Somewhere over the border: Grammar in a class of its own

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Abstract

The Grammar Gang blog has now passed its fourth anniversary as a borderless, non-proprietary language and learning online classroom. It gives wing to the aspirations of academic staff from four universities to explore language and learning across hemispheres. The Blog's recent birthday provides a timely opportunity to explore how this collaboration takes place and some possible ways to extend language, learning and academic support services. The Grammar Gang is an online classroom where people around the world can learn and explore their interest in language in a fun, conversational way. It is also a borderless classroom which queries the notion of institutional "ownership" in its traditional sense. Further, it opens wide the debate around the rights and wrongs of English language expression and learning. Four members of the Grammar Gang examine the implications of this digital collaboration in this context by addressing the ways in which the blog is used and some of the thinking within the literature around global English and institutional ownership of knowledge. The Grammar Gang continues to be an "adventure across the hemispheres" providing a model for others to follow.

Introduction

The Grammar Gang collaboration between Purdue University in the United States and the University of South Australia (UniSA) was launched in 2008 so that the two institutions could explore social media, cross-institutional and international collaboration in the context of value adding to their respective language and learning services. While Purdue's Online Writing Lab (the OWL) was attracting more than 30 million visitors each year, learning advisors at the University of South Australia had been exploring the use of social software (blogs in particular) as a way to reach out to first year students (Johnston, Duff, & Quinn, 2009). This institutional involvement then doubled from two to four, with contributors joining from Massey University in New Zealand

and the University of Adelaide in South Australia. Lecturers in academic skills from these four institutions now work together in the Grammar Gang's global classroom.

Definitions of the word "classroom" have traditionally been largely limited to the physical space occupied by students. The Merriam-Webster Learner's dictionary, for instance, defines a classroom as "a room where classes are taught in a school, college or university" (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2012). Since dictionaries are corpus-based and reflect the most common uses of a word, it is clear that for most people the word "classroom" does indeed relate to a physical area. Educators are questioning these traditional concepts, however. Rutherford and Rutherford (2007, p. 47), for example, extend the usual meaning of "classroom" to teaching situations which are partly face-to-face and partly online, and those which are conducted entirely in a virtual environment.

The Grammar Gang blog is a virtual classroom in every sense when we consider that, since its inception, scholars, academics and lovers of language from all over the world have visited and interacted with the site and those who write, edit and manage it. On its fourth birthday in 2012, there had been 213,914 page views, often averaging around 200 page views a day. There are also 310 faithful 'followers' who add their personality, insights, language qualms and quibbles to the blog regularly. In blogging parlance, a follower is someone who is interested in a blog and either follows it through a 'following gadget' or adds the blog address to their reading list, which gives them an automatic update each time the blog is updated (Google 2012).

Bloggers access the Grammar Gang in multifarious ways, including via email subscription; via 'likes' on Facebook and Google; via linkages and referrals from their university websites; and via staff email signatures. The most popular referring sites are the Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University, followed by Google, Google UK, Google Canada and Google Australia. Most people (82%) view the blog using Windows, followed by Macintosh (12%) and Linux (2%), but a small percentage (less than 1% in each case) follow the blog with an iPad, iPhone or iPod.

 'Borderless classrooms' are becoming more common, and a quick search on YouTube for Grammar Resources yields 97, 000,000 results. Web sites like OpenStudy (http://openstudy.com/) and the Khan Academy (http://www.khanacademy.org/) are widely used by students and the general public. More recently, the Purdue University Writing Lab is involved in a project to develop a site (TOWN—The Online Writing Network) that will help students to practise writing in various genres and to solicit and give peer reviews of work in progress and finished projects. In addition, the popular Turnitin site (http://turnitin.com/) is a widely used software program that matches text provided by students to a vast collection in its ever-expanding database, allowing students to practise paraphrasing and examine their writing for possible plagiarism. Miller (2012) describes the online dictionary as another borderless source where students can find assistance with word form and use. A more lighthearted but nevertheless informational approach is taken by the creator of Grammar Girl, which is famous for its 'Quick and dirty tips' for writing and now has its own Facebook site. All these classrooms without borders are an extension of the traditional, physical learning space, such as university language centres.

