A Framework for an Online Forum for a Writing Course

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**ABSTRACT**

The bane of teaching writing is that there is a scarcity of CALL (computer-assisted language learning) courseware that can effectively teach writing. Conventional CALL systems are unable to interact realistically and meaningfully with students and to provide the motivation for students to write. The success of e-Learning 2.0 that creatively applies technologies for social networking to education has pointed out a new direction for CALL. Based on insights from e-Learning 2.0, an online forum was developed and implemented as the CALL component of a writing course for ESL (English as a second language) learners in a university in Malaysia. The online forum project was conceptualised with the specific aim of helping to achieve the objectives of the classroom-based writing course it complements. With proper planning and implementation, the forum technology can be successfully utilised to complement writing instruction. This paper presents the framework that was used to guide the designing of the forum. It describes the five basic components of the framework, that are course objectives, the model adopted for the forum, pedagogical considerations, control, and teacher role.

**Keywords**
blended learning, CALL for writing, e-Learning 2.0, online forum, writing instruction

**1) INTRODUCTION**

Teachers of writing know intuitively that the teaching of writing requires the fostering of certain interpersonal dynamics between teacher and student. Writing requires human engagement, and cannot be taught effectively by merely taking the student through a set of algorithm. Thus, it is not surprising that there is a scarcity of CALL (computer-assisted language learning) courseware that can effectively teach writing. Conventional CALL materials are unable to interact realistically and meaningfully with students and to provide the motivation for students to write. Students require human interaction, audience, creative ideas, and conviction to develop as writers. Conventional CALL models are unable to meet these demands.

In recent years, the success of e-Learning 2.0 (Downes, 2005) that creatively applies technologies for social networking to education has pointed out a new direction for CALL. Based on insights from e-Learning 2.0, an experimental online forum project was developed to serve as the CALL component of a writing course in a university in Malaysia.

The online forum was conceptualised with the specific aim of helping to achieve the objectives of the classroom-based writing course it complements. The forum was conducted over two semesters with approximately 1500 students participating each semester. These students had enrolled for a general writing course which was a compulsory course for students with low to average English language proficiency. All the students were required to participate in the forum as part of their coursework.

The project demonstrated how the simple forum or discussion board technology can be
applied to achieve language learning objectives, more specifically, to develop writing skills among ESL (English as a second language) learners.

This paper presents the framework used to guide the design of the online forum. It describes the five basic components of the framework: course objectives, the model adopted for the forum, pedagogical considerations, control, and teacher role. The framework can serve as a guide for writing instructors planning on incorporating the online forum as part of their writing class.

2) WHY AN ONLINE FORUM?

The forum or discussion board networking tool was selected as the basis for the project because of its nature that requires interaction through the mode of the written word. Other more advanced technologies such as podcasting, video sharing etc. may not provide the platform for writing practice that is needed for a writing CALL programme to be effective.

Second, the online forum allows unlimited opportunity for students to write and express their ideas. The writing instructor’s ability to give and collect writing assignments cannot match the speed with which students are able write in an online forum. There is a limit to the number of writing assignments the instructor can read and grade. However, this should not be the reason to limit students writing practice. An online forum allows students to write as much as they are motivated to do so.

Third, an online forum allows for active interaction between writer and reader, and encouragement and learning from peers. As the social context has been found to be an important factor that shapes writing (Schultz & Feco, 2000; Vipond, 1993), fostering a supportive e-community and environment is expected to contribute positively to students’ writing development.

Many ESL students, especially low proficiency students, see writing as a difficult task. Thus, reducing apprehension towards writing (Daly, 1978; Gungle & Taylor, 1989) and providing motivation for students to write is an important issue in any ESL writing programme. The online forum, being a tool of social networking, is able to spur students to communicate with each other through the medium of writing. Writing is thus made a part of the social networking practice, which makes it less threatening to learners.

The online forum also provides students with a strong sense of audience and a purpose to write which are important motivators. All writers write for an audience, and student writers are no exceptions. By providing a real audience for students’ writing in the forum, students no longer write solely for the benefit of the instructor, but has the opportunity to interact with and co-construct their writing with their readers (see Vipond, 1993; Gergen, 1995).

3) THE FRAMEWORK

This section presents and describes the components of the framework used as a guide in the designing and implementation of the online forum in the project. The components, though each conceptually different, are closely linked in a web of interdependent relationships. The framework affirms the importance of sound pedagogical planning, the foundation of all effective educational interventions, whether with or without the use of technology.

