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Vlogging Abroad: YouTube Reports from New Zealand to Japan

Abstract

This article introduces the notion of 'vlogging abroad' in describing a case of videoblogging back to a women's college in Japan while traveling with students abroad in New Zealand. The needs served by vlogging abroad provide a rationale, but the community outreach afforded by social media such as YouTube may also be suggestive of further innovations. EFL practitioners in Japan are already noticing that, with fewer young people available to higher educational institutions, pressure has been increasing on faculty members to engage in community outreach activities. However, teachers could proactively offer alternatives to the redoubling of traditional efforts by taking the initiative with new technologies. Social media including online video could be utilized to reach a wider audience than was hitherto possible. This article thus describes the process of vlogging abroad in New Zealand for those who may find the approach of reference for similar projects in the future. The question of what would constitute an innovation is also considered in terms of social media and community outreach.

1.0 Innovations in Community Outreach with Social Media

For the purposes of this article, to briefly clarify the terms involved, community outreach could be defined as pursuing, for a certain purpose, connections beyond the radius of given relationships, for the mutual benefit of the institution and those it potentially serves. For a foreign language educator in East Asia, community outreach involves initiating intercultural communication with people other than students currently in one's classes, yet with a similar goal of motivating foreign language learners to participate in the target language community. While external pressures to face-to-face community outreach increasingly emanate from institutional imperatives, practitioners can initiate alternative forms of community outreach involving online technologies.

Community outreach in the sociocultural context of Pacific Asian education is detailed elsewhere, along with specific community outreach activities besides videoblogging, both requested and initiated voluntarily. The forthcoming manuscript also describes other contemporaneous initiatives where social media and other online technologies were utilized in order to enhance the integrative motivation of EFL students in Japan (Norris-Holt, 2001).

Social media can be defined broadly (Wikipedia, 2010) or with a narrower focus (Search Engine Watch, 2010). As opposed to social software, online social media can be seen more in terms of their social functions than as technologies. Although Wikipedia itself exemplifies social media, its definition is still in flux, having included offline meanings as well as venerable Web 1.0 applications. Wikipedia does cite the focus of Kaplan and Haenlein on "Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (2010). Search Engine Watch adds more specifics, including "social networking sites like LinkedIn or Facebook, social bookmarking sites like Del.icio.us, social news sites like Digg or Reddit, and other sites that are centered on user interaction." Indeed, social networking sites are currently most characteristic of social media as integrated platforms or suites of Web 2.0 technologies that are utilized to generate virtual social environments.

Categorizing YouTube as a form of social media raises many complex issues, in that YouTube makes quite a number of social media functions available, such as comments and sharing, while the social aspect of presenting online videos to mostly strangers is largely implicit. However, the preceding definitions prove useful in placing YouTube unequivocally among social media in the broader meaning of the term. In this case of videoblogging for a study abroad program, the videos were made with a specific communicative purpose and just intended to reach the targeted audience of college stakeholders.

As for what constitutes an innovation in this context, study abroad programs, short of becoming a distinct academic discipline, would seem to first seek best practices. Adding videoblogging, the quality measures or effectiveness criteria for best practices might span interdisciplinary areas between intensive L2 education and blended e-learning.

In the latter vein, the Sloan Consortium for quality online education has a framework of five pillars: learning effectiveness, cost-effectiveness and institutional commitment, access, faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction (Moore, 2005, p. 2). Their criteria for designating effective practices include innovation, that the practice has originality, as well as replicability, potential impact on the field, and documented evidence of effectiveness (Moore, 2005, p. 6). Crosta & Prieto "measure innovation in eLearning projects" (2009, p. 1), implying that "learning 2.0 technologies" (p. 2) provide criteria for their definition of innovation as combining technological and sociological breakthroughs with improved services to e-learning users. The above criteria may prove relevant to the vlogging abroad project to some degree, once its characteristics are examined.

2.0 The Study Abroad Program

Osaka Jogakuin College (OJC), a women's college with two-year and four-year programs, offers students various opportunities to study abroad, and in this case the author was selected to accompany students for the duration of their stay in New Zealand. Twelve students completing their first year at the two-year college, representative of the various placement levels at OJC, traveled to the southern island of New Zealand for a three-week study abroad program from February 22nd to March 17th of 2009. It featured different home stay families for each student and a three-week program at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT).

This study abroad program is designed as the culmination of an OJC course, an intercultural research practicum. An important duty of the faculty member every year is therefore to bring back videotape of all the students' final presentations at CPIT for the part-time teacher of the course in Osaka to evaluate. CPIT is a public university but, perhaps because of the beautiful environment of Canterbury Province, attracts many colleges in Japan and elsewhere to its International Program along with immigrant ESL learners. What CPIT offered to OJC after several years of consultations was a bicultural studies program, meaning that Maori studies were included as per the national policy of New Zealand. There were also some elements of global issues tailored to the content-based EFL curriculum of OJC such as local activism to protect vulnerable women, to oppose wars and racism.