Each university involved in the Grammar Gang has its own Language and Learning Centre and this is where each contributor was originally based. The aims of each centre (the Purdue Writing Lab; the Centre for Teaching and Learning at Massey; the Writing Centre at the University of Adelaide; and the Learning and Teaching Unit at UniSA) are similar and perhaps reflected in the following description:

> Language and Learning teams ... provide students with guidance on various aspects of their learning. This includes their general English language skills, the academic literacies required for study in their particular discipline area, and strategies for transitioning to university and managing new expectations and workloads.
>
> (University of South Australia, 2012, para. 2L)

Common across language and learning centres generally is a tendency toward the use of traditional print-based or 'static' Web 1.0 resources rather than Web 2.0 resources. The simplest description of the difference between the two is that whereas Web 1.0 resources involve simply "reading", Web 2.0 resources involve "reading, writing and interacting" (Cuene in Wang & Chiu, 2011 p. 1792; Kirkwood, 2011, p. 80).

In a recent study, Leslie-McCarthy and Tutty (2011) found those in learning centres in Australia were frustrated by a lack of IT expertise to make full and best use of learning design and implementation. They also found that staff were keen to integrate the interactivity of Web 2.0 but very few used interactive activities widely (2011, p. 24). These authors—and others—highlight a need to re-envisage the way in which websites are designed in line with the shifting demographics and expectations of the students who are native to the "online participatory culture" of social media (Kirkwood, 2011, p. 99; Johnston, Duff, & Quinn, 2009). Blogs are a perfect way to address some of the changing expectations of the digital generation.

A blog can be described as "a free, versatile and creative digital publishing environment that can include text, images, links, audio and video" (Quinn, Duff, Johnston, & Gursansky, 2007). Quinn et al. (2007) also point to the fact that the traditional culture of a university—with its emphasis on rigour and objectivity—has not quickly accommodated the use of a popular media interface which is colloquial (even joyful) and promotes reflection and conversation. Others would argue that the interactivity of a blog and other social media facilitate far deeper learning opportunities than static learning resources or even lectures. Biggs and Tang (2007, p. 19) promote a "student-centred" model of teaching which (unlike the didactic nature of the transmissive lecture and the print-based learning resource) places an emphasis on "what the student" (rather than the teacher) "does". A blog is an ideal medium, for a student-centred approach.

In an earlier study on the effectiveness of blogging as a teaching resource, Duff, Carter, Miller and Spangenberg (2010) established that using a blog as a platform for the Grammar Gang has enabled not just a contemporary and colorful interface for language learning, but has also facilitated an exploration of pedagogies, bolstered a cross-institutional sharing of language resources and enabled a meeting of minds which positively encourages diversity in approaches to language and teaching. What has remained constant throughout the Grammar Gang's four year history is the participants' continued exploration around teaching of language in a way which crosses borders and transcends classroom walls. Over time, the Grammar Gang collaboration has continued to be about innovation with blogging, but also raised questions around contemporary uses of English, institutional propriety and the Internet. In examining how the blog is used by its participants, we can draw some inferences and questions about the borderless classroom.

The English classroom without walls

The Grammar Gang is, at its core, about language and academic literacy. Connell and Gibson (in Pennycook, 2010, p. 80) describe English as being a "translocal" language whose "fluidity and fixity move across, while becoming embedded in, the materiality of localities and social relations". English also has the capacity to "refashion" identities (Pennycook, 2007, p. 6), perhaps as part of this very co-citizenship, as individuals communicate in a shared language across the globe. The style of English language usage in the digital environment has also moved traditional written forms of language to a more casual and conversational style.

The Grammar Gang blog provides a means of examining the changing use of English throughout the world. While the largest number of Grammar Gang viewers have originated from the United States (97,244 up to 13 May 2012), there are also many from India (28,013), Canada (9,949), the United Kingdom (9,692) and Australia (9,662). Other countries which do not use English as a first or official language also have avid followers, with 3,035 in Germany, 2,313 in Russia, 1,848 in France and 1,118 in the Philippines. English is the lingua franca of the blog, but the linguistic diversity of Englishes is as diverse as those who use the blog, from US to UK and from English as a first language to English as an additional language (EAL).