3.1) Course objectives and forum objectives

For a CALL programme to be successfully carried out in the blended learning mode, planning must begin with the integration of the CALL component with the classroom-based instruction (see Colbert et al., 2007; Warschauer, 1996; Kannan, 2000). The first component in the framework is the aligning of the objectives of the online forum with the course it is created to complement. The online forum should not merely contribute to students’ language learning in a vague way, but should be clearly streamlined with the objectives of its classroom-based offline counterpart. The streamlining of objectives has implications towards on the one hand, students’ perception
of relevance and therefore acceptance of the forum activity, and on the other hand, the justification for grants and funding to carry out the project.

Furthermore, the determination of the forum objectives is crucial as it affects the decisions to be made for the other components in the framework. For example, the selection of the forum model to be adopted, type of writing prompts, assessment and control measures relate directly to the objectives of the forum.

3.2) Forum model

The technology of online forums is fairly simple. It comprises applications allowing members of the forum to log in with or without restrictions, and post comments, as well as member/group management features for the leaders of the forum. However, how the forum can be used for educational purposes varies considerably.

A survey of English language learning websites available on the internet yielded several models that academic online forums commonly adopt.

3.2.1. The ‘ask-the-expert’ forum

This is the type of forum that is most suited for content-based courses as well as grammar, where the instructor, the ‘expert’, answers questions from the students, clarifies their doubts and gives motivation and advice to students about learning. An example of this is the ‘Grammar Clinic’ (see Appendix A).

3.2.2. The student community forum

This is by far the most common and prevalent of the models used. The forum ‘belongs’ to the students, who are expected to provide social support to each other on matters that are important to them. Some forums limit discussion to academic subjects, while some function as free bulletin boards where students may even post personal notices such as ‘room for rent’. An example of this type of forum is shown in Appendix B. It is noted that the type of writing usually elicited from members in forums of this type ranges from short communicative messages to longer messages for the sharing of ideas.

3.2.3. The ‘serious discussion’ forum

The third possible model for online forums is the ‘serious discussion’ forum, where the leader or instructor leads by posting questions and topics for discussion. Often, discussion will revolve around prescribed readings. It is noted that this forum model is used mainly for ‘content’ intensive courses, where theories and their application are discussed. The focus of such forums is the content discussed and the goal is to promote, or to demonstrate, deeper understanding of the material. In ‘high control’ forums, the instructor sets stringent rules and conveys his/her expectations on the quality of discussion required (see Appendix C for an example).

3.2.4. The creative writing forum

This model is the closest to the ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) model, where members of the forum post creative writing work and give constructive comments to each other on how to develop their writing. An example of this is the “Writers’ Digest” forum (see Appendix D) where a leader posts writing prompts on a regular basis and members write accordingly. The members are mostly creative writers and students of creative writing, learning from each other to develop their skills within their ‘practice’. The focus of the forum is on the skill of writing effective stories.

Thus, in designing an online forum activity, decisions have to be made about which forum model is appropriate following the stated objectives of the forum as an instructional tool for language learning. In tailoring a forum activity to the objectives and needs of the learners, hybrid models are encouraged, as creativity in the application of technology to education is the mainstay of e-Learning 2.0.

3.3) Pedagogical considerations

The next component in the framework has to
do with pedagogical considerations. Especially for e-Learning, pedagogical considerations must be held sacred over any hype in the use of technology. As Warschauer has rightly pointed out, effectiveness of CALL does not depend on the technology, but on how the technology is used (1996).

3.3.1. Theoretical paradigms and approaches to writing instruction
The important questions that instructors must ask are what theories of language learning and instruction underpins the approach that will be used in the e-Learning/CALL activity being planned, and how should they be implemented as an online forum activity?

Instructors must be aware of the different views of writing, such as the cognitive view of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1980), the socio-constructivist view (Gergen, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978), as well as the various approaches to writing instruction such as the product-oriented, process-writing, and genre approaches. Awareness of these views about writing and writing instruction will influence the decisions that are made about how the online forum is implemented.

Decisions on what paradigm and approaches to adopt hang upon the objectives of the learning activity being planned. For example, if the objectives of the online forum are to develop students’ critical thinking abilities (cognitive view of writing), and to develop ideas collaboratively with their peers (social constructivist paradigm), it is likely that the writing prompts/tasks given in the forum will be of the thought-provoking and high-interest type, or those that require higher-order analytical skills. Moreover, peer feedback and interaction should be highly encouraged, in line with writing instruction approaches informed by the social constructivist view of writing.

