

Publishing L2 Learners' Writing on Sites with User-Generated Content: Analyzing the Potential Audience

Caleb Prichard

Ferris Women's University

prichard@ferris.ac.jp

The JALT CALL Journal

While research shows that language learners value blogging as a way to express themselves, experience suggests that few people other than classmates or spammers actually visit the blogs. This provides a relatively sheltered forum for the students, but it hardly gives the students a public voice on the web. On the other hand, having students publish on popular sites with user-generated content, such as Wikipedia or Tripadvisor.com, could provide students a true voice on the Internet. This action research study evaluates web users' responses to students' work on blogs, wikis, and user reviews. By analyzing the quantity and quality of the audience on each of the platforms, the paper aims to help instructors understand which is ideal for a particular learner group or learning objective.

Introduction

In order to motivate students and to increase the authenticity of student writing assignments, instructors are increasingly using the Internet to have language users publish their written work (Smith, 2000; Lowe & Williams, 2004; Bloch, 2007). Publishing on the web seems to "stimulate investment... and engagement" since the students see it as public and "playful" (Lowe & Williams, 2004). Moreover, publishing on the web can lead students to have autonomy and to take responsibility for their work (Pinkman, 2005; Alm, 2006). Blogs seem to be the most popular platform to publish students writing (Fellner & Apple, 2006), as they allow easy and instantaneous publishing and have potential for interaction. To allow for even more student collaboration, some

teachers also utilize class wikis or discussion boards on Course Management Systems, such as *Blackboard* or *Moodle*. The growing number of public web sites that include user-generated content (UGC) also have great potential as platforms for publishing students' work. As will be discussed in this article, having learners publish a user review on a film web site or edit content on *Wikipedia* could be useful and motivating for many students.

With all the new exciting options for publishing student writing, writing instructors may be confused as to which platform is the most appropriate for their particular student population or a particular learning objective. One essential factor to consider is the potential audience of the various platforms. A main advantage of publishing on the web, which instructors often convey to students, is the potential for a wide worldwide audience (Lowe & Smith, 2000; Federman, 2004; Williams, 2004). However, though writing for an audience increases authenticity and may lead to more motivation, teachers are sometimes very protective of their students' writing. Language learners might experience backlash because of their lack of proficiency or because they may have "different" viewpoints. On blogs or discussion boards, there could be negative comments, wiki contributions could be deleted, and user review may be rated negatively. All could seriously discourage students.

Are L2 learners ready for a worldwide audience, such as they might encounter on *Wikipedia*? The researcher posted a question on *Wikipedia*'s online "help desk" asking whether a certain level of language proficiency was necessary before contributing. However, the replies by two "Wikipedians" were reassuring. "Bjellaklagn" wrote, "Everyone is welcome, but please be aware that articles may be deleted..." "Ssep" soon added, "There is no policy on minimal proficiency. As long as it is understandable and has good content it should be fine, other users can improve the English" (28 May 2007). Therefore, as long as students realize that their wiki can be edited or even deleted, contributions by language learners are welcome by many Wikipedians.

Moreover, a "wikiProject" to counter bias suggests that not only are language learner contributions welcome, but they are sought. According to the site (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Countering_systemic_bias), *Wikipedia* aims to have balanced perspective, but most contributors of *Wikipedia* are white, educated males. Authors of the page pleaded users to:

Change the demographic of Wikipedia.... If you are at a university, contact a professor in minority or women's studies... and ask if they would be willing to encourage students to write for Wikipedia. Contact minority or immigrant groups in your area to see if they would be interested in encouraging their members to contribute. (retrieved May 27, 2007)

Therefore, according to this WikiProject, since language learners have different perspectives as the average "Wikipedians", having them edit sites does not ruin *Wikipedia*, but actually helps the site become more balanced. Unfortunately, not all web users have the liberal ideals of *Wikipedia* editors.

Despite the importance of understanding the potential audience of learners' work on the web, instructors often have no idea as to how public, or how private, a site actually is. For example, many instructors and researchers claim that student blogs may have a worldwide audience (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Lowe & Williams, 2004; Suzuki, 2004). However, experience suggests that few users other than classmates or spammers actually visit student blogs.