The editors publish posts on items of interest in academic writing, such as the use of tenses and punctuation, and essay structure. These posts are written in an entertaining manner, with illustrations and cartoons, but are based on serious content. Each post is followed by a comments box, and viewers frequently add their comments or queries here. In addition, a post may be supported by a poll. For example, in the post entitled 'Feeling tense?' from 25 March 2012, viewers were invited to vote for their use of the third conditional in a particular sentence for which five alternatives were given, the last being more light-hearted. The poll closed a month later, after 407 votes:

If I'd have known you were coming I'd have baked a cake	10%
If I'd of known you were coming I'd have baked a cake	2%
If I'd known you were coming I'd have baked a cake	37%
If I knew you were coming I'd have baked a cake	41%
I never bake cakes!	7%

The statistics here show a clear indication of the increasing use of the more American English use, 'If I knew' (also popular in Australia), compared to the more traditional British English use, 'If I had known'. The fact that most viewers of the blog are based in the US may of course have influenced the data, and there is unfortunately no way of tracking which country the voter resides in. However, such information is a vital indicator of the need to abandon any idea of 'correct' English, and enthusiastically accommodate the significant variations among different commonly used and locally accepted 'Englishes' (Kachru & Nelson 2001).

Another indication of changing use, this time semantic, is revealed in a poll question around the term 'High tea'. Among 227 voters, 80% thought of high tea as 'an elegant, insubstantial meal involving little sandwiches and dainty china cups' (the traditional meaning of 'afternoon tea' in the UK), while only 20% viewed it as 'a meal of filling sandwiches, meat, and cake, washed down by mugs of tea' (the more traditional meaning of high tea in the UK). Again, of course, voters' location has had a major influence, reflecting changing usage in this worldwide language.

Occasionally, however, viewers add comments on the posts which underline the strength of regional bias. Viewers have, for example, criticized our spelling, when a word such as 'centre/center' is spelled in the British or Australian manner, reflecting the English variety of the majority of the editors. Such controversy can provoke bitter reactions from viewers, one of whom wrote: 'You want me to read your brilliant ideas? Then express them clearly and don't ask me to supply the punctuation and try to guess what that misspelled word means.' Such comments are indicative of web comments generally, in which writers are frequently less inhibited when contributing online than they might be in a more formal setting. They also reflect the years of learning and teaching language practices that make 'center' seem more normal (and thus correct) than 'centre' to Americans—and vice versa. Other comments are more erudite and lead to discussion, such as the writer who talked about academic 'dryness' of style and asked for further comment. A smaller and somewhat contentious example is the ways in which punctuation is used. The US contributors have a preference for "double inverted commas" and the Australians tend to have a preference for 'single inverted commas', in keeping with a trend in Australia to minimalise punctuation. The post 'Peeves and passes' provoked comments by 12 different authors, some of them English teachers, in regard to their pet hates about the use or misuse of the English language. Comments such as these add to the sense of ownership and online community which is a feature of the blog.

Gee and Hayes (2011, p. 35) describe how the digital age has created conditions in which language has never before been used, enabling rare, intimate and close encounters with strangers across the globe. The Internet diffuses linguistic 'expertise' and everyone in 'the crowd' has an opportunity to contribute to what 'should' and 'ought to' be correct language. A Grammar Gang post by

Hyejeong Anh entitled "I speak English too" (2011) encapsulates this point when she points out the difficulty of EAL learning in an environment where "bilingual speakers of English are always measured against the standard of the native English speaker and found to be 'incomplete' and 'deficient' [which, in turn]…often leads to resentment and frustration in learners…" Not only does Hyejeong raise the issue of diversity in English, but very intimately expresses a sense of frustration at the constraints and boundaries of the 'rights and wrongs' of English. The blog facilitates this intimate expression.

Coincidentally, Western countries such as Australia and the United States have opted for standardization and testing of reading, writing, listening and speaking English, in Australia through NAPLAN and in the US through various state-sponsored exams and national college entrance exams like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Testing Program (ACT).   This localized standardization poses a challenge in an international environment which promotes a diversity of Englishes. Andrews and Smith (2011) argue that English language pedagogies must be "fit for purpose for the 21st century, which means being up-to-speed on the multimodal and digital dimensions of writing as well as the integration of writing into the curriculum not only in relation to speaking, listening and reading, but also with regard to the wider functions and uses of writing across the curriculum". The Grammar Gang blog is able to contribute to this movement by promoting discussion on World Englishes and valuing diversity.
The blog is also used to inform teaching practice. For instance, in a poll on which type of character viewers would most like to see in a teaching video on grammar, the overwhelming winner among 145 voters was an Agatha Christie style lady detective (46%), rather than Little Red Riding Hood (22%), an elf (17%) or a silent movie heroine (13%). This information has been used subsequently as the basis for a series of teaching videos around the character Ms Parrot, who solves grammar mysteries in an online teaching resource developed with the help of Australian federal government funding.