Thus, the selection and adoption of theories of teaching and learning will no doubt have implications on the other components of the framework.

3.3.2. Espoused theories versus ‘theories-in-use’
The activities in the forum should be designed and be seen to achieve the desired outcome. For this, the type of prompts provided, the topics of discussion selected, the type of feedback given, the method used to encourage interaction, and other aspects of the actual ‘operation’ of the forum that reflects the “theory-in-use” (Argyris & Shon, 1974: 6), must be clearly spelt out. For example, providing detailed correction of sentence level grammar of a student’s attempt to argue a point may be detrimental to the student’s confidence and practice of co-constructing meaning with his/her readers (social constructivist view of writing). It would be appropriate, though, for a stated objective of teaching grammatical awareness.

Thus, as important as pedagogical awareness is to the planning process, knowledge of how to apply the pedagogy practically and appropriately in the specific context of the forum activity is just as important, to avoid the unintended inconsistencies between espoused theory and ‘theory-in-use’.

3.4) Control
Another important factor to consider in the framework is the issue of control. How much and what type of control should be imposed? This section discusses the areas of control that should be carefully considered.

3.4.1. Assessment
Assessment represents the most effective means of control. Marks can be awarded for participation, quality of writing, asking questions, etc. The criteria for assessment made known to students usually provide a strong control over the type and quality of the writing in the forum. While online forums for ESL learners that do not impose any assessment on the students’ work or participation can reduce anxiety of the students towards the activity, many instructors find that no assessment often results in poor participation and poor performance (McCarthy, 1999).
3.4.2. Interactivity
To ensure a sufficient level of interactivity in the forum, the instructor may have to lay down rules for interaction. This is important especially for models that utilise peer feedback and collaborative work as an important part of the learning process. An example of such a rule is the specification of the number of times per week a student must post a comment on or a response to a fellow forum member’s post.

3.4.3. Feedback
Control may be exercised in the area of feedback. What kind of feedback can or cannot be given, and by whom? In order for peer feedback to be effective, training students on how to give constructive feedback will be helpful.

3.4.4. Access
A decision has to be made about the openness of the forum. Should it be completely open in the World Wide Web, or should access be restricted only to registered students? Do we want students to experience exchange of ideas with people of other nations/cultures, or do we want them to interact only with members of their own class?

There are pros and cons for different levels of openness the forum adopts. Basically, the more open the access, the more ‘threatening’ but challenging the environment. The more closed the access, the ‘safer’ the environment. The instructor will have to evaluate whether the students are ready and for which level of access.

3.5) Teacher role

The role of the teacher in the online forum must be clarified and made known to the students. This is to prevent a mismatch of expectations that could undermine the success of the forum and the students’ satisfaction level.

What role will the teacher be playing in the online forum? Will he/she be an ordinary member of the forum community, the ‘expert’ who answers questions, the facilitator/m motivator who provides topics and questions to guide discussion, or is the teacher purely an administrator who has no role in the discussion?

From the project that was carried out by the researchers, it was found (through informal sampling of students’ feedback posted in the forum) (see Appendix E) that a contentious issue among the ESL students is the expectation that the teacher’s role is to correct the grammatical errors in their writing. In the feedback they gave after the project, a small number of them mentioned that they wanted the teacher to point out errors in grammar and sentence structure in their forum posts.

Also, some of them wanted more online interaction with the teacher, indicating they preferred a stronger presence of the teacher. This may be because the students, and possibly most Asian students who are used to teacher-centred instruction, may not be sufficiently exposed to the practice of CALL where independent learning without the security of the presence of a teacher is the norm. The results obtained from another CALL project that was carried out in the same university with a different group of students pointed to the same conclusion (Liew et al., forthcoming). The students had agreed that they were not very comfortable learning in the CALL environment without the presence of a teacher.

4.0) CONCLUSION

The online forum, a web-based social networking platform, can be modified as an e-Learning tool for the teaching and learning of writing. Properly designed, it is a promising alternative to conventional CALL coursewares for developing writing skills in ESL students.

Informal sampling of students’ feedback on the forum project showed that even the students with low proficiency in English felt that they had improved in their writing skills and had an overall positive learning experience (see Appendix F for an example).

The components of the framework described in
this paper can serve as a guide for instructors of writing to design and tailor the use and implementation of the forum platform to the specific needs of their students. In an age where networking is said to spur social learning, educators should and can successfully harness the advantages offered by e-Learning 2.0 to achieve down-to-earth learning objectives.

