

## Student Weblogs on Tawawa.org: Adventures in a Mixed Medium

By Rudolf AMMANN

As part of an English Composition course with third-year students at Mie University, I set up a weblog site to which the students were invited to post: Tawawa.org, a member site of the JapanBloggers<sup>1</sup> network. Here is a project outline followed by a few reflections.

### Some Background

When Jorn Barger, the creator of the term “weblog,” started posting to his Robot Wisdom Weblog in December 1997,<sup>2</sup> he did a relatively straightforward thing: he made a habit of linking to web pages he found interesting and added a brief comment to each link, thus offering a chronologically ordered collection of links that provided an alternative to the ordering of links by categories in web directories such as Yahoo and DMOZ. In a USENET posting he called the practice a form of “media digest.” Slashdot,<sup>3</sup> which was created in September 1997, did essentially the same and might have been called a group weblog except for the fact that the term hadn’t been coined yet. The most widely used metaphor for what the early weblogs did was that of “filtering” existing Web content, that is picking out, to borrow the phrase from Slashdot’s tag line, the “stuff that matters.”

The early weblogs led an existence separated from the older genre of online diaries, but soon came to be affected by it as new weblog creators increasingly shifted from media commentary to personal narrative. The process was sped up by the introduction of hosted Web publishing tools such as Pitas<sup>4</sup> in July 1999 and Blogger<sup>5</sup> in the following month, which made the practice of weblogging available to people with little or no technical knowledge and thus significantly increased its popularity. As media commentary came to be mixed with personal narrative, some weblogs stressed one over the other, while others provided them in equal measure.

In November 2000, Noah Grey released Greymatter,<sup>6</sup> a weblogging tool which to some extent changed the rules. The software, unlike Blogger, had to be installed on a user’s own server and allowed the page design of a weblog to be controlled down to the smallest detail via an intricate

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<sup>1</sup> The network consists of a mailing list and a webring: JapanBloggers Mailing List, founded by Stuart Woodward on Dec 12, 2002, unmoderated, 181 members as per October 2003 <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/JapanBloggers/>>; JapanBloggers Webring, founded by Megan Jane Daniels-Sueyasu on April 20, 2003. 113 members as per October 2003 <<http://www.souzouzone.jp/japanbloggers/index.html>>

<sup>2</sup> <<http://robotwisdom.com/log1997m12.html>>

<sup>3</sup> <<http://www.slashdot.org>>

<sup>4</sup> <<http://www.pitas.com>>

<sup>5</sup> <<http://www.blogger.com>>

<sup>6</sup> <<http://www.noahgrey.com/greysft>>

template system. More important, possibly, was the inclusion of commenting functionality which allowed readers to add responses to archived weblog pages. This new interactive feature, not previously available to the average user, significantly affected the dynamics of weblogs and shifted many of them towards the type of online conversations that were familiar from bulletin boards. At this stage, the weblog had come a long way from its beginning as a news digest: with personal narrative and user interaction added, it had become a very mixed medium.

It had also become a form of writing that is very hard to define. Dave Winer, struggling with a definition, opts for “voice of a person” as the defining feature:

they are writing about their own experience. And if there’s editing it hasn’t interfered with the style of the writing. The personalities of the writers come through. That is the essential element of weblog writing, and almost all the other elements can be missing, and the rules can be violated, imho, as long as the voice of a person comes through, it’s a weblog.

Winer’s “voice of a person” does not have much of the stringency he seeks for a possible definition of the genre. However, it pinpoints the immediacy and individuality that characterizes the weblog as a form of writing, no matter what an author’s chosen subject matter is, no matter what weblogging software, if any, a weblog runs on.

The emphasis on the individual’s voice, the genre’s flexibility and its interactive potential offer a wide variety of possible adaptations in the educational field, and an increasing number of educators are introducing student weblogs to their courses.<sup>7</sup>

### Infrastructure and Site Design

Tawawa.org runs on Movable Type,<sup>8</sup> a content management system firmly established in the world of personal publishing on the web, where it has created a whole culture surrounding it.