In addition, the Grammar Gang acts as a centre for advice on academic writing via its OWL and Possum helpnest. Here, viewers can ask questions on all aspects of grammar and writing, and answers are contributed by the editors or, occasionally, other viewers. One question which provoked a range of answers was posted on 7 June 2010: "Is it P's and Q's or Ps and Qs or p's and q's or ps and qs?" Another blogger replied: "The term comes from pints and quarts, so, logically, as they are plural, not possessive, it ought to be ps and qs." This was in addition to suggestions from two of the editors. It is exciting to see people all over the world taking an interest in grammar through their questions, answers and comments. In presenting examples that seem to be definitive, contributors demonstrate variety again and again. Bloggers are of course free to make their own judgements about what applies in their own writing context, and the occasional lapse from the 'Grammar experts' in expressing grammar incorrectly, will invariably be seized upon by readers!

The borderless institution

Unlike the more confining borders of physical learning spaces, control in the digital world is "less controlled and controllable" (Gee & Hayes, 2011, p. 126). Gee and Hayes use expressions such as "co-citizenship" (2011, p. 125) to describe relationships which occur laterally with like-minded spirits in different countries (for example those with an interest in language), as opposed to citizenship which occurs within countries where individuals may have disparate interests. However, there are undoubtedly tensions in this new sphere.

There are questions about ownership and spheres of influence which are gaining pace in the higher education community as new players purvey alternatives in free online education to new markets. Kokowich (2012) recently posted on Inside Higher Education about "Massive open online courses, or MOOCs," which are being promoted and offer "anyone the ability to take online courses from professors at top … at no charge". On the one hand these enterprises could be seen as real alternatives to population currently unable to access (or who are excluded from) education. On the other hand, they may be viewed cynically as nebulous enterprises with few quality controls.

Just who owns the Grammar Gang therefore remains unclear. It could be argued that it belongs to the four institutions who manage, contribute to and promote the blog. Or, perhaps, it is 'owned' by Google (which most certainly owns the 'free' platform on which it sits). There is yet another question around the 'moral rights' to the information posted. Although the Grammar Gang editors moderate the comments, are the conversations actually 'owned' by the publishers of the blog – in much the same way as a journal article belongs to a journal? From an economic perspective, we might also describe the Grammar Gang as a 'purveyor of brand' in that our institutions are clearly visible, with Purdue, UniSA, the University of Adelaide and Massey University logos prominent on the blog. The cross-institutional distribution also serves to further promote our respective organizations. What is clear is that social media is out-pacing policy and legislation in ways which are acknowledged regularly in the media.

It seems likely that the 'borderless classroom' may signify the future for the internationalization of Higher Education. Sidhu and Dall'Alba (2012, p. 413) explain how the internationalization of higher education was once state-centric in its philosophy but is now couched in terms of "knowledge economies", "global cities" and "signifier[s] of cosmopolitan identity". Etzkowitz, Ranga and Dzisah (2012, p. 144) describe the shift from Industrial Society to Knowledge Society as representing a "tectonic shift" which will offer an opportunity to create "new technologies, enterprises, interface professions and employment opportunities". Rather than a focus on education and research, they herald the university's role as having a much more active part to play in innovation and entrepreneurship as a means to support social and economic development. In order to achieve this, universities need to continually equip students with the skills to adapt to changing global situations.

Students, of course, are a heterogeneous group, and universities treat them in many different ways. In an early piece of writing about online learning, Williams (2001, p. 27), talks about three models of student: the "student-as-product, the student-as-worker, and the student-as-consumer". For Williams, the online classroom involves students as both workers and consumers. As visitors to the Grammar Gang blog students may indeed be consumers, but when visiting the blog to pose questions or gain information, many of them are also contributors, working to create a space in which others in the community can learn and share ideas.

Conclusion

The Grammar Gang has enabled a group of language and learning specialists to start to bring language into the 'now' of global development and enterprise. Despite its longevity, however, the Grammar Gang still remains on the fringes of the teaching of language as universities have been slow to adopt the amenity toward student outreach and engagement that social media offer. This may well be a reflection on the large, slow-grinding nature of institutional policy and bureaucracy, made all the more obvious by the unfettered pace of the Internet and its functionalities.

The fact that the Grammar Gang blog is free and widely distributed means that it is easily accessible, not just by language learners, but for cross-institutional global collaboration. As a social network, the blog allows English users worldwide to generate and disseminate knowledge about language, crossing the borders established by national institutions, testing organizations, and universities. The Grammar Gang has shown us that we can successfully co-create, re-create and collaborate using the humble blog. It has also shown us that difference is no barrier to the celebration of language and acceptance of diversity.

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