4) REFERENCES


5) APPENDICES

Appendix A: Example of an Ask-the-Expert Forum: Lydbury English Centre’s Question and Answer Grammar Clinic

**play dance**

POSTREPLY Cancel Search this topic... Search

play dance

Dby wenlee on Mon Oct 06, 2008 2:49 pm

1) I can play dance.
2) I often play dance on the machine.

Is the phrase "play dance" in the sentences above acceptable?

Re: play dance

Dby admin on Mon Oct 06, 2008 3:48 pm

I regret it is not a phrase with which I am familiar.

Duncan Baker

http://www.lydbury.co.uk

Source:

http://www.lydbury.co.uk/forum/viewtopic.php?f=10&t=397

Appendix B: Example of a Student Community Forum: Cengage Education’s Student-to-Student Forum

**Does anyone need help in German?**

Dby SarahP on Wed Jan 24, 2007 1:41 am

I was just thinking that if anyone needs help with their German course feel free to ask currently studying in Australia.

Tschüß,

Sarah 😊

Dby Anna201002 on Sun Jan 20, 2007 3:49 pm

Hey there,

I'm German too. If anyone needs help, I'm here. What are you studying Sarah?

Cheers

"Anna"

Source:


Appendix C: Example of instructions for a ‘Serious Discussion’ Forum for a University Course

**Blackboard Postings**: Specific requirements for Blackboard posting will be listed with each dialogue period. In general, each student is expected to post at least once with original thought(s) and twice in response to classmate postings. **Online Dialogue** response to **instructors’ posted questions and peer postings** offers an opportunity for students to demonstrate some mastery of the concepts, as well as apply learned knowledge immediately. The focus of the dialogue will be on the student’s critical thinking skills as evidenced by substantive commentary. This means that student postings should be thoughtful and cogently responsive to the question or peer/instructor material that is posted. The dialogue format simulates a degree of normal classroom discussion and interaction. Where relevant and indicated in instructor postings, students will be expected to cite authors thought(s) and idea(s) relative to the question at hand along with the students understanding, knowledge, opinion and experience. Students should check [omitted material]

All students will be expected to participate fully in the online aspects of the course, and successfully fulfill all assignments. Class members are expected to show-up with **honest and grace-filled interactions that extend human dignity and worth to all members of the community while being willing to challenge one another’s thoughts.**

Source:

Appendix D: Example of a Creative Writing Forum: Writer’s Digest Forum

Baby Talk 2/26-3/3
Jump to page: 1 2 3
New message page 1 [25 messages per page]

Motivation: Station 2: Writing Prompts and Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Thread Name</th>
<th>Posts</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000-02-26</td>
<td>1:26 PM</td>
<td>Baby Talk 2/24-3/2</td>
<td></td>
<td>620</td>
<td>Inside the Writer's Digest office</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-02-26</td>
<td>3:30 PM</td>
<td>Baby Talk 2/26-3/2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1196</td>
<td>Somewhere between the twilight zone &amp; outer limits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Babies typically talk in babble that adults can’t understand. But one day, while next to two babies, they started babbling, when all of a sudden you realize you are plotting a nefarious plan. Write this scene.

Please limit your response to 500 words or fewer.

Re: Top 10
by tongueless9448 on Tue Sep 23, 2008 9:42 pm

Through this forum exercise, I learn a lot in the area of how to write an essay in a correct sequence found when participating in the forum is time management. Finding time to online with my love gave responses to the article is really a struggle for me. I guess there is nothing easiest to do with hardest part for students. Personally, I will rate myself average for my writing skills. There are confidence to write in English without a professional beside me. From topic 1 to 9, we always juggle grammars and tenses are correct or not. So, there is no input or feedback to our forum exercise to learn and achieve its objective.

Appendix E: A student’s feedback on the forum project

Topic 10
by NURUL142566 on Mon Oct 06, 2008 11:06 am

First time I know that I must give my opinions and comments in this forum, I feel like I want to diet. 😊 Actually, I don’t like to write an essay because I don’t know how to describe my point. 😞 After a few week, I started love to write in this forum although my English language is broken. 😄 The important thing that I learnt from this forum is how to express my opinions and give comments in simple paragraph. Although I take one week to finish a simple paragraph, I satisfied with my effort. Now, I only take about half an hour to finish my paragraph. 😍 From this forum, I also can give feedback to my friends according their opinion. Besides that, my friends and I can change and share more information about one topic. For conclusion, this forum must go on for next student especially for student who don’t like write an essay like me 😊

Source:
http://forum.writersdigest.com/forums/thread-view.asp?tid=16388&posts=54&start=1