3.0 Videoblogging Progress Reports to College Stakeholders from Abroad

The context as alluded above was that of female students going to a faraway country after two semesters of college English classes, supervised by a faculty member who needed to bring along a video camera. Although the possibility of culture shock is sometimes exaggerated, it is undeniable that suddenly leaving familiar territory, mentally as well as physically, with long airplane travel to an entirely new environment with a different language, can be stressful and disorienting. Study abroad experiences, including home stays, do not always go smoothly, and are therefore preceded by orientation sessions including various warnings. It is at least a presupposition in Japan that other countries are not as safe. Students occasionally withdraw from study abroad programs at the last minute before departure, or, after arriving abroad, cannot cope with the separation, local customs or language, and soon return home. Moreover, considerable sums of money and international relationships between institutions are also at stake. Thus, in view of the greater perceived risks to the well-being of young women in particular, relative to everyday life at home in Japan, parents, college staff, and others concerned with the students harbor justifiable worries. When the students depart, their parents and college stakeholders seek assurances as soon as possible that all the students are healthy and happy, well taken care of, not encountering any troubles, and improving their English.

It is incumbent upon the supervising faculty member to make regular progress reports and to take photos to show that the students are faring well. Documenting the journey only after students have returned home would not meet the most compelling needs. To reassure stakeholders back home as soon as possible, telephone calls are a traditional but expensive recourse, while digital photos could be attached to e-mail reports and passed on by college staff. To further reach various stakeholders including friends of the students quickly and efficiently, progress reports and photos could be posted to a blog or social networking site. However, schools in Japan are inhibited by recent personal information privacy laws from publicly displaying information or images that could be used to locate or identify individual students. Thus, in the past, OJC had gone as far as to provide a password-protected campus blog site where study abroad experiences could be viewed by those with campus user accounts and shown to families of enrolled students.

It was within the above restraints and affordances that the author proposed the idea of 'vlogging abroad': videoblogging the students' experiences nearly in real time, to offer the most vivid and multisensory reports to reassure the students' parents, and to provide a new service to other college stakeholders. It built upon previous experience with technologies such as making podcasting blogs and YouTube videos in collaboration with students. Moreover, for someone working in an urban area like Osaka, New Zealand represented a rare opportunity where video both suited the task and enhanced the results.

4.0 The Video Production Process for Vlogging Abroad

The OJC CALL staff enabled the author to post to the English newsletter blog site for New Zealand. To use the video camera extensively, it was necessary to also bring extra videotape cartridges. One cartridge with only student presentations would normally be handed to the teacher back in Osaka, though this time the video footage was rendered into more efficient formats. The deck in which to place the Sony Handycam was needed along with the cord for electricity and to recharge the video camera. For other Japanese appliances also, a socket adapter was needed, because the shape of wall sockets in New Zealand is angular. Japanese Handycams nowadays are made to work without needing an adapter for the very different wattage in New Zealand and other countries.

However, another cable that came with the relatively inexpensive Handycam, which the author expected would transfer the video data into computers, turned out to be for photo data only. A digital video to USB2.0 PC transfer cable (IEEE 1394 standard) to connect the video camera to a USB port had to be purchased later in 2006 before the author could start producing online videos. For New Zealand in 2009 a difficult decision was to bring a tripod or not. The bulky inconvenience of carrying heavy equipment around did turn out to be outweighed by the advantages

of the tripod, such as when narrating an introduction to each video or showing panoramas of up to 360 degrees. However, if the Handycam is held steadily and moved slowly, its automatic focus works quite well, so the tripod is useful but perhaps not indispensable unless the aim is professional production values.

Another item of equipment was a flash memory stick to store photo and video files while traveling. Although the author had login privileges at CPIT, there was no secure working space offered in faculty quarters, so it was important to keep track of equipment and not forget to take the flash memory out after each use. Once when the university was closed on the last day before returning to Japan, video editing was completed in an Internet kiosk after finally finding one that had a computer with Movie Maker software installed. After returning to Japan it was also most efficient to offer the videos on portable memory through USB ports to college staff, and the video footage of students' final presentations to their intercultural research teacher at OJC, in .wmv format for media players. YouTube renders the video files into flash format, but saving the original files for re-editing or offline purposes as well can prove to be useful.

