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Writing and Social Media: Which Website Types for Which Scaffolding?

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Writing and social media: which website types for which scaffolding? This chapter considers how the social web can support writing. The theoretical background lies on three principles: reading / writing interaction, socialization of productions, procedural aids supposed to ease the cognitive load. The corpus is composed of writing tasks designed for a telecollaboration by master's students in French as a foreign language (future teachers). These tasks brought the learners to compose and then "publish" texts on participatory websites. The analysis first proposes a brief typology of these websites; it then discusses the way they support writing.

Ce texte examine certains apports du web dit « social » en tant que support à l'écriture. L'approche relève des champs de la didactique de l'écrit et des TICE. Le cadre théorique fait appel à trois principes aujourd'hui bien établis en didactique de l'écriture : l'importance du lien lecture-écriture, l'intérêt d'une socialisation des écrits et les facilitations procédurales destinées à alléger la charge cognitive. L'étude s'appuie sur un corpus de tâches créées par des étudiants de deuxième année de master professionnel de français langue étrangère (futurs enseignants) dans le cadre d'une télécollaboration internationale ; ces tâches prévoyaient toutes la rédaction et la publication d'un texte sur des sites participatifs non scolaires. L'analyse propose tout d'abord une brève typologie des sites auxquels il a été fait appel. Puis elle examine les apports de chacun des types dégagés à la pédagogie de l'écriture.

The present research analyzed a corpus of writing tasks in order to consider how social media can be used to support writing. These tasks, designed for a telecollaboration project by master's students aiming to become teachers of

French as a foreign language (FFL), required learners to write and “publish” texts on designated, non-educational websites. The analysis was carried out from a writing instruction theory and instructional design perspective, and was based on a theoretical framework encompassing three didactic principles: the reading-writing interaction, the socialization of productions and the use of procedural aids to lighten the cognitive load.

1. Theoretical Framework and Review of the Question

1.1. Writing Instruction Theory and CALL

It is not this chapter’s intention to provide a comprehensive review of writing instruction theory. For a perspective oriented towards the production of teaching applications and learning scenarios, the reader is referred to the approach described by Mangenot (1995, p. 151-152) in the theoretical framework of his Ph.D. thesis:

This approach [of computer supported writing instruction] follows a few simple pedagogic principles:

- **Authentic text production** must take place, even if it is limited in length and complexity. The computer does not evaluate the production, in order not to limit creativity.
- One of the goals of these computer-supported writing aids is to encourage learners to **observe how language/discourse functions**.
- They must provide links between reading and writing.
- Priority must be given to the **translating phase**, with scaffolding procedures (e.g. through prompting). The term “translating” refers to Hayes & Flower (1981) model, where it means “the translation of ideas into language.”
- They must enhance—even more than a word processor—group work and the **collective solving of writing problems**. They should elicit peer interaction around the screen.

In 1995, the Internet was not yet part of the educational landscape and “authentic production” meant simply that the texts produced had to have sense for the learners, rather than being produced merely for the teacher (for a critique of essay writing, see Halté, 1989). In terms of the link between reading and writing, Peytard and Moirand (1992, p. 51) had already noted that in

a second language “it would be vain to ask (students) to produce texts before giving (them) similar texts to read in the language they were learning, because the exercise requires the prior appropriation of foreign textual models.” Consequently, some computer programs and applications included “libraries” of texts categorized in a variety of ways (e.g., *Gammes d’écriture*, Mangenot, 1996, *Ecrire en lisant des récits de vie*, Crinon and Vigne, 2002). Finally, group work was designed to take place “around the screen” by, for example, asking learners to write in pairs (see Dejean, 2004).