If this is indeed the case, blogging would hardly give students an influential public voice on the web as is claimed, but would rather be providing a relatively sheltered forum for the students to practice fluency and self-expression. On the other hand, having students publish on content-specific sites with UGC may be less sheltered and could provide students a true meaning voice on the Internet. However, most writing teachers have yet to utilize sites with UGC in advanced writing classes, and studies have not examined the potential audience of such sites. Indeed, it is important to know how many users are viewing a students' contribution in order to select the most ideal platform for a particular class or learning objective.

This paper evaluates web users' responses to students' work on personal blogs and public sites with UGC, including *Wikipedia* and web sites with user reviews, to determine the potential audience of each of the platforms. The objective of this study is to determine which web platform is ideal for a particular student group or learning objective, by considering the following:

- How public is each platform?
- Are contributions by limited-proficiency users of English welcome and "useful"?

Study

To analyze the audience of students' work on various web platforms, the researcher examined comments on a student's blog, the edits or deletion to a students' wiki contributions on *Wikipedia* or *Wikitravel*, and the ratings on students' user reviews on sites such as like *movies.com*.

Participants

Forty students at all grades at Ferris Women's University in Yokohama signed up for the elective course entitled Internet English. A needs analysis at the beginning of the semester determined that the students had various web backgrounds. Most stated that they had some experience searching the web in English, but only a few had created a blog and none had experience publishing on public sites with UGC. The students also had various levels of proficiency, though the majority had TOEFL scores from 430-480.

The course

The main objective of the course was to improve students' ability to communicate on the web, which included developing both their web skills and their language ability. The students created personal blogs and were instructed to write one post a week on a topic of their choice outside of class. In-class work was broken down into student selected topic-based units (movies, music, and travel), with each unit starting with web-based vocabulary, reading, and listening activities. After building their language around the topic and becoming familiar with various web sites, the units concluded by having students publish their writing on a site with UGC.

The movie unit concluded with a project in which students wrote a film review and posted it on either *movies.com* or *imdb.com*. They wrote a brief plot summary and then gave

their opinion of the movie the second paragraph. Figure 1 shows a portion of one student's contribution, errors included, published on imdb.com/title/tt0410297/usercomments-415.

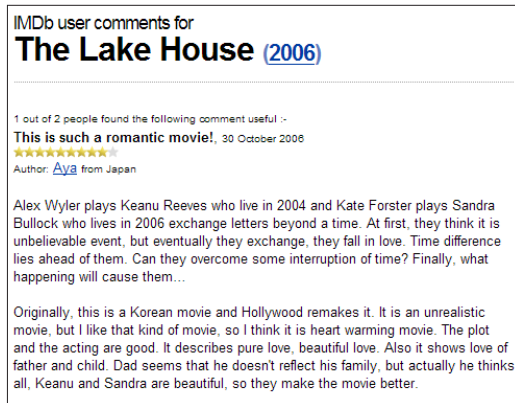


Figure 1. Example of a student's user review published on *imdb.com*

For the music unit, the students were to describe a Japanese musician on the popular online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*. They added new information on an existing page or started a new page if there was no existing site for the musical artist of their choice. One student started a new *Wikipedia* page for the group Ego-Wrappin':

EGO-WRAPPIN' formed in Oosaka, Japan in 1996. Yoshie Nakano is the vocalist. She has a deep and soulful voice. She writes a song and also composes the music. Masaki Mori is the guitarist of the group. He composes the music either. They created new music genre in Japan. It is Japanese pop music, but they are not prepossessed with an ordinary genre. They can be rock, jazz or reggae. It is EGO style. (en.wikipedia.org/wikilego-wrappin , retrieved November 23, 2006)

For the travel unit, the students were given the choice of describing a destination on *Wikitravel.com*, writing a review a hotel, airline, or destination on *tripadvisor.com*, or giving advice to Japan-bound travelers on the *tripadvisor.com* forum. Figure 2 shows an example of a hotel review written by an advanced student.

Data Analysis

All the data were collected in November and December 2006 and analyzed six months later in May and June of 2007. Though each student completed at least 13 blog posts, only the final November post of each of the 40 students was analyzed. The students completed 48 wikis in November, with 33 students completing their music assignment on *Wikipedia* and 15 choosing the option to write on *Wikitravel* for the travel unit. The students completed 38 user reviews: 30 on *imdb.com*, three on *movies.com*, and five on *tripadvisor.com*.



