

Micropublishing as a Tool for Collaboration and Socialization

Alexander Ganz (Tucson, AZ)

Abstract

As a recent Stanford study proposes, writing is undergoing a significant shift towards a new media literacy, especially in the amount that is written (Thompson, 2009). The fact that students today often write for a broader audience rather than a single teacher, and especially the fact that enthusiasm for writing is significantly higher than it used to be, has brought educators to work deliberately to integrate this new writing process into the foreign language classroom. The goal is to both facilitate the writing process, and to engage students into this new mode of literacy. Several types of micropublishing [MP] tasks have been tested by language educators including blogs, boards, wikis and student designed web pages. This paper will try to give a short overview on how these tools can be used to promote online and offline socialization strategies in the foreign language classroom, with a focus on collaboration, revision, and motivation in the fostering of classroom interaction.

Keywords: micropublishing, blogs, motivation, socialization, collaboration

1 New Media Tools in the Language Classroom

Recently the influence of online and new media tools has increasingly become an integral part in many language learning classrooms. Educators continue to leverage the possibilities that internet tools provide, for both the creative writing and reading process in their students' first language, as well as in foreign languages. Given the individual focus on reading, writing, and listening in foreign languages, different types of social tools are predominantly integrated into the classroom. This development occurs as several recent studies propose that the general writing process is drastically shifting (Thompson, 2009) and teachers need to be aware of how to make use of this newly facilitated motivation and the processes that are

involved. Especially the globalized and multilingual environment that teachers have at their feet with environments like Facebook, Twitter or the Blogosphere, creates a condition that shifts drastically from the classroom community into a new cultural online community outside of day to day educational setting.

While talking about new media or web 2.0 technologies, several definitions have been put forward in order to clearly frame the tools that are available for teachers and learners alike. Conway defines the range of devices as “applications that merge traditional media such as print [...] with digital technology to create interactive and dynamic publications, tools and uses” (2011, p. 245). While new technologies or tools emerge almost daily, a general categorization can be classified in the aspects of collaborative workspaces that foster an increased connectivity and editorial capabilities between individuals (both the teacher and the students) in an asynchronous online setting.

Murray and Hourigan (2006) defined micropublishing as a newly integrated language learning tool, which gives students the ability to move away from solely writing for their teacher or classmates, but to write for a new audience that interacts through the internet with the author. Their overview of relevant research indicated that this process involves both a different process in writing and the move to a more collaborative approach between teacher and student. Both the teacher and the learner are involved in a blended environment that increasingly draws on multiple steps of production.

The use of wikis, blogs, chats, instant messengers, or even Facebook and MySpace, has seen a dramatic increase and has led to a whole group of new learning and interaction abilities for the participants. As research indicated, those new abilities are both: a result of this new writing/reading practices, as well as the ongoing cultural development within languages, and therefore need to be taught by any instructor (Kramersch, 2009). Keywords like "cultural translation" (Byram & Kramersch, 2008, p. 20), "translingual and transcultural competence" (MLA, 2007 as cited in Byram & Kramersch, 2008, p. 20), and "intercultural competence" (Elola, 2008, p. 454) have played into the writing field and have pushed the move to integrate tasks of micropublishing [MP] into the classroom.

In addition, recent research focus has been laid on the potential of connecting this new socialization web with foreign language research concepts such as Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD; see Thorne, 2009) to explore the promise of incorporating

media-based communities in the foreign language learning process. The possibility of using tools like social media (i.e. Facebook, Twitter), blogs or wikis to explore the capabilities of theories like Vygotsky's, seems more appropriate than ever, given the fact those internet communities and the socialization and learning processes included provide group identities hardly found in conventional classroom interaction. Experiences of reduced anxiety, increased motivation, stronger community building, and the construction of group identities play a vital role in considering new media in the process of increased socialization and classroom interaction (Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Lam, 2004; Thorne et al. 2009; Miceli, 2010). Moving from computer mediated exercises towards a facilitated environment which ignores the traditional isolated task-based learner structure not only creates opportunities for group development, but features an enhanced personal involvement, acting as motivator and catalyst towards classroom community building.

While many classrooms are already heavily engaged in using tools like blogs or wikis, the aforementioned writing process also poses questions about how teachers can successfully incorporate literacy practices that ~~has~~ have shifted significantly from traditional classroom activities. This paper examines research regarding micropublishing with a focus on blogs and related processes of socialization in the classroom and tries to draw a concept of an integrative socialization method through it. As indicated, issues of collaboration, interactivity, community building, and participation (Savignon & Rothmeier, 2004; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Thorne et al, 2009; Miceli et al, 2010) are evaluated to examine factors of feasibility and interaction-to-socialization successes.