Since the university’s data center refused to host the Tawawa project because of their strict ban on CGI scripts, which are disallowed for security concerns, I had to look for alternative hosting. I was unwilling to run one of my own computers as a web server, so I had to resort to a commercial hosting company.

Building the site interface from scratch exclusively in XHTML 1.0 and CSS, I opted for a

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<sup>7</sup> Web sites that survey the field include Seblogging (<http://seblogging.cognitivearchitects.com>), Weblogg-ed (<http://www.weblogg-ed.com>), Educational Bloggers Network (<http://www.ebn.weblogger.com>)

<sup>8</sup> First released by Ben and Mena Trott in September 2001, Movable Type is a software package designed for weblogs and online journals. It is freely downloadable from [MovableType.org](http://MovableType.org) and can be used for non-commercial projects at no charge. The software proved a success right from the start and found a large and loyal user base throughout the world, including Japan.

Movable Type consists of a number of CGI scripts which can be set up on any web server that runs Perl and has either a Berkeley or MySQL database. While creating a main page to which new entries are added at the top and older entries are shuffled further down the page as new material accumulates, it also supports archiving on a daily, weekly or monthly basis in addition to single-post archiving and archives by category. Any number of separate weblogs can be run off a single install and any number of users can be signed up, all of whom can be assigned authoring and/or administrative privileges on any number of the weblogs created. As a web-based tool, it is accessible from any browser.

conventional weblog setup featuring a text area and a site navigation in a sidebar, and I gave the site a colorful look and feel that distinguishes it from out-of-the-box Movable Type setups. Given the fact that none of my students were previously familiar with the weblog format, I trimmed any and all non-essential and potentially confusing features that Movable Type includes by default: I removed the comment popup window (one of the infelicitous design choices promoted by the software), disabled Trackback and chose not to place the site under a Creative Commons license.

The most consequential site design decision I took involved setting the site up as a group weblog in which all posts by all contributors go to the same front page. I could have given each student a weblog of their own, but I anticipated that individual weblogs would have been felt to be too “lonely” and that they might have dissipated the strong group dynamics of a tightly-knit class. As an alternative, I could have given each student their own weblog while pulling their contributions into a master log, but I didn’t have the time to look into that. I did, however, use Movable Type’s category feature to create contributor archives, thus giving each contributor their own page.

As an afterthought to the original idea, I set up a second weblog to which, outside the course framework, the students were encouraged to contribute in Japanese. During the course, I extended the Japanese weblog with a moblog (mobile weblog) sidebar to which the students were able post both text and images from their cell phones.

### Course Design

The course consisted of fourteen weekly class sessions plus support provided online. The class sessions were informal, loosely structured meetings deliberately held in a classroom without access to computers rather than in one of the university’s computer labs. As part of these sessions I solicited questions, concerns and comments from every student in turn while trying to build conversations from the points raised. Straight instruction involved an introduction to structural markup and a few other technicalities pertaining to the Internet as well as to the practice and customs of weblogging.

The course ran as Composition III, third in a series of courses in which I teach the basics of

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The software is elegant, intuitive to use, highly adaptable, feature-rich, and has a well-designed user interface. Its HTML output is template-based, which makes its Web interface fully customizable and allows users to create a unified, site-wide look and feel. Its interactive features include comment functionality, which allows readers to add comments to archived entries, and Trackback, an interactive feature originally developed by Movable Type, which allows inbound links to an archive page to be displayed and hyperlinked on the very archive page itself. In addition, its architecture permits plugins, i.e. third-party extensions to the program, which adds another level of customization that greatly extends the range of possible uses. In an interview conducted by Jesper Lindholms, Jeremy Hedley aptly likens the software to “a big tub of bricks for the web.”