Figure 2. Example of one student's user review on *tripadvisor.com*

User responses to the students' work were analyzed for quantity and quality. The former was done by tallying the number of times users outside of class posted comments on the students' blogs, the number of edits or deletions on a site including a students' wiki contribution, and the number of times a student's user review was rated (as useful or not). User ratings to submitted reviews are displayed above the review on each of the sites, as shown in figure 1. The number of times a wiki has been edited was determined by locating the wiki version that the students edited. This can be found by clicking on a page's history tab. The number of edits compared to the current version of the wiki is displayed, as in figure III ("13 intermediate revisions not shown").

The perceived quality of the students' blogs by users outside of the class was determined by analyzing whether the user comment was positive, neutral, or negative. The quality of the student reviews was examined by checking whether the reviews were rated as useful or not useful. For example, Figure 1 shows that one of two users found the student's review to be useful. The wiki pages the students edited were compared with the current versions of the pages and rated as unedited (or slightly edited) or severely edited (or deleted). In addition, the language use in the wikis was analyzed to see if it was unedited (or slightly edited) or totally rewritten. The example in Figure 3, with the edited words shown in red text, reveals that one student's contribution was nearly totally rewritten, though the content remained.

Results

Number of Responses

As expected, there were no comments from users outside the class on any of the students' blog posts. There were only comments from other students in the class, as the students

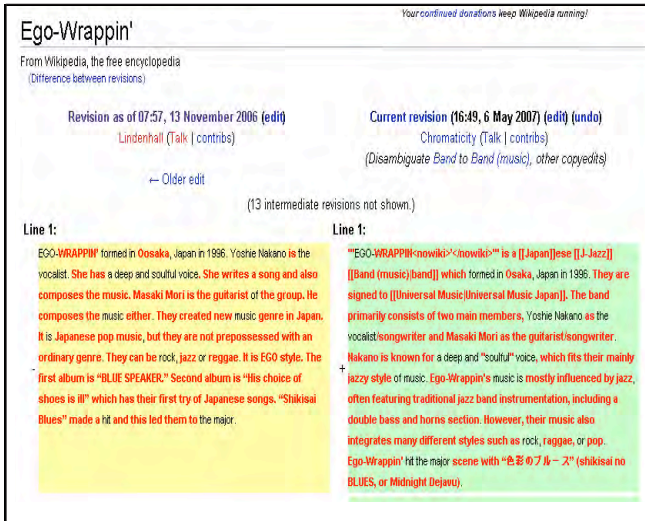


Figure 3

were assigned to read and comment on each others' blogs.

There were user responses to students' written work on *Wikipedia* and *Wikitravel*. After a student contributed to a page on *Wikipedia*, there was an average of 27.09 more edits to the page six months later. The range was from 4 edits to 160, depending on the popularity of the page. There were fewer edits, 8.06 (ranging from 0 to 23), on pages with student submissions on *Wikitravel*. The average number of edits for both wiki sites was 20.88.

There were also responses to students' user reviews. For students' movie reviews on *imdb.com*, there were 35 user ratings for 30 student reviews. While one student received eight ratings and another seven, fourteen of the reviews had no user ratings. *movies.com* seemed to have fewer readers, with 0 ratings for 3 student reviews. For the five students' *tripadvisor.com* reviews, there were 16 ratings. Each review had between two to four ratings. For all sites, there was an average of 1.34 ratings per user review (51 ratings for 38 student reviews).

Quality of Responses

The students' work on *Wikipedia* was often edited. In terms of content, 42% of the submissions were deleted or mostly deleted. In terms of the students' language use, 52% of the contributions were totally or mostly rewritten. The three students' whose pages were edited over 100 times all had their data completely deleted. The students' submissions on *WikiTravel* were edited to a lesser degree. Ninety-three percent of the students' submissions had both their content and language kept. Totaling the data for both wiki sites, 69% of the contributions' content was kept and 63% of the students had their language use unedited or only slightly edited.

In terms of the students' user reviews, 32 of 51 (63%) of the ratings were rated as useful. For *imdb.com*, 19 of 35 were rated usefully, and 13 of 16 the ratings on *tripadvisor.com* were useful. Three student reviews were rated positively 4 of 4 times, while one review was rated as not useful all four times.