2 Many-to-Many Interaction and Processes in Micropublishing

Blogs are designated as "one-to-many" interactions in comparison to wikis or other social tools and possible "many-to-many" (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008, p. 9) communications. Working with micropublishing in any context (or with any tool) involves interactivity and collaboration. The writer may take a standpoint while enabling viewers/readers to engage in discussions in the form of direct or indirect feedback. This process facilitates interactions and patterns in the form of multi-level social spaces, discovered conversations and group development (Ducate &

Lomicka, 2008, p. 9). This fosters both interpretative and presentational skills and can be briefly described as "one, large, loosely interwoven net of information" (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008, p. 10).

While all of these interactions between writer and reader are desired and encouraged, the question is how this writing, editing, and interaction can possibly be considered an equal or even more-suited environment of socialization for the use in foreign language classroom environments. As Ducate and Lomicka (2008) explain, teachers want to encourage a best-case scenario of micropublishing that stimulates debates, drives critical analysis, and encourages a better communication of ideas and opinions compared to a standard classroom setting. In addition, it is beneficial when a student acts as a reader or writer. In a 2005 study by Ducate and Lomicka, both authors created blogs in both German and French foreign language courses with the goal of promoting social interaction and increasing the quantity of writing without initially forcing students to independently produce blog writing. This was done by reading native speakers blogs weekly and collecting information about the culture, the blogger, and the target language. Collected notes were then compiled into a research project and presented in both a presentation and a short written report at the end of the semester. In addition, focus group interviews and pre- and post-questionnaires were designed to assess students' reactions to this project.

Since this kind of *passive* approach to implementing blogs in the foreign language classroom is rather unusual, the research followed up with the same group of students in their fourth semester of German and fifth semester of French, when students were asked to post weekly entries to their personal blogs and comment on classmates' blogs. The authors found that students followed a set of eight steps while engaging in this process, most notably "Getting to know the Blogger", "Articulating the identity of the Blogger", "Exploring blogging in the foreign language", "Establishing an identity as a FL Blogger", and "Forming a community with classmates and/or FL community". The blog-based tasks seemed to provide a communication forum for the classes in a way traditional writing tasks could not have offered. Students were enabled to connect to their peers and external blogs during any stage of the project through interaction inside and outside of the blog (commenting, in-class discussions, and assessment through the instructor). The writing process itself was assessed not only as a tool to engage with the foreign language itself (identification with the blogger as well as with

the blog), but also with a cooperative spin towards blog-to-blog interaction and discourse strategies – an interaction and socialization process that could hardly be achieved through conventional offline writing practices. In general, most students reported a positive experience in writing the blog and saw it as an improvement in the academic learning process of writing.

Miceli et al. reported a similar experience in their research regarding the enhancement of learners' participation and their sense of community in L2 classes (2010). By combining offline and online writing tasks, students produced on average a higher number of words individually than students in regular contact classes and fostered a blended learning environment in which the authors found additional stimulus to create constructive social presences and community building. The authors emphasize that the tasks moved from a course-led controlled type of writing to a freer and engaging environment that fostered students' preferences in both talking and writing through personal approaches by recalling experiences and perspectives. Providing a forum in which students were able to transform conventional classroom interaction into an exercise of respect and collaborative participation seemed to be the overwhelming result of this study which featured promising key-findings in students' end-of-semester evaluations. Students reported on a variety of advantages in comparison to the traditional setting regarding the question "Do you think that using the blog [the micropublishing] influenced (positively or negatively) your feelings of belonging to the class-group and the way you see the class-group?" (Miceli et al, 2010, p. 336), most notably:

1. [...] for me especially as I joined the class this semester; allowed to know more about my classmates and they were very nice and open to having me in the class
2. I think it was a positive influence as the contact with the group continued outside the classroom
3. I think it helped the sense of belonging

Miceli et al. therefore summarize a set of factors that played into the increased socialization process throughout the micropublishing experience (2010). Besides the general factors of an increased literacy development, students were especially connected through the use of the blended learning environment, i.e. the classroom discussions as well as the

personal blogging experience. According to the author, the combination of classroom contact hours and online experience fostered exploratory class cohesiveness and helped maintain a “constructive social presence” (2010, p. 338). Especially the style of interaction and the plurilingual discourses led to a stronger community and sense thereof, mainly through the discussions involving personal experiences in the blog-writers’ own voice.

