

## DEVELOPING DIGITAL NATIVES AT A JUNIOR COLLEGE IN JAPAN

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### ABSTRACT

Learners in post-secondary settings are often described as digital natives, though in truth they often lack the computer skills and digital learning skills they need to fully participate in and benefit from digital learning activities. In the 2008 academic year at a junior college in Yokohama, Japan, a program was undertaken to develop the digital learning skills of one group of freshmen learners across three courses in two semesters. We found promising results could be obtained by: (a) requiring the use of digital technologies across courses, and (b) providing a high level of support and involvement from the teaching staff.

### INTRODUCTION

Recently, it has been common to assume that learners in post-secondary programs are 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001), however universal digital literacy is still not here (Livingstone, Bober & Helsper, 2005; Friesen, 2006). Instructors and institutions still cannot assume that all their learners will show up computer literate; and even when they do possess a good degree of computer literacy, they may not have ever used those skills for formal learning. Thus, we must seek to understand digital learning literacy when considering the implementation of CALL activities with our learners. Digital learning literacy is the skill set that is required to successfully manage CALL activities and it includes familiarity with the tools (software and hardware); an understanding of the different styles of learning via a computer (including the social learning style of computer mediated communications (CMC) and social learning (including

that with Web 2.0 applications) (Kern, 2006; Thorne, 2008); linguistic competence, including a knowledge of online discourse patterns; a willingness to accept an immersive environment rather than a fixed syllabus of content and a willingness to be socialized into a new community (Hanna & de Nooy, 2003); and a high degree of personal involvement (O'Dowd, 2003; Hampel, 2006).

### THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

An annual survey of incoming freshmen at Kanagawa Prefectural College of Foreign Studies in Yokohama, Japan has shown that an increasing number of students begin school with their own computer and Internet connection (climbing steadily from 54% in 2003 to 72% in 2008). Questions in 2008 about computer use prior to entry to our college showed, however, that only 50% had ever used a computer for English listening training and only 9% had ever

listened to a podcast in English; only 47% had ever made a blog (in English or Japanese); only 31% had ever written an e-mail message in English; only 12% had ever used Skype; and only 37% had ever tried a CALL room.

**OUR PROGRAM**

From our own experience, the results of other studies, and published research (Hubbard, 2004), we understood that what was needed was an institutional approach (that is, use in more than one course), where tools and activities are introduced in stages, with required use by learners.

Table 1. Results of student questionnaires: Blogs and journals in writing class

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Journals					
Tried Hard	9 (56%)	5 (31%)	1 (6%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)
Enjoyed	5 (31%)	4 (25%)	6 (37%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
Improved	12 (75%)	3 (19%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
Blogs					
Tried Hard	6	8	1	1	0
Enjoyed	7	5	3	1	0
Improved	6	8	1	1	0

We also saw that we would have to commit ourselves to seriously supporting learners by introducing activities, helping students learn how to use them, modeling behavior, and monitoring them carefully for the duration of the program. For this reason we decided to introduce the use of blogs and various web 2.0 tools (see Appendix) in three courses with three

different instructors over two semesters with one group of learners at our junior college: two courses (*Workshop and Writing 1*) in first term (meeting for a total of three 90-minutes sessions per week) and one course (*Writing 2*) in second term (one 90-minute session). To better provide support, instructors regularly viewed and commented on student postings in all courses, not only their own.

**QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Upon completion of the first term courses, questionnaires were given to learners to assess their effort and impressions of the various tools and activities used.

The results of questions given to compare student reactions to blogs and journals used in *Writing 1* are summarized in Table 1. Blogs were the main CALL tool we focused on, and journals, a traditional paper-based tool, were the main non-digital tool used. As we can see, students showed a favorable reaction to both paper journals and digital blogs by the end of the first term. The journals certainly required more effort over the length of the courses, particularly in the first half, and so student assessments of how hard they tried are no surprise. This may be connected also to the result that students enjoyed the blogs slightly more. When asked about how the activity contributed to their language proficiency development, a surprisingly large number of learners assessed the blogs positively. We believe that this shows how learners had begun to see the value of blogs as a learning tool that facilitates written interaction.

Table 2 shows how the students assessed the difficulty of using blogs for both courses at the end of the first term. The question asked was: do you think it is hard or easy to write posts in your blog?

Table 2. Results of student questionnaires: Blog posting difficulty

	Very Hard	Hard	Not so Hard	Easy	Very Easy
Difficulty	2 (11%)	0 (0%)	11 (61%)	5 (28%)	0 (0%)

Of course, posting involves general computer competence, blog system familiarity, typing skills, and linguistic competence. It seems fair to say that most students had achieved a sufficient comfort level with all these.

Table 3 shows the results for questions about how students felt about the style of learning that is used with blogs. The first question asked whether students thought it was interesting to write posts on their blogs and leave comments on the blogs of their group or class members and the second whether it was useful or helpful for learning English to do so.

Table 3. Results of student questionnaires: Blogs

	Very Interesting	Interesting	A little Interesting	Not Interesting	Boring
Interesting	9 (56%)	5 (31%)	1 (6%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)

	Very Useful	Useful	Not so Useful	Useless
Useful	7 (39%)	11 (61%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

The results here seem to indicate that students had developed positive feelings to using blogs for learning. In comments on the questionnaire, students clearly showed that they were happy with the opportunity to exchange opinions, improve their language proficiency, and develop computer skills.

**AFTER THE FIRST TERM**

Following the first term, some students continued to use their blogs over the summer (17%) for personal

postings. In *Writing 2* in second term, the instructor only required one of the paragraphs students produced be posted in the blog during the term. The students produced far more than that requirement (an average of 4.1 postings) though there were considerable differences between students (ranging from 0-9 postings per student).

**CONCLUSION**

It seems that our approach to developing students to be digital learners was generally effective. In implementing this program, we found the following factors were important:

- Know your learners
- Institutionalize (multi-course and required)
- Immerse (multi-course; regular assignments)
- Support actively (multi-lingual; all stages)
- Allow sufficient time

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