While it is geared towards the weblog format from which it emerged, its use is also being extended into the realm of academic courseware, a field currently dominated by far less flexible, not to mention more expensive, software products. In “MT as Courseware,” for instance, Elizabeth Lawley describes a somewhat heterodox use of the software integrated in one of her courses at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Alternatives to Movable Type include the somewhat expensive Manila (<http://manila.userland.com/>) as well as two zero-cost, open source applications; Nucleus (<http://nucleuscms.org>) and Drupal (<http://www.drupal.org/>).

expository writing. I extensively edit student work in all of my composition courses, and this class was no exception in this respect. Originally I envisaged an arrangement whereby the students would have sent me Word files that I would have corrected using Word's "track changes" feature, so the students would have had to go back into their first drafts and authorize or reject each of my changes separately before uploading their text. I quickly found that this wasn't practical since it built too long a loop into the publishing process. Instead, I asked the students to upload their texts to Movable Type directly, but save them as "Drafts", meaning that contributions did not get published until after I ironed the creases out of them. Once a contribution was published, students were encouraged to read it again, if only to make sure I didn't distort their meaning. Students were free to edit my edits.

In addition, I corresponded with my students via e-mail, mostly responding to issues they raised and offering help where needed.

Writing assignments were kept to a minimum; the first week's homework involved writing a one-paragraph entry that included a hyperlink and offered some personal comment on the contents of that link. A later assignment consisted in writing a portrait of a fellow student in the class; the interview with the American rock guitarist Dan Clark, with the EFL professor at Yokkaichi University Dan Kirk and with weblogger Mike Gerhardt were suggestions of mine taken up by three individual students. All other contributions were made under a wide-open brief: "write about the things you're interested in and care about; use and discuss hyperlinks where appropriate."

### **Assumptions**

Although the practice of weblogging has been established for quite a while, and advanced software tools that facilitate it have been available for years, weblogs in education are still at an emerging stage: most projects are of an experimental nature and a set of best practices is far from established. Given this fluidity, it seems like a good idea to spell out the assumptions that went into the making of the Tawawa course.

**EFL.** On a basic level, the Tawawa course was intended as an EFL course. English learners in Japan seldom experience spoken English in everyday situations, so they stand to benefit a great deal from being involved in Web-borne communication for the simple reason that the Internet's prevailing style is colloquial English, a variety of the language which is hard to teach in its protean manifestations and which students are not usually made aware of to a sufficient degree. As weblogging invites exchanges with other people, many of whom are native speakers of English, there is a steady exposure to real-life language.

The networking potential of weblog also holds the promise of breaking out from the confinement of classroom walls and taking the learning out to an open space where students can autonomously pursue their own lines of investigation and discuss their interests in an environment that de-emphasizes the hierarchical structure that prevails in conventional academic settings. The learning that results may be unstructured or even chaotic from a perspective of curricular control,

yet I believe that it will be greatly enhanced by the twin factors of authenticity and personal relevance to the learner: contributions get discussed and receive feedback from real people, and the exchanges that result speak to the points of interest that students identify in their contributions to the weblog.

JapanBloggers, a loosely organized network of mostly anglophone bloggers who either live in Japan or have some attachment to the country, seemed likely to provide a welcoming environment in which to put the above into practice.

**Writing.** Since the course was scheduled as Composition III, and since weblogs are primarily a form of writing, the course obviously aimed at improving writing skills. Whereas its predecessors, Composition I and II, focused on the conventional preoccupations of academic writing classes (paragraph structure, thesis statements, proper citation, etc. ), these preoccupations were not a priority. A weblog kept as part of a composition course invites what Winer identifies as the defining feature of weblogging, the “voice of a person.” While grammatical and typographical correctness remained a concern, other things did not.

**Media Literacy/Participation.** The weblog format draws a large part of its vitality from linking to other web content and commenting on it. As such, it encourages reflection in its practitioners, the ability to contextualize and evaluate Web-borne artifacts within a writer’s personal horizons. Even where the “news digest” format cedes to personal narrative, the weblog format fosters a critical outlook, a readiness to ask questions rather than accept ready-made answers and perspectives.