While the above results look promising, certain aspects of interaction such as physical distance and the loss of face-to-face interaction can certainly affect the community building process and the involved individuals. It is therefore immanently important that the group finds ways of defining itself towards its members and the possible public to increase the effective sense of community. Defined as a space in which members actively and cooperatively work together to solve common tasks, members have to engage in a setting in which they share personal thoughts, information, and opinions in order to compensate for the lack of physical contact classes.

3 ONLINE COLLABORATION AND PEDAGOGICAL GOALS

In her research collaboration during micropublishing tasks, Soares describes two different types of blogs that fit educational purposes (2008). As Soares mentions, previous research from Campbell (2003) suggests that the learner blog, where a student runs the blog individually (or collaboratively as group), and the class blog, where both student and teacher collaboratively work on the tasks, fit a wide array of educational goals. Since both blog types involve some kind of collaboration, the pedagogical goals of sharing knowledge, feelings and thoughts, and the possible linguistic practice are generally fulfilled (Soares, 2008). The learner blog was identified as the better choice to foster the standardized purpose of reading and writing, especially once students realize that they are interacting with a real audience and therefore an additional community outside of the classroom. Thus the expectation is that students are more concerned with what they write about instead of the correct use of grammar and spelling. The idea is that students would consequently experience the "potential for alternative expression and a pathway for reflection“ (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003 as cited in Soares 2008, p. 519), leading to a deeper learning experience and

sense of community. While this form of micropublishing initially seems to foster individual writing and reading skills, students can be assigned to groups to produce multi-faceted entries, based on group-discussions and collaborative discourses. As an outlook, teachers could then facilitate exchanges with other groups of learners interacting with the personal/group blog entries as part of additional on- and offline classroom environments. While the author's research revealed a variety of downsides, especially with the group of students used for the research (ESL teenage students), and the decision to run a class-blog instead of individual publications, the overall idea remained the same.

To identify the possible advantages of micropublishing techniques in terms of community building, one must first understand the process that underlies the use of modern web technology in a broader educational sense. Murray and Hourigan (2006) identified MP as a possibility to widen students' audiences and therefore giving the students a heightened sense of community and integration (as previously mentioned in Miceli et al, 2010). Both authors give several suggestions on how current research and theory might offer successful ways of integrating micropublishing in the classroom. In order to fully understand the process that is behind public writing for students, teachers need to be aware that this will "involve blended roles for the teacher and the learner, both in the classroom and in some of the virtual writing spaces on the web" (Mishan, 2004 as cited in Murray & Hourigan, 2006, p. 149).

Since this process is a complete collaboration in both the functional, as well as the writing activity, each individual includes their own expertise, motivation, and needs, to create a very complex environment. Additionally, instructors need to be aware of the different approaches the writing process has seen, going from the traditional product approach to a system of problem-solving, planning, and contextualization. Giving effective and critical feedback to students has become essential in any post-process theory, and even more so if the process ought to be community-centered. This is especially vital given the possible feedback compared to traditional comments on papers or more modern approaches like commenting on blogs, posts and personal websites. The change here can be summarized as moving from a practice unidirectional feedback to a more collaborative and dialogic. Therefore the goal for educators is to see MP as a complex model that moves away from conventional classroom interaction processes towards a multi-faceted tool for language acquisition which fosters personal interaction in a digital environment.

The knowledge transfer that initially was teacher-learner based has now moved towards an increasingly collaborative and constructive setting. While working in groups, as suggested by Soares (2008), students are more deeply involved and develop a sense of "co-ownership and joint responsibility" (Murray & Hourigan, 2006, p. 151). In addition, research showed that this collaborative process produces better texts in all aspects of language development (task, grammar, complexity) given the fact that computers in general offer a superior environment for composition (Murray and Hourigan, 2006).

The question of a blog's integrity (and a student's or a group's writing) is constantly challenged through a variety of freely available inputs such as multiple edits, deletion, comments, and the addition of supporting media such as pictures or references. Students are enabled to change content and voices, either as they acquire new knowledge, or as they find themselves in the position where produced texts do not seem to align with their own *identity* anymore. Comments from visitors, classmates, or the teacher below a student's blog can include much more than the indication of possible lexical, contextual, and grammatical errors in the sense of a learning environment. Online interaction within the immediate online class community has been shown to lead towards the construction of social identities and online relationships (Thorne et al., 2009; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011) that foster digital literacies far beyond the isolated classroom experience.