1.2. Writing with the Internet: Information and Socialization

Long before the advent of Web 2.0, the Internet had begun to impact the way writing is taught. The acronym ICT (*Information and Communication Technologies*) highlights two essential dimensions of the Internet, information and communication. In terms of writing instruction, the Internet facilitates the search for texts of the same genre or type that a learner would like to master, as well as allowing learners’ writings to be introduced into a social circuit, which is one aspect of what is sometimes referred to as “the socialization of writings.” The term “socialization of writings” encompasses both the design of ways to ensure the teacher is not the only person for whom texts are destined (as in the Freinet method and in writing workshops), and the use of the Internet, especially social media, to share writings within an environment that gives them sense and allows other Internet users to provide feedback. In the words of Ware and Warschauer (2006, p. 110), “Electronic discourse also provides an audience of peers beyond the instructor, which helps heighten awareness of audience and of communicative purpose.” Nevertheless, both of these operations involve risks. The risk in the first case is of plagiarism; in the second case it is that no one reads the texts that are put online. As Bézard (1998, p. 19) pointed out:

The idea that putting students’ work online makes it available to the entire world is, in itself, incontestable, but it deserves to be looked at from an editorial point of view, if only to avoid the disillusionment of young authors [. . .] It is essential to bear in mind the fact that having students publish on the Internet is still a kind of simulation and to avoid giving students the idea that every web page thrown to the wind will inevitably fall before the eyes of an interested reader.

These limitations may be overcome by careful task design, including pre-

cise instructions about the ways in which previously read texts can be transformed, or, most importantly, by ensuring the project design gives sense to the texts and creates an audience for them when they are put online (Mangenot, 1998).

In fact, the Web can be considered a discursive space that facilitates the emergence of new *cybergenres* (in the Bakhtinian sense of the term *genre*), which depend on both the tool being applied and the social spheres in which that tool is used. The only way to make use of this discursive dimension is to get learners to enter these *cyber discourses*, which is something certain university-level teachers have already tried to do. For example, Hanna and de Nooy (2003) asked their students of French to take part in discussion forums on the *Le Monde* website (although the degree of success with which they integrated this discursive environment varied widely) and Ollivier (2010) asked his Austrian students of French to write articles about their home towns for *Wikipedia*. In both cases, the learners had to follow the “rules of the genre,” which was highly beneficial for them:

Encouraging learners to publish the results of their work on a popular website puts learners in a new position. They are no longer learners; they are people with knowledge to share. This encourages them to pay greater attention to both the accuracy of the content and to the way they express this content [. . .]. The resulting effects are similar to those of “learning by teaching” (Ollivier and Puren, 2011, p. 46).

Le Monde’s forums and *Wikipedia* are part of the social web, a concept which is defined more precisely in the following section.

1.3 The Social Web

Zourou (2012) defined “web 2.0” as “(only) the technological platform enabling social media applications to evolve, thanks to the possibilities it gives users to create, distribute, share and manipulate different types of content, most of them publicly accessible.” Hence, the term *social web* covers both the technical ability to share content and all the practices that arise from the possibilities offered by Web 2.0. Social networks, the best known of which is *Facebook*, are just one part of the social web. The myriad websites for sharing information and content about tourism, food, health, films, etc., are also part of the social web, as much of their content is produced by users. The social web has no well-defined boundaries and is “not a homogenous set of appli-

cations” (Zourou, 2012.). Its central characteristics are its “User Generated Content (UGC), openness and network effects.” This purposely-wide definition allows the concept of social media to encompass applications as diverse as sharing sites, video and photo transformation sites, blogs, virtual worlds, link-sharing sites, wikis (as long as they are open) and social networks in the strict sense of the term.

With respect to the link between writing and *social media*, in March 2010 the journal *Computers and Composition* (created in 1983) published a special issue entirely dedicated to “Composition Web 2.0.” One of the authors, Clark (2010), who teaches first-language writing at a college (university undergraduate level), argued for a 21st-century approach to teaching that incorporates the “digital imperative”:

The future of writing—based on a global, collaborative text, where all writing has the potential to become public—informs our classrooms and forms a new, “digital” imperative, one that asks how we can reshape our pedagogy with new uses of the technologies that are changing our personal and professional lives.

The approach to teaching writing Clark describes, albeit from a slightly technocentric and dithyrambic perspective, encompasses this “digital imperative”:

Through the calculated and sequenced introduction of ePortfolios, digital stories, online games, Second Life, and blogs, all of which create a new digital infrastructure for my course and assignments, I am working to create a set of practices that work together to explore the ways in which writing instruction can change to meet a new digital imperative; as such, I attempt to use technology in my courses to re-create the contemporary worlds of writing that our students encounter every day. (Clark, 2010, p. 29)

2. Analysis of Websites and Applications

2.1 Constitution of the Corpus

This chapter is part of a broader study of Web 2.0 telecollaboration tasks, which were designed and tutored by master’s students in FFL during the 2011 and 2012 winter semester, and which were assigned to learners from Cyprus

and Latvia (see note 1). The learners always submitted their productions to the student teachers before publishing them on the Internet (for more details on this point, see Dejean-Thircuir and Mangenot, 2014).