The Web itself as a medium is built by its users and thrives on their participation. Rebecca Blood sees this in terms of “a staggering shift from an age of carefully controlled information provided by sanctioned authorities (and artists), to an unprecedented opportunity for individual expression.” Moreover:

I strongly believe in the power of weblogs to transform both writers and readers from “audience” to “public” and from “consumer” to “creator.” Weblogs are no panacea for the crippling effects of a media-saturated culture, but I believe they are one antidote.

This transformation dovetails with an educational concern that aims to transform students from passive receptacles of information into self-directed, autonomous learners.

**Collaboration/Ownership.** Possibly the most naive assumption that went into the making of this course was the simple idea that the Web site would be play rather than work; that there would be an element of joyful tinkering with readily available technology which would supersede the usual power structure in an educational setting, bring about a flattened hierarchy in which the instructor acts as a facilitator rather than a scourge, offers assistance rather than dictates targets to be achieved. Thus, I expected the students to embrace the site as theirs rather than mine, particularly with the addition of the Japanese weblog/moblog as an area free of any sort of editorial intervention. Tawawa.org was intended as an open space for the students to take charge of and fill with their own creative energies.

## Discussion

Predictably, none of the above points proved unproblematic. Let me take them in turn.

**EFL.** Tawawa.org generated a considerable amount of interest on the Web at large. The site got commented on and blogrolled (i.e. put into a semi-permanent list of favorite links) on quite a number of other weblogs, many of them JapanBloggers sites run by English-speaking expatriates in Japan. In addition, there was a steady stream of visitors, many of whom repeat-visitors, and many of these visitors commented on individual entries, adding their own perspectives on the subjects at hand, discussing them, and thus eliciting responses from the original contributors.

Interaction with outsiders did occur and was easy to monitor owing to the Recent Comments feature in the site's sidebar, yet it was not as prominent an aspect of the project as one might have wished for: outside comments were relatively sporadic, and only few visitors became regulars. A bond with webloggers outside the class would also depend on the students taking the initiative; going out, reading and commenting on other weblogs. While I encouraged this initiative (and practiced it myself), I found the students were rather reluctant: a few of them did venture out and leave comments on other Web sites, but I never observed any protracted exchanges.

The students proved more comfortable commenting on the entries posted by their classmates. This led to protracted exchanges between them, which wasn't a bad a thing at all: language learners can greatly benefit from peer-to-peer interaction with their fellow learners.

**Writing.** The attempt to break out of the academic enclosure and situate the project in the JapanBloggers neighborhood created its own dilemma in that the neighborhood can rightly claim to have its values respected, most important of which, arguably, is the expectation that weblog authors not only write in the "voice of a person" but be a person in the sense that they follow their personal interests and write about what they care about. Topic assignments — the staple of traditional composition courses — suddenly turn into an oddity, which somewhat rattles the whole academic apple cart.

The brief to "write about what you care about" may also be problematic for students who grew up in a system that favors highly specific, clear-cut tasks with clear-cut instructions. Accordingly, there seemed to be a sense of irritation and lack of direction, particularly in the early stages of the course. This subsided somewhat as students got familiar with the Web site.

Another issue with the open franchise has to do with communication styles. Based on entirely episodic evidence, I would venture to claim that Japanese communication styles are less confrontational than their Western counterparts, favoring reiteration and repetition of shared beliefs and assumptions rather than questioning or challenging them: group boundary maintenance seems a higher priority than the individual sticking up for personal perspectives. This can lead to weblog posts that to the Western eye seem entirely banal or that read like marketing copy in tourist brochures. Charlie Kingham picked up on this in his review of Tawawa: "Sometimes it's powerful when a student writes about what they really feel, other times it can be completely anodyne." I privately discussed this point with some individual students via email but stopped short of discussing bad examples in class, which I didn't think was called for psychologically, so I

limited my comments to exhortations to write about things they were passionate about and praised the good examples instead.

