment other than peer response and feedback.
2. The students tagged each of their postings writingmatrix. This was in order to give each posting produced by all the students, probably a couple hundred students in the three countries, an anchor tag common to all postings in the project.
3. Students could tag their postings with other tags as well. Tags are meant to identify subject matter according to the writer's personal categorization scheme (folksonomy). Doris Molero in Venezuela had all her students tag their postings URBE (the name of their school) and EFL as well writingmatrix. As we harvested postings in the project, Doris's students' postings became quite apparent because of their URBE and EFL markers.
4. Participants used Technorati to search the blogosphere for postings labeled writingmatrix. Also, Google Blog Search [<http://blogsearch.google.com>] gives results that find some of our blogs where Technorati doesn't, so this tool was also used. Technorati provides a very simple and efficient way to pull together posts by participants from all over the world. We have learned when using Technorati to search for posts with the specific delimiter, "any authority." Some people who conduct blog searches wish to be directed to reliable ones (posts with "some" or greater authority). This would leave out student bloggers who have not established "authority," which is not what we want. We want to see all blog posts tagged writingmatrix, especially from beginning student bloggers with "no authority." The following URL accomplishes this exact search, and typically reveals a few hundred to

occasionally almost 1000 such posts:

<http://www.technorati.com/search/writingmatrix?authority=n&language=en>

One great benefit of this approach to tagging and social blogging is that anyone in the world can join the project with no prior arrangement whatsoever. All one needs to do in order to participate is to tag posts *writingmatrix*. A Technorati search can then be performed to find other participants. Or, even simpler, you can subscribe to the RSS feed for the Technorati page that has given you the desired results from a *writingmatrix* search, using a feed reader of your choice (e.g., Bloglines [<http://www.bloglines.com>] or Google Reader [<http://www.google.com/intl/en/googlereader/tour.html>]), and be automatically alerted when new posts are published. Figure 1 shows how Ctrl + click or a right click will allow the user to copy the 'Subscribe' link that can then be pasted into a feed reader.