Students' perceptions regarding the use of blogs have been mainly positive. They have been seen as an improvement to the traditional classroom; a tool, which fosters foreign language learning, cultural exchange, and collaborative discourse (Ducate & Lomicka, 2006; Savignon and Roithmeier, 2004). As blogs, wikis, and other online tools are implemented in many foreign language classrooms, teachers need to be aware of the additional implications online environments have on their practices. While students willingly post status updates on Facebook and other sites, they are still in control of who they share information with.

Nevertheless students' writing exercises in blogs for the classroom are publicly available for everyone to read. Students are not able to decide whether they want to share their writing with fellow classmates or not. They not only engage in critical discourses, e.g. the death penalty (Savignon & Roithmeier, 2004), but also in the expression of personal details about themselves. Feelings, moods, or inappropriate comments are possible in blogs

and are issues that might concern other students or the teacher and affect the socialization in and outside of the classroom almost instantly.

This situation can be both, a great asset to a student's language development, and a possible risk concerning the interaction with a student's classroom discourse both online and offline. Ducate and Lomicka encountered one German student in their project who shared intimate details and feelings in his blog entries (2006). This included instances of his grandfather's death or his cousin being in Iraq. The student in general contributed often to class discussions, but never in a personal manner as he did in his blog. The authors assume that he would have been too timid to mention any of these issues in the classroom environment as to the restrictive nature of class discussions. It is safe to assume that the more distanced nature of the blog also helped in enabling the student to talk about more personal issues.

Therefore, the goal has to be to make students aware that their writing endeavors are public and subject to comments or intensive discussions. If teachers decide to involve third party viewers (e.g. other classes, collaborative projects with other schools, etc.) students need to be informed of any public process and given a chance to getting accustomed to a learning environment that can be intimidating, challenging and unexpected. Given this initial statement, students should then be more aware of the writing process and engage their products more critically ensuring a solid approach to any personal issues.

In addition to the critical factors of these public instances, students' motivational aspects clearly play an increased role in the usage of online collaborative writing and reading. While Lamy and Hampel indicate that the extrinsic factors might be lowered, mainly due to limited participation or assessment requirements, students' asynchronous writing experience can result in higher intrinsic motivational factors (2007). While obvious facts such as writing for a real audience and the reflection of personal interests and opinions are certainly important, the intrinsically important factors for this paper such as working collaboratively or the participation in authentic exchanges with peers, teachers and/or native speakers cannot be underestimated. These "empowering learning environments" (Lamy and Hampel, 2011, p. 83) create a sphere of motivational factors which, through the right stimulus and instructor-led cooperative tasks are destined to lead to an increased socialization and community building within the particular micropublishing task. Enabling students to collaborate within a wide array

of active discourses such as commenting, reflecting, independent participation, process-oriented activities and their assessment can increase the overall motivation and therefore the process of social construction was an individual in the group (Chelliah and Clarke, 2011, p. 281).

As the trend continues to form mediation between micropublishing, traditional writing, and other in-class activities, educators are required to shift their focus from the fascinating aspects new tools offer to the traditional question of classroom interaction and socialization. Concepts of writing processes, literacy, and technology have to be considered when preparing possible learning strategies for these new kinds of exercises and environments. Although these processes initially seem not to differ too much from traditional writing, they involve more factors than are visible on the surface. Micropublishing is as refined as its problems when it comes to its use in the foreign language curriculum. The added value to students' abilities in the target language and culture are preferable and recent research indicates that the added construction of group identities fosters the overall learning process. However, any kind of micropublishing has to be soundly designed regarding the task, time, goals and assessment, to reinforce the learning within the classroom first and then to leverage the above mentioned benefits regarding the L2 learning process and the intended community-building.

4 Concept of an Integrative Socialization Process through Micropublishing

The multi-faceted approaches made available through recent technological advancements such as blogging, online curating or simple day-to-day web interactions show us that the current language socialization process could indeed be far more advanced than many of us realize. Even without the use of micropublishing or other new media tasks in classrooms, a vast majority of our students continuously engage in online interactions, partially even outside of their L1 in order to form communities with friends, family or strangers in target languages of their interest.

Virtual spaces such as chats, social networks, blogs, or network-based games facilitate a level of interaction and socialization which could not have been leveraged for second language learning and the appropriate research more than a decade ago. While a variety of socialization frameworks exist, detailed qualitative studies, especially those of longitudinal character, are still few. Most of the research discussed above or available today discusses a variety of case studies that look onto the community of learners in the aspects of achieving certain pedagogical tasks rather than looking at the possible factors in terms of socialization in the new media-enabled classroom setting. In addition, learners are analyzed primarily to the extent of qualitative one-to-many interaction frameworks, i.e. the individual's personal view on their integration and socialization within the educational setting online and in class. These approaches therefore rarely take into account the interwoven classroom community, which dissolves into arrays of interrelated discourses with the introduction of new media tools (especially the above mentioned) and the appropriate exercises.