**Media Literacy.** Up to the present, Japanese high schools largely failed to teach computing skills, and the rate of spontaneous take-up of computing among teenagers seems to be relatively low. Tim Clark, in an article titled "Japan's Generation of Computer Refuseniks" sees the problem exacerbated by the prevalence of cell phones: "Most teens and young adults in Japan rarely use computers to surf the World Wide Web. Instead they use cell phones to access a scaled-down wireless Web. The result: A growing computer literacy problem among Japan's youth." It's hard to tell if and to what extent Clark overstates his case, yet the idea of using the Web as a research tool, of going out there and tracking down information, does not seem to be firmly rooted. To be sure, one student contributed a well-researched and richly hyperlinked movie review, and another offered a very thoughtful critique of Japanese foreign policy towards the U.S., yet overall there was no significant tendency towards media commentary. In a future iteration of the course I will probably resort to assignments that foreground this aspect.

**Collaboration/Ownership.** When I discussed the project with a student a few weeks before it got under way, he responded with a spontaneous outburst of enthusiasm. I expected a similar response from the whole class, which, however, failed to materialize immediately.<sup>9</sup> Many students did warm up to the project in the following weeks, however. The proof of the extent to which students were ready to accept the site as play rather than work, as their own piece of turf rather than mine, I imagined for a long time, would be their willingness to keep going at it even after the term was over, after they could no longer expect the academic coin of grades and credit as remuneration for their efforts.

The transition from Tawawa.org as a course vehicle to a Web site based on voluntary participation, if it was ever going to happen, was thoroughly marred by a server failnre. For a mixture of complacency, preoccupation with all the other aspects of keeping the site afloat, I never created any backups of the site throughout the duration of the course. I was going to create backups after 10 August, which was the deadline for the last remaining student portraits to be posted, since I was planning to burn the site on CD and give it to the students. On 9 August, while two portraits were still missing, disaster struck and the site went down. The original database was lost in the crash as well as two months' worth of archive pages prior to the incident.

In the following weeks I signed up with a new host, re-installed Movable Type and re-created the site from the bits and pieces that I managed to salvage of the original version. By the end of the month I had the site up and running again, complete with both the English and the Japanese weblog. Still, with a few exceptions, the students did not return to the site, and it has been

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<sup>9</sup> This experience isn't unique. Oliver Wrede reports:

I also noticed students usually are much less enthusiastic about personal weblogs than educators. Educators hope for the empowerment of learners by helping them to create intellectual property. Students usually don't see a need for this and potentially see weblogging as a waste of time: the idea of having a personal webpage with (maybe) mediocre material does not seem to be appealing. I have seen very rare exceptions from this.

moving very slowly since. Still, at the time of this writing (October 2003) I am hopeful I will manage to attract a group of volunteer contributors who will participate much in the way they participate in the various clubs and circles that offer extra-curricular activities at this university.

One issue that affects not only the question of whether students are going to embrace the site as theirs but plays into practically all the problem areas outlined above is time. It takes time for students to get comfortable with the weblog form, and if it is at all possible to connect a university-based online project with the outside world, it will equally take time for a community to evolve around a site. In both cases, the span of a single term may be far too short.

### In the End

Was it worth the effort? One student reported that he read and wrote more in this course than in any other composition course, which would indicate a measure of success. I am also fairly confident that the kinds of interaction facilitated by the course improved the students' communicative competency in a number of key areas.

Shortly after the course launched, the site concept was taken up by Paul Collet, a fellow educator at Kitakyushu University, who implemented it for a group of his own students. Aaron Campbell, a teacher at the East Asia Center in Kyoto, called the project "inspirational" and suggested he might do something similar. This suggests that the weblog has some potential as a tool in university-level teaching, a potential that ought to be further explored in the future.

On Tawawa.org, I am currently trying to develop a writing culture with a group of volunteers and possibly gather a community around the site. A future course using the site, scheduled for the first term 2004/2005, will profit from the lessons learned during the first one, and should be able to plug into established, ongoing practices and a welcoming community of both learners and native speakers.

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