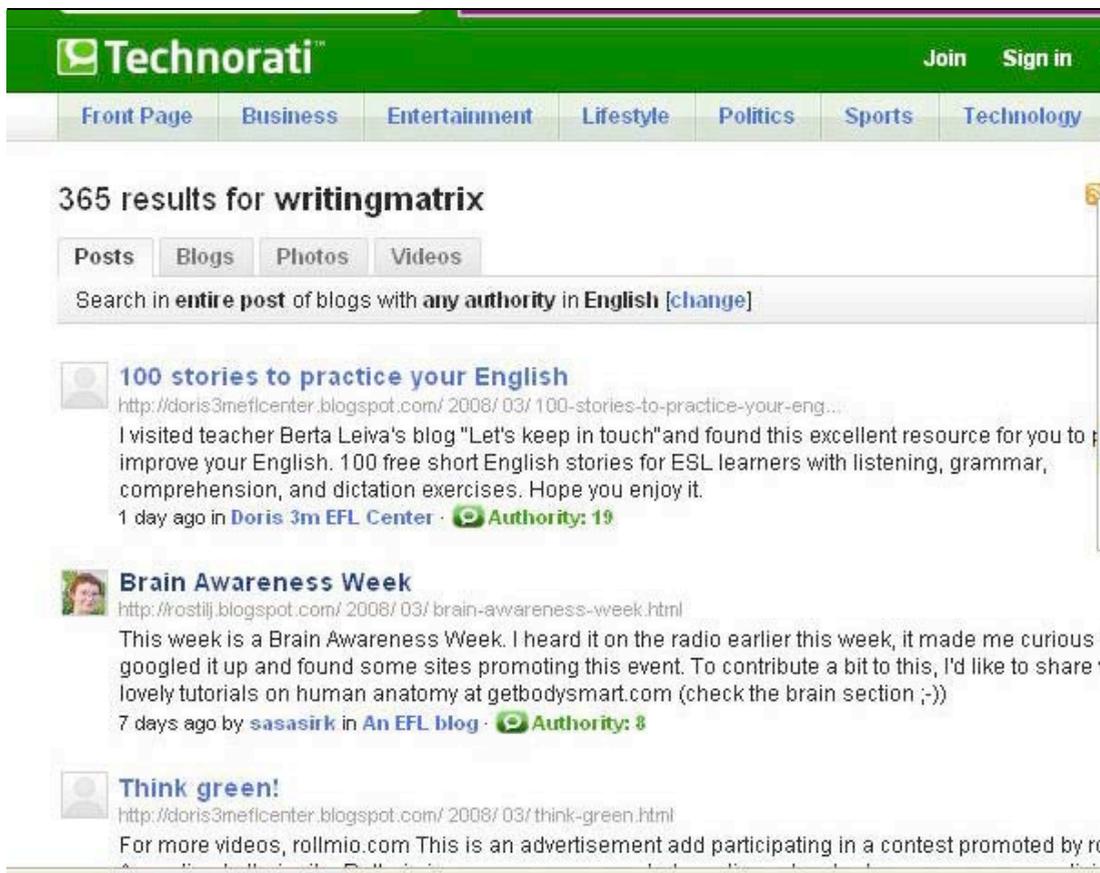


Figure 1. This graphic shows how to Copy Link Location with Ctrl + click or right click. The link can then be pasted into Bloglines or Google Reader.

Teacher Perspectives

Rita Characterizes Her Experience with Her Students in Rosario, Argentina

I work at a private institute, Asociación Rosarina de Cultura Inglesa in Rosario, Argentina, a local center for Cambridge exams, which students of English choose to attend to get their certification of achievement, and then sit for a final examination. The teachers here aim primarily at accuracy both in writing and in speaking, and the students fail to see the importance of communicating with the language they've been studying for around ten years, as on very few occasions do they have the chance to meet native or even non-native speakers of English to practice the language in authentic situations.

This being so, it is very hard to convince students of their need to poke their heads and minds out of their classroom windows to see beyond, to appreciate the invaluable chance the Internet offers to use tools that will enable them to meet like-minded people all over the world and communicate safely from their homes, in English, exchanging information about each other's cultures. This is what Vance had in mind when he started his Writingmatrix project involving teachers from different countries ready to pass their enthusiasm on to their face-to-face students. And tagging promotes this effect.

In my case, I get new groups of students every school year who want to sit for the CAE exam, and who are reluctant to deviate from what they perceive to be their limited aim. Yet, little by little they are coaxed into participating in a class blog, they start their own blogs, they post and see their writing out there in the real world, they get amazed at reading comments from other teachers and students from places they have never imagined they would reach. And they come to see the advantages of tagging, and they realize how through tagging they can connect with people sharing their interests, regardless of geographical and cultural distances.

Following this progression, my students enthusiastically wrote, read, recorded, listened, and tagged. They added writingmatrix to their list of tags at the end of each blog post, and they went to Technorati, where they located not only other teachers and students from our Writingmatrix project, but also other readers who had become interested in the project. We even ran our own project, which we called The Serendipity Project, as they had to record a serendipitous experience they had had or had heard about. They all enjoyed the experience, chronicled in our blog for May 18, 2007, caeb2007's podcast: The "Serendipity" Project [http://caeb2007.podomatic.com/entry/2007-05-18T19_12_16-07_00], and later posts through June, 2007.

At caeb2007's podcast for September 7, 2007, you will also find the podcast my students produced about tagging, Tagging...sth really fun [http://caeb2007.podomatic.com/entry/2007-09-07T17_39_46-07_00], and it can be seen how this concept opened their eyes and minds into a broader world--how they became aware of the fact that a final examination and a certification of achievement should not be the only target when taking up a new language. Rather, one should be open to the possibility of meeting like-minded people, of learning about different cultures, of making friends beyond and across geographical distances. My students became aware of a different way of learning, of the importance of using English to communicate, to exchange experiences, opinions, possible solutions to common problems related not only to learning a language, but also to those facets of their everyday life they have in

common with the whole world. They have become aware of the need to learn through sharing, both through text and voice, which serves to enhance their proficiency in the four skills. In fact, through tagging, learners can develop heuristics for improving their reading, writing, listening and speaking abilities as they are led into connecting, communicating, and interacting in authentic environments and with authentic aims in mind.

However, there is still a long way ahead, since students themselves will not see these benefits until and unless they are guided into the process by those capable of showing them the way. The next steps will therefore entail raising teachers' consciousness and helping them gain the necessary knowledge to see for themselves how to integrate the use of tagging and social media into their teaching practices.