I have talked about a variety of instances in which micropublishing online leads students into an environment they more or less are already accustomed to. Following Prensky's concept of "digital natives" students are generally networked online before they enter the classroom (2001). Building on the momentum of these already established structures of friendship, networking, openness and community participation, educators are suggested to move away from the isolated and instructed L2 settings that foster learning "about language" (Thorne et al., 2009) and engage in the possibilities a learning *with the language* setting offers via the vast collection of online tools. While certain aspects of these environments such as pragmatics or vocabulary acquisition are visible, practices of socialization are still to be analyzed in greater detail to provide quality guidance and instruction for foreign language teachers on how to leverage this new form of socialization effectively.

As teachers engage more and more with new web technologies, the act of learning has transformed significantly into a field of "productive relationships" that feature "acts of reciprocity, recognition, respect and benevolence" (Conway, 2011, p. 246). Exactly these acts build the foundation for a collaborative space and social interaction between the key participants that a normal writing process may not have delivered before. It is hard to imagine on how in a traditional class setting, students were asked to read and respond to an

arrangement of outputs by fellow classmates in the same way teachers nowadays ask of them.

Defining the process of socialization through micropublishing tasks is not as simple as assigning a framework of interaction towards a single tool or element of online learning. The processes involved from transforming a non-digital classroom into an ever-changing environment of online collaboration are varied and underlie a variety of practical implications. Research indicates a variety of successful examinations through various online writing tasks concerning the nature of an increased socialization inside of student groups and indications of heightened motivation and interaction (Lam, 2004; Miceli et al, 2010; Yang, 2011). Nevertheless the culture of micropublishing is far more complicated. In general, the goal must be to transform our conventional classroom interaction processes into interconnected and multi-faceted online tasks that foster personal interaction and socialization on a digital level while leaving room for facilitating the traditional learning processes. As some educators are more and more driven to move traditional tasks online, one must be aware of the possible constraints involved in trying to simply change the setting of the task. In order to achieve the intended and described results in terms of community building and to foster an integrated environment, teachers need to be aware of the goals they are trying to achieve -What do I want my students to learn? Do I work with the process or the results?

First and foremost it is vital to evaluate on how this micropublishing experience is integrated in the overall course context. The goal for the facilitator is to design writing tasks that create a lifecycle-like process by integrating collaborative literacy tasks, revision processes and forms of articulation through online feedback in a way that involves every student on (preferably) the same level. Achieving such an ambitious goal requires the teacher to redirect his or her attention towards the processes in which students interact online on a day to day basis. Chelliah and Clarke define this process through the creation of learning spaces that enable “teaching and learning modes to connect, collaborate, share, reflect and report” both face to face and online (2011, p. 278). In addition, this route would then cater towards the cited comparison of how digital students interact, namely by networking simultaneously with many others (2011, p.278). Therefore writing tasks would be designed to be shorter and geared more towards capturing the students’ opinion or reflection to a previous

piece of writing of their peers and interacting on a multi-level scale through various comments and reactions.

Researchers have found that experience-based writing and direct engagement towards these online products show increased collaboration and socialization compared to traditional writing tasks such as academic essays or short papers (Yang, 2011). Fostering this path of instruction, students are able to engage in a more personal way, initiating an environment to create social presences and identities within the realm of an online task and therefore are happy to pursue motivating writing tasks online as indicated by various case studies. In general the integration of such tasks automatically steers students into forming a community by cooperating, analyzing and reflecting directly on the writing processes of others. Direct engagement with fellow classmates, as well as the indirect engagement with the actual task (i.e. the writing and reading in a foreign language) increases both, interaction and the sense of community within the student body, simply by performing the instructor-assigned tasks.

In addition, research has shown that students tend to exceed expectations by producing any variety of additional content once actively engaged in the micropublishing task (Miceli et al, 2010). While fostering skill sets that match the demand of a twenty-first century education such as collaboration, sharing ideas, reflection and problem solving, the intended skills become part of a community construct that inadvertently leads towards the intended results of increased social interaction, collaboration and knowledge construction (Chelliah and Clarke, 2011). As long as teachers are aware of the design requirements needed to reflect these emerging technologies, the offered environments will increasingly see a construct that could possibly outshine traditional classroom interaction tasks and fulfill the contemporary needs of instructors, administrators and students alike.

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