Another human side to carrying video equipment besides the bulk and weight is the unavoidable obtrusiveness and self-consciousness that filming evokes in potential subjects, unlike taking photos discreetly. The video producer becomes part of the scene, along with extraneous noise. Especially to record the English speaking of EFL students, rapport needs to be established gradually and performance pressure minimized, so windows of opportunity need to be selected judiciously. It is unpredictable what will happen after the recording button is pressed, yet tape is limited, so there will be footage that cannot be used and also missed opportunities where something valuable was heard or seen but not recorded. As examples, a young boy on a sheep ranch was interviewed, but was probably not the best choice because he was difficult to understand for listeners unfamiliar with the local dialect. Another time, a student conducted a song by the OJC group at the Sayonara Party preceded by her memorable but unrecorded speech that the author did not anticipate.

There are various parameters of production values, for example lighting, such as to avoid shadows appearing in people's faces when it is sunny outside, which are learned as skills by trial and error. One gradually accumulates experience in filming, and the results can be examined frame by frame when using an editing program such as Movie Maker. The subjects discussed here are mostly EFL students, who can be reassured that the film will indeed be edited, but students are still liable to be inhibited to an extent on camera unless they initiated the segment. Japanese EFL students generally prefer to prepare what they are going to say, so the author let them adjust to the request for a few days before interviewing each of them about their home stay. In order for the interviews to be an unobjectionable use of time abroad as well, they took place while waiting for main events or riding a chartered bus across the city. Communication involves more than the usual negotiations when it comes to recording non-native voices.

A detailed explanation of video editing would go beyond the scope of this article, but some general issues are addressed as follows. YouTube generally has a default limit of ten minutes, and video files in any event quickly become large and unwieldy. To record the experience of students abroad, aside from their final presentations, short and fast-moving videos of representative scenes and comments can fulfill the intended purposes such as reassuring parents without costing viewers much time. While title frames, transitions and special effects added to segments can make the videos more interesting, it does not take much packaging to provide what the target audience would like to know and see, particularly in a beautiful setting like New Zealand.

Many stages of video production had to all work successfully, yet the author did not wish to be confined to computer rooms for long periods in New Zealand. Fortunately, the videos could be edited with a light touch, and great amounts of data were transmitted across continents fairly rapidly. Videos were posted to the author's YouTube account, adjusting parameters and dimensions there, then the resulting code was captured to embed the videos in the desired size and design in campus blog posts.

After videos and photos started to appear in the campus English newsletter blog, there was rapid feedback in the form of e-mail messages and comments posted under the blog entries. Thus the author was able to make adjustments, and was encouraged to continue the pace. The feedback from various stakeholders was indicative of intense interest in the project.

The final touch in production was to change the default cover photo of some videos by selecting among two alternatives offered by YouTube. The color and size of the flash player embedded in a blog entry can also be adjusted, but the changes by YouTube can take time, and the embedded code would have to be updated to that of the latest parameters selected. With mostly photogenic scenes and happy faces, it was possible with three choices to achieve the desired results.





Thumbnails of the selected cover photos of the student videos blogged

Besides blogging sightseeing photos involving the students, the six videos embedded in blog posts included interviews with each student about their home stay, beautiful scenery, action such as horseback and speedboat riding, a simulated Antarctic storm, brief campus and classroom scenes, and their Sayonara Party with group performances and thanks by each of the students.

The presentation in Nagoya can be more visual and auditory in terms of equipment, techniques, and video scenes of the study abroad program in New Zealand, while responding to issues of concern to attendees. The video blog and YouTube channel <http://www.youtube.com/user/waoe> can be shown as well. See also related and forthcoming works made available online, except for book chapters, at <http://waoe.org/steve/epublist.html>

5.0 Conclusion

In the field of e-learning or online education in particular, there has been abundant experimentation with rapidly changing technologies, and the issue of what constitutes an educational innovation has arisen. Another perennial issue is the degree to which a technology, or the communication media its infrastructure generates, is suitable to a certain pedagogical purpose. Vlogging abroad is clearly interdisciplinary in bringing together TEFL and online education.

This article earlier raised the issue of what constitutes an educational innovation or effective practice. McLoughlin & Lee have listed exemplary online projects, describing learner tasks, what Web 2.0 technologies were used, and how they manifested "pedagogy 2.0" (2008, pp. 25ff). On the other hand, Crosta & Prieto (2009) seemed to gloss over pedagogical criteria in their quantitative methodology, while they usefully distinguished innovations from results. They provide useful criteria for online innovation: technological and sociological breakthroughs, plus improved services to e-learning users.

In terms of the above criteria, a number of Web 2.0 technologies are clearly essential to enable vlogging abroad. The sociological breakthrough is in the area of community outreach, involving students' parents who are especially motivated to access the vlog and to try new technologies to find out how their daughter is faring abroad. The service of the campus blog to the college community is also upgraded technologically by embedding videos along with photos and bilingual communication.

It is for other practitioners to determine the ultimate value of this work, but it is suggested for future research that the pedagogical criteria to evaluate a hybrid case such as 'vlogging abroad' could be drawn from TEFL and applied linguistics, while the technological criteria could be drawn from online education and the wider e-learning field.

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