Saša Records Her Experience with Her Students in Slovenia

I teach English at the Vocational College of Tehniški šolski center Nova Gorica in Nova Gorica, Slovenia. My students are full-time and part-time students of different professional orientations (Informatics, Mechatronics, and Countryside Management). The full-time students are aged 19+ and generally are continuing their education straight after secondary school (so they have little or no working experience), whereas the part-time students are employed adults of different ages. Both full- and part-time groups are usually quite large (60+) and their level of English varies a lot (from group to group and within the group, ranging from lower intermediate to advanced). So far, two of my groups have been involved in the Writingmatrix project--nine students from the Spring 2007 group (part-time adult class) and most of the students from the Autumn 2007 group (full-time students).

I had started blogging in class for the first time just a few weeks before finding out about the Writingmatrix project. We had started blogging simply to continue class discussions beyond classroom walls and class hours. Our class blog was meant as an extension of our Moodle [<http://www.moodle.org>] forum, which is not public. At first I just wanted to show my students how simple it is to use a blog and how far it can reach. Also I wanted to show them what a wonderful tool blogs are, and how efficient they are for keeping in touch with the latest news and developments in various professional fields. I hoped that exposure to blogs would encourage students to get used to reading in English more regularly. Students today should know how to use this technology efficiently.

When I heard about the Writingmatrix project I joined it with some students from my adult class. Unfortunately our course was already winding up at that point. Some of my students chose to join in spite of this and blogged in their free time. We didn't cover all the tools from the Writingmatrix syllabus. We explored Blogger [<https://www.blogger.com/start/>] and learned how to use Bloglines and del.icio.us [<http://del.icio.us>]. We reached out into cyberspace, exchanged comments with participants from other countries, and got to know one another in a fun way.

My second group (full-time students) was younger (19+) and much bigger. Unlike the previous group, these students mostly had a general idea of what blogs are

but did not read them much and were not familiar with aggregators and RSS. Seeing how much time and effort some students from my previous group had invested in their blogs, I decided to additionally encourage these students' participation by giving them a possibility to earn part of their written grade this way.

The students liked the idea behind the Writingmatrix project and most of them joined. To be able follow their work more easily, I asked them to record all their weekly activities in a Google docs [<http://docs.google.com>] and share this document with me. These personal reports were in English and clearly showed how much effort they invested in their work. In addition to Blogger, my students explored Google Reader, Technorati, del.icio.us and Flickr [<http://flickr.com/>]. Those new to the Internet needed some help and guidance, and had some problems getting used to switching between the many different applications. We tried to help each other by setting aside some time during the classes in our computer lab (one to two classes a week). Some students developed their blogs considerably; others just posted a few experimental posts. Some chose not to participate because they didn't like the idea of having their writing publicly displayed online.

Like the previous group, this group too exchanged some comments with other Writingmatrix students and teachers, but by and large the group mostly interacted within itself. We learned how simply and efficiently we could connect and aggregate content using tags and how invaluable tags are for organizing our posts, bookmarks, and photos. The tools we explored were new to the students. The Writingmatrix project gave them an opportunity to practice their English meaningfully while familiarizing themselves with tools useful for life.

I liked the way some topics spread across the Writingmatrix project; for example, the Internet meme started by Maria Lujan, Nelba's student (she had received it from a friend and passed it on to some participants, who passed it on to others). The meme (in this context, a question that shares cultural information and may spread or transmute "virally" around the Internet) is about describing your first Internet experience. I liked it and set it as one of my students' weekly tasks. My students were asked to write about their experience in their blogs (or Google docs, if they chose not to work on their blogs). Some of them dropped a comment letting Lujan know they did their homework (see for example, The Tics World: This is my first Meme-- [<http://theticworld.blogspot.com/2007/09/this-is-my-first-meme.html>] (September 29, 2007). It was fun to hear about Lujan's surprise when she later checked her blog statistics and found there a greater number of visitors from Slovenia than from her home country, Argentina! (See The Tics World: Writing Matrix project is global !! :) [<http://theticworld.blogspot.com/2007/10/writing-matrix-project-is-global.html>]).

Later, Nelba invited us to explore the trackback option with her, and we helped each other figure out the settings. (See English Virtual Community: My first meme (pingback and trackback) [<http://englishvirtualcommunity.blogspot.com/2007/10/my-first-meme.html>] in October 2007). Other memorable moments included my students' using Doris's fun posts in their blogs (e.g., the superhero quiz at Doris 3m EFL Center: I am

Superman. What Super Hero are you?