As a first step, we selected the Web 2.0 tasks (20 out of a total of 60) and the productions (oral, written, multimodal) they generated. Dejean-Thircuir and Mangenot (2014) used this initial corpus to determine the readerships for these productions and the support provided by the student teachers. They noted that the tasks rarely led to exchanges with run-of-the-mill Internet users and suggested a number of possible explanations. Mangenot and Soubrié (2014) studied a sub-corpus of 12 tasks involving written productions in order to assess the contribution social media can make to writing. They tried to characterize Web 2.0 sites and applications in terms of their editorial apparatus and their genre (in the Bakhtinian sense). The objective of the present research was to draw up a more praxeological classification by identifying sites and applications with the potential to promote the three didactic principles listed in the introduction. It was based on the same 12 tasks used by Mangenot and Soubrié, which were designed in 2011 and 2012, together with an extra task from 2013. The tasks designed by the FFL student teachers in 2013 are too recent to have been analyzed in detail, but one of them stood out for the original way in which it used Web 2.0 tools, especially *Facebook*. The 13 tasks are described in the Appendix.

2.2. A Didactic Classification of Social Websites and Applications

Given the small size of the corpus and the specific conditions under which the telecollaboration project was run, most notably the very rapid rate (weekly) at which the tasks were designed/completed, the classification outlined below makes no claim to being either exhaustive or a true typology. It was drawn up on the basis of three criteria. The first was the accessibility of productions to run-of-the-mill Internet users. Here, the notion of accessibility includes both the technical accessibility of the students' writings and the likelihood these writings would reach an audience (see Bézard, above). The second criterion was the degree to which the website guides productions by imposing technological constraints (as in the case of *Prezi*, see below) and/or through the use of forms (as is the case for some websites). By definition, all the sites considered here include a certain amount of UGC. The final criterion was the link between reading and writing—does the site include similar texts to the ones the students are trying to produce? In the light of these criteria, the sites and applications used by the tasks in the corpus were divided into four categories, as summarized in Table 22.1.

Table 22.1. Categories of websites and applications

	Dissemination/interaction	Guidance	Reading/writing link
Multimedia design tools (Prezi, Slideshare)	Yes, but problem of readership (see Bézard, 1998)	Only on the technological level	No, except for examples provided by the teacher
Themed networking sites (e.g., TripAdvisor, Livemyfood, recipe sites)	Dissemination varies according to the subject and its social utility.	Variable. Maximum guidance provided by the use of forms.	Strong link: texts are always present and can serve as models.
Humor sites (Birdsdessinés, Tusais que)	Dissemination possible but may be restricted by moderators	Guidance strong in terms of the format but negligible in terms of the humor	Strong link
General social networking sites (Facebook)	Yes (link with personal pages)	Depends on how the site is used.	No defined genre

The following sections explore each of these four categories in greater detail.

2.3 Multimedia Design Tools

Some multimedia design tools have functions that can be used to produce a variety of writings or even lead to interactions. Productions can then be accessed via a website address, without a password if the access is configured not to need one.

First, even though creating a video usually involves writing a storyline and/or script, the tasks in Dejean-Thircuir and Mangenot's (2014) corpus that required the use of *YouTube* or *VoiceThread* to create/share videos or audio slideshows were not considered writing tasks and were therefore excluded from the present research. *VoiceThread*, a teaching tool designed by an American university, allows viewers to add written, audio or video comments to each slide in an audio slideshow created by one or more learners. *Prezi*, a website that allows users to create non-linear, multimedia presentations including rich graphic animations, was used by task 12 to present Latvian films. Although most productions created using *Prezi* were written, some students also created attractive multimodal productions. Some students' productions can be found by entering the term "cinéma letton" in the site's internal search engine.

Other sites, for example, those to which videos and slideshows can be uploaded and whose main role is to share content (*Slideshare*, task 10), leave

more latitude as to the form productions can take. However, given the vast amount of content hosted by these sites, the chances of a learner's production finding an audience are slim.