Table I summarizes the findings of the study. There were the most responses (edits) to the students' wiki contributions, and there were some responses to their user reviews. Blogs received no responses by users outside of the class. Most of the students' contributions on both the wiki sites and the sites with user reviews seemed to be viewed as constructive.

Table I. The quantity and quality of user responses to students' published work

Platform	Number of Responses	"Positive" Responses
Blogs	0.00 comments	-
Wikis	20.88 edits	69% of content kept
User Reviews	1.34 ratings	63% rated usefully

Discussion

It is impossible to know exactly how many users outside of the class were accessing the students' contributions since none of these sites examined in this study included page counters. However, this study can provide a very rough estimate as to the potential audience of the students' work on each of the platforms. A brief analysis of *YouTube.com*, which releases data showing the number views, user ratings, and comments, reveals that the number of comments and ratings are comparable, and that there tend to be hundreds of comments and hundreds ratings for each view. Therefore, it is possible that the students' user reviews, which received 1.34 ratings on average, were viewed perhaps hundreds of times. On the other hand, there was no evidence of users outside of class viewing the student blogs. There were no comments on the blogs, and there were likely very few, if any, views. *Wikipedia* or *Wikitravel* pages edited by students were edited about 20 times on average, and were likely viewed many times more. Overall, instructors' can be fairly confident that, compared to blog publishing, having students' publish on content-specific sites with UGC provides students with a larger audience. Moreover, the fact that roughly two-thirds of the students' submissions received a "positive" response indicates that even intermediate language learners have a welcome place on the worldwide web, if they put forth their best effort.

Student opinions

The students were very enthusiastic about the course, including blogging and publishing on sites with UGC. A survey administered after the research project revealed that blogs were still the most popular platform on average. On a five-point Likert scale, blogs received 4.74 in terms of being useful and/or interesting. Wikis received 4.19, and the average for user

reviews was 4.33. This reinforces the idea that, while all of the projects were popular, blogs are the most risk-free and useful for nearly everyone. As mentioned above, the class consisted of students of various proficiency levels. Since some students, especially lower-level students, had their work deleted, it is clear that sites with UGC are not ideal for lower-level students, as mentioned above.

However, for certain higher-level students, these projects were the most motivating. Three people wrote a post-project reflection that the movie review project was the best, with one stating that she was "so excited when my first review was uploaded on [imdb.com]." It was evident that many students felt motivated to publish on a popular website. Students who added reviews on the *tripadvisor.com* site seemed to feel that their writing was especially useful. One student wrote, "I hope my review will help people who want to know about this hotel." Clearly, the student saw that her review could be meaningful and influential.

There were similar comments about wikis. One student stated that "I made my hometown page by *Wikitravel*. I wanna increase more infomation [sic] from now!" Another wrote, "My favorite thing... is Music project which I wrote a part of *Wikipedia* [sic]. When my sentences run in *Wikipedia*, I was pleased." Like with the user reviews, these students' were motivated that their work was published on such popular a web site, and they felt their writing had a purpose to inform others.

Meanwhile, student comments about blogs were different. The students wrote that writing on the blog felt easier and that they liked communicating with others in the class. One students' comment seemed capture the essence of blogging:

When I wrote... in the blog, I felt really excited. I had no idea to write in English is easy [sic] :) funfunfun!! I felt free from the wrong spelling or difficult grammers [sic], because this is MY blog!! Haha. ("Snory Nory Story")

While publishing on sites with UGC often motivated students to put forth their strongest effort, blogs seemed to promote fluency and community. The major reason for this was likely that the sites with UGC had an audience, while the blogs were apparently not viewed by anyone outside of the class.

Implications

Blogs have various uses in writing courses (see Lowe & Williams, 2004). However, since this study shows that they are not likely viewed by others outside of the class, instructors should not give students the idea that their blogs will be viewed by a "worldwide audience". Because blogs provide a relatively sheltered environment, blogging gives students the opportunity to develop their fluency (Fellner & Apple, 2006). Considering they are not likely to be viewed outside the inner-circle (and can be made private by changing the privacy settings), blogs are particularly good for low and intermediate learners.