[<http://doris3meflcenter.blogspot.com/search/label/superhero>], October 15, 2007), and Doris and some others highlighting interesting picks from other blogs (for example, Doris 3m EFL Center: This is another personality test!!!! [<http://doris3meflcenter.blogspot.com/search/label/personality%20test>], November 4, 2007).

After my first encounter with this project, I have created a short wish list for the Writingmatrix project in subsequent iterations. It would be nice if...

- every now and then teachers involved in the Writingmatrix project set out some joint tasks such as those shown above, simply to connect the WM participants across borders. We could for example explore some topic together (like the Internet meme above), or talk about cultural peculiarities, or work with topics like Rita's Serendipity Project, or explore a tool of interest together (like the trackback option we did with Nelba). Maybe we could get more international interaction this way. Some of my students preferred being given a topic to writing freely about topics of their choice; indicating a set task might encourage more people to join in.
- we had a bigger critical mass of WM participants, so more people contributed to the project, greeted new participants on their arrival, etc. The first contact is a very powerful experience; it would be great to be able to capitalize on that.
- the time frames of our courses overlapped more, so that we could do more things together (mission impossible, but wouldn't it be nice?).
- we could find a way to encourage more students to reply to comments on their blogs and visit the blogs of those who posted comments. (There are always some students doing a great job in commenting and responding, it would be great to see more of them.) Each week, I set a task for my students to post some comments to our students' blogs and some to international students' blogs and to document the URLs in their Google doc reports.

Doris Describes Her Classes in Venezuela

As of this writing, we have been blogging for only one year of three trimesters here at URBE (Universidad Rafael Belloso Chacín, Maracaibo, Venezuela). In our first trimester, both teachers and students were new to this blogging idea. I had already started a blog to participate in a multiliteracies adventure to which Vance had previously invited me as part of a TESOL Multiliteracies course (Stevens, 2006), so blogging wasn't entirely unfamiliar to me.

I teach all levels and at many schools, so my classes are a mixture of tasks and skills. My students come from different backgrounds and from different schools and have very different interests and ways of learning, so my approach to teaching has to be very flexible and allow enough space for the students to be creative and responsible. The methodology used is task-based and combines different learning approaches. Our English program at URBE is based on Communicative English so it requires a lot of interaction, like holding conversations, and real life simulations. Most teachers in the traditional class just use traditional tools. But my classes are different. Technology is present in

the classroom and in the lab, and social networking is strongly supported both in class and online. My students and I use cell phones, cameras, video, and PowerPoint (Microsoft) as everyday tools. Homework is assigned at the end of each class, and most of the time students have to produce something based on a model given in class. That way, working on their products becomes a gradually easier task.

As early as March 2006, I proposed my students start their blogs as journals to record their homework assignments. However, not all of them were able to do that, nor were they all able to do it the next trimester or even now. Only the ones who were really motivated or disciplined enough did it. Some of my students are just interested in passing the level, not in learning per se. They are goal-directed university students and they want only to be lawyers or engineers for example. It's up to the teachers to help them fall in love with education, but finding support from fellow teachers at school is really difficult since teachers consider technology to be too difficult and time consuming and most of them say they are too busy now to start working with something they are not familiar with. Despite this, my students have produced a large number of blogs.

During the September/ December 2007 trimester I taught 13 classes and two or three intensive courses. All but the level one students (the beginners) tried to get on with blogging. Also we experimented with Windows Movie Maker (2004), audio recording in PowerPoint (Microsoft, 2007) presentations, photo shows with Slide [<http://www.slide.com>], Google Images [<http://images.google.com>], tagging, aggregating, Google Reader [<http://www.google.com/reader/view/#overview-page/>], audio forums at Chinswing [<http://www.chinswing.com>], virtual pets, chat boxes, commenting, memes, and so on. Most of these things were new, but we had lots of fun. Also we did a free hugs activity and video (see Free Hugs at URBE Edward Garcia [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkTKIZ88p-I&e>]). But the best was when we participated in Blog Action Day [<http://blogactionday.org>]. The students wrote about the environment and we watched some environment videos downloaded from YouTube [<http://www.youtube.com>]. The interesting thing is that when we tagged these artifacts with the label writingmatrix they immediately appeared in Technorati searches (see Figure 2). The hugs videos for example appeared for a long time right near the top of our Technorati searches once they were put online and tagged writingmatrix, as shown in Figure 2 below.