2.4 Themed Networking Sites

The aim of most themed networking sites is to create a community based round a specific topic; therefore, one would expect these sites to be visited by people interested in these topics. Tasks involving these sites are carried out on the social web. The context in which they appear gives them meaning and value, and guides the production of content (the sites used in the present corpus were *TripAdvisor*, *Live My Food*, *Cinétrafic*, *Le Journal des Femmes* and *750g.com*). Scaffolding can go as far as providing a precise format for submissions, as is the case with *Live My Food* (a French website that presents itself as a social network dedicated to the world's cuisines), where users present themselves via a standard form (favorite dish, best culinary memory, worst culinary memory, etc.). Choosing "Latvia" in the list of countries on *Live My Food's* homepage leads to the profiles of the learners from task 5; however, none of these profiles has been rated by other members of the community. In the case of *750g.com* (task 4), recipes are entered via a detailed form, which helps contributors respect the genre. Conversely, users of *TripAdvisor* (task 2) and *Cinétrafic* (task 6) are asked to write their own reviews of a restaurant or film without any guidance as to the format or content of the review, not even with respect to its length (the lengths of the reviews posted on these two sites vary enormously). Nevertheless, some guidance is given by the suggestion of themes, the texts already published on the sites, and encouragement to describe one's subjective experience (e.g., *Cinétrafic* uses the term "recommendations" rather than "reviews"). In addition, texts submitted to *TripAdvisor* are assessed by a moderator before being published (usually within 48 hours of being submitted), which encourages contributors to respect the genre.

2.5 Humor Sites

Humor sites were placed in a separate category because they have a very different objective to other social media sites—their aim is to amuse, not to inform. In France, these sites are exemplified by *Vie de merde*, once very popular among teenagers and young adults, on which users described the trials and tribulations of everyday life, ending their story with "Vie de merde!" This site was even exported into the English-speaking world under the name FML ("Fuck My Life"). *Birds dessinés* is the only site in our corpus to belong to this category.

However, *Vie de merde* was used for a task in 2010 and, in 2013, two masters students used the application *Tu sais que* to provide humorous insights into student life in Riga. In this latter case, students had to complete the sentence “Tu sais que tu es étudiant à Riga quand . . .” (“You know you’re a student in Riga when . . .”) after reading example sentences about Grenoble written by the tutors. *Birds dessinés* allows users to publish their own comic strips, with no scrutiny by a moderator, whereas on *Tu sais que* and *Vie de merde*, other users of the site provide a sort of evaluation (and moderation). A potential difficulty with using these sites in a foreign language is that humor is eminently cultural: something that makes one person laugh may leave another person stony-faced.

2.6 General Social Network Sites

Although general social network sites do not provide any models or scaffolding for productions, they can be used to promote reading/writing and the socialization of productions. None of the 2011 or 2012 students used the most famous of these sites, *Facebook*; however, in 2013, two students who had seen that their learners’ productions were not appearing on *Tu sais que*, created a *Facebook* “group” and asked around 30 of their French-speaking *Facebook* “friends” to write *Tu sais que* sentences about student life in different countries. As a result, 80 *Tu sais que* sentences were exchanged, many of which were “liked,” although few of them were commented on. (For example, “You know you’re a student in Riga when you don’t know what language you should be speaking: Latvian, Russian, English or French.”) The reason for describing this task, even though it was not part of the initial corpus, was because its *modus operandi* demonstrates a way of using one’s virtual entourage to guarantee a minimal level of online interactions, which cannot be done with the sites in the other categories. Paradoxically, this possibility of interaction is achieved to the detriment of widespread dissemination, as only members of the group have access to productions. Nevertheless, this system at least ensures that productions are read by people outside the class.

3. Conclusion

The most interesting sites with respect to the didactic criteria listed above are those in the themed social network category, as these sites provide learners with examples of texts they can use as models for their writings, they allow for the “authentic” dissemination of learners’ productions (as long as they are approved by the moderator) and, in some cases, they provide scaffolding that can aid writing. General social network sites, as long as they are used within a

suitable teaching scenario, have a different advantage in that they can achieve greater socialization of productions.¹ In every case, supervision by a teacher is needed, even if the teacher becomes more of a resource person than a purveyor of knowledge.