As this study shows, publishing on public sites with UGC may be more meaningful than blogging and could lead to a larger audience. Therefore, they can be particularly motivating for intermediate or advanced students. *Wikipedia* and its related sites are ideal for practicing objective writing. Since lower-level students will likely have their work deleted, contribut-

ing to public wikis is not ideal for them. To lessen the chances students will have their work deleted and to ensure they will have something to add, the instructor should have students choose a topic which students know a lot about and whose page does not have much information yet. In the study, Wikipedians more often scrutinized the content of very popular pages or totally new pages. Therefore, having students choose an existing page with limited information is ideal. Choosing a topic from the students' country, such as a semi-famous musician, actor, or athlete, would provide many welcome opportunities. *Wikitravel* provides more chances since it is still under development and since students may have a lot of knowledge about their hometown. Other Wiki sites, including *Simple English Wikipedia* and *Wikihow*, provide even more opportunities for students.

User reviews also had an audience and were meaningful for intermediate and advanced students. Students can write a review on a lot of topics of interest, including movies (*imdb.com*), a destination, airline, restaurant, or hotel (*tripadvisor.com*), and music (*sputnikmusic.com*). Since most sites with user reviews do not allow users to comment or delete on other users' reviews, there is little risk. However, being rated as not useful could be discouraging. To ensure good writing and a favorable rating by other users, instructors should have students study other reviews to learn the vocabulary and to learn how to write objective summaries and subjective opinion paragraphs. Editing a draft or having other students peer review, which was not done in this study, would also help.

Limitations

Educators need to be careful making firm conclusions from this action research study. Although the responses to three platforms were compared, the responses were of such different types that testing the difference validly is not possible. In addition, the participants in the three variables were not equally or randomly distributed. While all users completed a blog, some students either did not or were not able to publish a wiki. These were often lower-level students who were more likely would have had their work deleted, if they had published.

Conclusions

Blogs, public wiki sites, and sites with user reviews all provide students a platform for publishing their work. However, an analysis of user responses to students' work shows that each project could serve a specific purpose. Blogs may be best for practicing fluency and building community since they have a smaller audience (and could be made private by changing the privacy settings). On the other hand, having students publish on popular sites with UGC provides students a larger audience and a more meaningful voice. *Wikipedia* or other public wiki sites and sites with user reviews offer intermediate and advanced students a meaningful platform to publish their writing. This study shows that their contributions are welcome, constructive, and accessed by web users outside of the class.

References

- Alm, A. (2006). CALL for autonomy, competence and relatedness: Motivating language learning environments in Web 2.0. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 2(3), 29-38.
- Anson, C., & Beach, R. (1995). *Journals in the classroom: Writing to learn*. Norwood: Christopher-Gordon Publishers.
- Bloch, J. (2007). Abdullah's blogging: A generation 1.5 student enters the blogosphere. *Language Learning & Technology*, 11 (2), 128-141.
- Federman, M. (2004, December 26). Blogging and publicity. *What is the message?* Author. Retrieved July 21, 2006, from www.mcluhan.utoronto.ca/blogger/2003_12_01_blogarchive.html#107184093362428431.
- Fellner, T., & Apple, M. (2006). Developing writing fluency and lexical complexity with blogs. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 2(1), 15-26.
- Godwin-Jones, B. (2003). Blogs and wikis: Environments for online collaboration. *Language Learning & Technology*, 7(2), 12-16.
- Lowe, C., & Williams, T. (2004). Moving to the public: Weblogs in the writing classroom. In L. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff, & J. Reyman, (Eds.), *Into the blogosphere*. Retrieved September 7, 2007 from blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere.
- Pinkman, K. (2005). Using blogs in the foreign language classroom: Encouraging learner independence. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 1(1), 12-24.
- Smith, C. (2000). Nobody, which means anybody: Audience on the world wide web. In S. Gruber (Ed.), *Weaving a virtual web: Practical approaches to new information technologies* (pp. 239-249). Urbana: NCTE.
- Suzuki, R. (2004). Diaries as introspective research tools: From Ashton-Warner to blogs. *TESL-EJ*, 8(1). Retrieved January 12, 2005 from www.kyoto-su.ac.jp/information/tesl-ej/ej29/int.html.
- Wikipedia:WikiProject Countering systemic bias. Retrieved, May 27, 2007 from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Countering_systemic_bias.

Author Biodata

Caleb Prichard is a language instructor at Ferris Women's University in Yokohama. He also serves as the coordinator for the Intensive English Program. He is interested in teacher training and materials development.