367 results for **writingmatrix** Su

Posts Blogs Photos Videos

Search in **entire post** of blogs with **any authority** in English [\[change\]](#)

 **Brain Awareness Week**
<http://rostij.blogspot.com/2008/03/brain-awareness-week.html>
 This week is a Brain Awareness Week. I heard it on the radio earlier this week, it made me curious so I googled it up and found some sites promoting this event. To contribute a bit to this, I'd like to share with lovely tutorials on human anatomy at getbodysmart.com (check the brain section ;-))
 3 days ago by **sasasirk** in **An EFL blog** ·  **Authority: 8**

 **Think green!**
<http://doris3meflcenter.blogspot.com/2008/03/think-green.html>
 For more videos, rollmio.com This is an advertisement add participating in a contest promoted by rollm According to their site: Rollmio is a consumer generated creative network where anyone can participate CREATOR or PROMOTER.
 10 days ago in **Doris 3m EFL Center** ·  **Authority: 19**

Videos about writingmatrix [View all »](#)






Figure 2. A Technorati search showing the Writingmatrix videos from Doris Moleras' class. "Free Hugs at URBE Edward Garcia" is at the far right and until recently could be linked directly from Technorati.

Something really important about this project is that it has given my students a way to dare to do things, to be more courageous, and to realize that what you can dream can be accomplished. Also, there's the awareness of multiliteracies that they are gaining by combining their EFL training with use of Web 2.0 tools like blogging, tagging, aggregating--and having fun with or getting frustrated by technology, but trying hard to overcome hurdles. Through grappling with such real life tasks, we are growing as humans and becoming better students and teachers as all concerned learn the value of working together through the use of Web 2.0 tools in a multiliteracies framework.

Since starting this project, I have noticed that my students now are a little bit different from my students from a year ago. I remember telling my students that they were going to use technology and learn English at the same time. Their reaction was "teacher is crazy!" The students were initially afraid of computers but as time passed and the Internet has become more popular thanks to MySpace [<http://www.myspace.com>] and Facebook [<http://www.facebook.com>], students are now more familiar and feel more comfortable with technology. We are on our way to becoming multiliterate, empowered, Web 2.0 users and creators, connected members of the Internet, and citizens of the world.

Nelba Describes Her Unique Situation

I work at the School of Languages [<http://www.escueladelenguas.unlp.edu.ar/ingles/home.html>] of the National University of La Plata, Argentina. In 2001, I opened a Yahoo! Group [<http://groups.yahoo.com>], used primarily as an electronic mailing list, called English Virtual Community (EVC) [<http://ar.groups.yahoo.com/group/inglesunlp/>]. It was established as an opportunity for my students to gain extra practice with English, but little by little it became opened for any person interested in the English language. When Vance launched the Writingmatrix project around April 2007, I sent an email inviting EVC members to participate. Some accepted the proposal and we started blogging.

My student groups are different from the others described here because I normally never meet my students face to face. Participants in these groups live in different parts of Argentina (and one lives in New Jersey), and not only do they live in different parts of the country, but also they are of different ages, have different occupations, and are at markedly different level of Internet knowledge though most of them are not greatly familiar with Internet tools.

My experience of the Writingmatrix project has been very challenging because contact with my students has been completely virtual, and took place either by synchronous chat or asynchronously by email. We would normally have chat sessions every fifteen days. Once the students started meeting one another through the Writingmatrix project, and due to our time zone being similar time to that of Venezuela, I invited Doris Molero and her students to join our chat sessions. It was really very pleasant to interact with them. In the month of July an even more enriching session was carried out when the EVC participants were joined by some students of professor Molero, and also by professor Stevens, who was at that time on summer vacation in Houston.

Constant feedback and focus on fluency in communication have been keys to success. All the participants were interested in learning to interact using chat and email. Our habitual method of work was as follows: I used email during the week to send instructions about the work to be performed in blogs, and in reply, the participants sent any questions they had to me; in addition, once every fifteen days we had meetings using synchronous online chat in which we talked about our accomplishments, visited the blogs of the other participants, and left comments.