Note

1. Reviews of restaurants in Riga (task 2) were published on *TripAdvisor* (where they can still be seen and used by tourists), as were the *Wikipedia* entries written by Ollivier's students (*see above*).

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Appendix. Presentation of the Tasks Analyzed

	Objective	Web 2.0 tool, control	Writing guidance (models, scaffolding)	Dissemination of productions
1	Share memories of a food or a dish associated with one's childhood	Blogspot.com Private but open blog	The "childhood memories" workshop on the <i>Marmiton</i> website gave the idea for the task. In order to provide a "model," each of the two tutors wrote a personal note for a specially created blog.	Productions are available on the blog that was created, but who will read them?
2	Share knowledge about restaurants in Riga	TripAdvisor.fr A priori moderation	<i>TripAdvisor</i> sets out a series of rules (e.g., "... we do require reviewers to certify that they are reviewing their own experiences before they can submit their review ...").	Reviews of Latvian restaurants are available on the site alongside reviews written by other site users. Some have been tagged as "useful."

	Objective	Web 2.0 tool, control	Writing guidance (models, scaffolding)	Dissemination of productions
3	Talk about your relationships (“pet names” for one’s partner)	<i>Journal des Femmes</i> , personal accounts. A priori moderation	Productions guided by the requirement to answer questions. Model supplied with an associated vox-populi video.	Productions by the Latvian students were published on the <i>Journal des Femmes</i> website (psychology/couple section) alongside those from other site users, but it is one discursive space among hundreds.
4	Write and publish a recipe	750g.com A priori moderation.	Production guided by the form that has to be filled in.	Only one learner uploaded a recipe to the site.
5	Share the culinary habits and specialties of one’s home country	Livemyfood A posteriori moderation	Production (of one’s “culinary tastes and experiences” and the country’s specialties) guided by the form that has to be filled in.	Learners’ productions can be found on the site by searching for “Latvia.”
6	Recommend a film on a social network for cinemagoers	Cinetrafic No moderation	Little guidance given for productions (“recommendations”), even in terms of their length. Subjectivity and positive reviews are encouraged.	Some of the learners’ productions can be found by searching for “cinéma letton” (Latvian cinema).
7	Share a recipe on a specialist website	Marmiton.org A priori moderation	Learners worked on a Recipe Book (Private Area).	Recipes were not made accessible to site users, even though it would have been possible to do so (after selection).
8	Play on stereotypes by creating a comic strip	Birds dessinés A posteriori moderation	Form of writing with restrictions (max. 6 panels, characters=birds, finish on a point).	The tool was used as a model for creating the comic strips, not for disseminating them (the comic strips were not published).

	Objective	Web 2.0 tool, control	Writing guidance (models, scaffolding)	Dissemination of productions
9	Present a typical recipe from one's home country.	<i>Journal des femmes</i> , "cooking" column. A posteriori moderation.	Form with 21 fields, 9 of which are obligatory, corresponding to the different parts of a recipe. Some fields are accompanied by writing suggestions (e.g., for the "Comments" field: "X's favorite dish, a recipe from . . . , a dish I make for . . . , or any other ideas you may have").	The Latvian learners' recipes can be found on the site.
10	Produce a CV in the form of a slideshow.	Slideshare No moderation	No guidelines other than the format of the files accepted (slideshows, documents and videos).	
11	Present a Latvian recipe	Cuistos.com Type of moderation not specified.		The learners did not publish their recipes until their productions had been corrected because the site no longer allowed registrations from new members.
12	Produce an attractive presentation of a Latvian film.	Prezi.com No moderation	The tutors created a Prezi presentation of the film <i>The Intouchables</i> as a "model."	Productions accessible by searching for "cinéma letton" (Latvian cinema).
13	Share "Tu sais que" stories about one's home town or country	tu-sais-que.com website, then Facebook group. TSQ is moderated: only the best TSQ stories are published.	Syntactical guidance as sentences must follow the format "Tu sais que tu . . . quand tu . . ." (You know you are . . . when . . .") + respect the humor genre.	When the TSQ website failed to publish the learners' stories, the tutors created a Facebook group and invited 30 of their "friends" to take part. As a result, the learners' TSQ stories were mixed with native French speakers' stories, with reciprocal comments.