From the Writingmatrix project, students also learned:

- how to blog
- how to insert images and videos in their blogs
- what bookmarking and tagging mean and why they are important
- how to open accounts in Bloglines [<http://www.bloglines.com/>], Technorati, and del.icio.us
- in the case of at least two participants of the group, the importance of the pingback and trackback features inherent in some blogs, which allow users to track and view who has linked to a given blog post.

In general, most participants were very motivated to blog because their writings had a real audience and they were very happy when they received comments in their blogs from other countries. They also learned collaboratively because they were involved in each other's learning and progress.

For the teacher, it was a very satisfying experience from both the professional and personal points of view. Through working with the Writingmatrix project, I became more confident in leading a group online. The project motivated me to research topics pertaining to the social networking aspects of blogging and tagging, and I was able to transmit that knowledge to the participants. As we were all exploring these topics together, we had a very good relationship, a friendly yet professional one. And what is more, I am planning to repeat the experience this year (2008) with another group under similar conditions!

Carla Reflects on Her Informal Learning with the Writingmatrix Project

Although I didn't formally join the Writingmatrix group because I was not teaching at that time, I decided to apply its concepts to my own subsequent projects. I learned from the group how powerful tagging and RSS could be in aggregating content. The project has given me invaluable insights into how to tie bits of content together in one place just by tagging appropriately.

I have since chimed in with my contributions to the Writingmatrix group. I've given it a try to see what would happen just by applying the tag writingmatrix to any of my posts that I thought might interest the teachers and students involved in the project. What a surprise when Saša just "stopped by" on one of my blogs and joined the discussion (see the comments May 30, 2007, Brazil and Brazilians: The City of God [<http://brazilandbrazilians.blogspot.com/2007/05/city-of-god.html>]). It certainly added an interesting perspective to a very rich cultural exchange about the movie. Also, I replied to some of her students and was able to learn more about them and their lives in different parts of the world.

I learned that tagging is connecting, and RSS is the glue. It's about making stronger bonds that really make our world flat, where we become aware of many venues happening at once. Once we become cognizant and then familiar with these tools, it's just a matter of exploring them.

Some lessons learned:

- Now, I'm never too lazy to tag all the artifacts I create online.
- I create unique tags for projects, online sessions, and courses so that everybody can search what is being produced by others.
- I can easily retrieve information from past conferences, online sessions, and projects with a very simple search using the unique tag for the venue.
- My content connects to others in a mosaic of information.
- I keep learning informally from what others are producing.
- I can track specific subject matter that interests me.
- Social networking and tagging are two sides to the same coin.

I gained these insights thanks to the Writingmatrix group, who opened my eyes

to the tools to broaden our online connectivity and helped me understand the dynamics of social networking through tagging and RSS.

In Conclusion: Where Do We Go from Here?

A logical next step for those who decide to pursue their involvement with this project is for students to start forming friendships with one another that might result in writing partnerships. One way for this to happen is for them to browse the output of the Technorati tag search on writingmatrix, using Bloglines or Google Reader to aggregate RSS feeds and display results as they are updated (see Figure 3). As explained earlier this can be automated when students put the link to the RSS feed from the Technorati writingmatrix search results into one of these feed readers, and browse the output there. This technique saves a few mouse clicks and allows students to monitor the results of the desired Technorati tag search conveniently. Better yet, using an aggregator in this way might help some students more easily find others in the project whose blogs resonate with them and then follow postings from those particular peers regularly. Students might then comment more often in each other's blogs. Dialog might follow.

The screenshot shows a Yahoo! Groups interface. On the left is a sidebar with a list of groups, including 'YahooGroups (287)', 'evonline2002_webheads at Yahoo! Groups (200)', 'secondlifelanguages at Yahoo! Groups (87)', 'EVO 2007 (354)', 'gamelearning at Yahoo! Groups (45)', 'openwebpublishing at Yahoo! Groups (21)', 'baw07 at Yahoo! Groups (200)', 'ESLSA at Yahoo! Groups (88)', 'BBC News | Programmes | Click | UK Edition (140)', 'TI Tapped In Calendar (200)', 'WritingMatrix', 'Matute's Blog - Sharing Knowledge...', '[Technorati] Tag results for writingmatrix', '2007spring_082-10 (7)', '2007spring_082-03 (25)', 'wiaoc (42)', 'Friends (23)', 'thewebisflat (23)', 'wide open spaces (20)', and 'Technorati Search for: thewebisflat (3)'. The main content area on the right displays a blog post titled 'Matute's Blog - Sharing Knowledge' with 11 items. The first item is 'Web 2.0: Cualitative changes' by Matute, posted on Fri, Aug 24 2007 11:35 PM. The second item is '"Did you Know?" Video: Exponential c' by Matute, posted on Wed, Aug 22 2007 12:08 AM. The third item is 'Web 2.0 The Social Web' by Matute.

Figure 3. Blogs as well as Technorati feed results can be read directly in an aggregator such as Bloglines as shown here.

Whereas we see that tagging allows us to interact with others in a social network, and sift through and find each other's postings in an otherwise seemingly chaotic docuverse, this is not the only way we know that our writing is being read and interest shown in it. Blogs also allow comments to be made in them. As Carla mentions above, comments from unexpected sources can be very motivating. One can listen to the podcasts on the Worldbridges Network of Teachers Teaching Teachers [<http://teachersteachingteachers.org>], follow discussions about Youth Voices [<http://youthvoices.net/elgg/>], and note some of the quite remarkable outcomes from student bloggers whose writing has taken on a sort of cult quality, and who have found audiences neither they, nor their teachers, could have imagined. Paul Allison's (2006) videos on successful teaching practices in blogging are engaging presentations of how this kind of interchange between students happens in practice, the process of writing that goes into Paul's students' blog postings (freewriting, sentence starters, bubble cartoon devices, etc.), and how the students respond to one another and produce better writing by passing it through the crucible of feedback from peers. To paraphrase a student in one of Allison's videos, you can write something and think it is totally correct, but when someone else reads it they can find some aspect that the writer didn't think of. This kind of feedback, coming from another student, is much more meaningful to that student in some respects than a comment his teacher might have made. If Allison's videos are not evidence enough, he mentioned on a Women of Web 2.0 podcast in the summer of 2007 that he's finding that "students are beginning to write for students; imagine how exciting that is!" (confirmed in personal communication).

Stanley (2006) provides an excellent rationale for using blogs in writing and its counterpart, reading. A recent dissertation by Felix (2007) also documents in a systematic framework the rationale and many positive outcomes associated with blogging. As an illustration of such outcomes, Saša told us, though her classes had ended and she and her students were on summer holidays:

Another student of mine opened his blog and joined our project--2 months after our classes officially ended : -). It's really nice to remain in touch through blogging--everyone working at his own pace without any pressure.

The Writingmatrix project, still ongoing as long as there are students who wish to try it out and respond to one another's postings, worked remarkably well considering that its participants acted as pioneers and didn't know what to expect from it. Next steps in the project include getting the students to tag the URLs of each other's posts in del.icio.us. Saša has already explored this possibility. In her words:

I showed the students how it works, entered my class blog in there, and to my surprise saw that it had already been entered 6 months earlier by Hala Fawzi, a Webhead from Sudan. Similarly I asked my students to add their blogs and one or two Writingmatrix blogs they liked in their Del.icio.us accounts and check who else had bookmarked the same sites and what else these people had bookmarked. Some of

them found one another this way.

Once students find each other through appropriate use of Technorati and Bloglines or Google Reader, tagging each other's posts and exploring how others have tagged them through del.icio.us will be a mind-opening experience. It is further reinforcing and accordingly motivating to discover that others are tagging what you produce and place on the Internet, and to follow the links that these others have tagged to see what their interests are. In our view this is the crux of collaboration in such a way that students might be motivated to make discoveries of authentic interest so that a motivation to write can be nurtured.

In a recent recapitulation of what I had learned from this project (Stevens, 2008), Ronaldo Lima from Brazil corroborated our outcomes when he commented there:

Just want to testify here that, around September or October. . . . I was conducting a blogging writing project with two classes here in Brazil. Well, I had my students tag their posts writingmatrix and later they were amazed to see some comments from students from totally different countries and backgrounds.

So, it surely works!

----- The recording of this WiAOC [<http://wiaoc.org>] presentation may be found at Learning Times [<https://sas.illuminate.com/p.jnlp?psid=2007-05-18.0447.M.FF88B318415986DF118835E>]
Further information about the presentation is here:
<http://webheadsinaction.org/node/174>.

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