Japanese university students use Content 2.0 online forum to share their views of the world

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Forum

As a supplement to the textbook World Interviews (Craven, 2006) which interviews young people from 16 different countries around the world, Japanese university students taking a Spoken English 2 class share their cultural views of the world through the Content 2.0 online forum. This paper describes the system's key features and how it was set up, shows sample webpages, reports on the results of the project including internet traffic statistics and feedback from the students, and discusses the prospects for using the Content 2.0 system again in the future as a viable computer-assisted language learning medium.

Introduction

Continued advances in Internet technology have exploded the number of online learning systems educators have available to supplement their traditional classroom instruction. Choosing the most appropriate and effective system among these seemingly unlimited types of computer-assisted language learning (**CALL**) systems can prove to be quite daunting, if not overwhelming, even for those who are not technology-challenged.

Whether it be Content Management Systems (**CMS**s) such as Moodle (Daniels, 2008) or Drupal (Collett, 2010), open source social networking platforms like Elgg (Swanson, 2010), wikis, blogs, micro-blogs, photo/video sharing sites, or other social media sites, there are a number of important criteria to consider in deciding which kind of **CALL** system to implement for any given set of teacher/student classroom circumstances.

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For my own circumstances, my "wish list" of desirable criteria boiled down simply to:
1. No requirement for an Internet-based web server
2. No requirement to coordinate system administration matters with university **IT** staff
3. No steep learning curve, requiring an inordinate amount of time setting up and making the **CALL** system operational
4. Free to use

After at least two years of monitoring new developments in the **CALL** field and evaluating their possible effectiveness for my classes, nothing seemed to be a good match for my particular set of circumstances. It wasn't until the beginning of the spring semester in April 2010 that I realized I might be able to use a system called Content 2.0 (often shortened to "**C2**") (Evoy, 2005) in my Spoken English 2 class, which comes bundled at no extra charge with the web hosting/website-building service I was already using for my own personal website. **C2** is run by a privately held Montreal, Canadian-based company named SiteSell Inc. (Evoy, 1997).

Since 1997, SiteSell.com has helped tens of thousands of entrepreneurs and small businesses build profitable e-businesses. Their proprietary online business-building system known as Site Build It! (**SBI!**) is the only private sector e-business product that is now taught at over 30 colleges & universities, including the University of Arizona, Penn State, and The Citadel.

The Content 2.0 module is a webpage that offers visitors the opportunity to submit their comments, articles, photos, stories, or videos about a particular page. Subsequent visitors to that page can also submit their comments, in much the same way as popular networking site Facebook does, which is now the second most-visited website on the Internet, behind Google. Unlike Facebook, however, these newly-created Content 2.0 webpages receive their own unique **URL**, which in turn get indexed and ranked by search engines. In effect, these **C2** contributors become instant authors as the long tail keywords on their newly created webpages get discovered and indexed in time by various search engines.

Content 2.0 is like a combination of Wikipedia, Facebook, and Flickr, except that unlike most social networking sites like Twitter, online posts don't keep getting pushed down by the next visitor and quickly falling off the page, never to be seen again. Also, users don't create profiles or gossip, and they do much more than just upload photos. Their online stories become a permanent fixture in cyberspace, catalogued by the major search engines. Think about it: How many of your Facebook posts have ever been indexed by Google? If you take the best of Web 2.0 and eliminate the worst, you wind up with Content 2.0.

What gave me the idea to use the Content 2.0 system in my Spoken English 2 university class was that we were already using an excellent textbook entitled *World Interviews* (Craven, 2006), based on interviews with young people from around the world. Each unit focuses on a different person and topic, giving a unique insight into that country's culture from the perspective of another young person. In effect, the textbook gave our class the opportunity to take a virtual tour around the world.

Although the primary aim of the textbook and our spoken English class is to help develop the students' face-to-face listening and speaking skills (in addition to enhancing their international cultural awareness), I felt that an online forum that would enable students to share their views and opinions of various countries with other students (and the online community) would not only be a fun class project, but that the Content 2.0 system would be the perfect medium. This supplemental out-of-class reading and writing **CALL**

assignment, in effect, provided a more balanced blended learning (**BL**) language environment, encouraging the use of all four language skills (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2011).

Methodology

Our two-semester class project was entitled "What Japanese University Students Think About...?" (Wolff, 2010) and included the 16 various countries from the textbook: America, New Zealand, Brazil, Scotland, Australia, Northern Ireland, Italy, England, Wales, China, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Switzerland, Singapore, Russia, and South Africa. Every week after completing a unit in the textbook, as part of their homework, students were asked to go online and to share a story about what they thought of that country, based upon the cultural information presented in that week's textbook unit, their own personal travel to that country, or any other thoughts or feelings they already had about the country, including contact with any friends residing there.

Country webpage setup

Every week after we studied a new country in our textbook, I built a new webpage for that country, starting with America, the first unit in our textbook which interviews a young lady from Cambridge, Massachusetts. The **SBI!** system allows site owners to easily build new webpages, with little or no knowledge of **HTML** coding. The actual invitation, which requests stories from webpage visitors, along with the online submission form discussed below, generally took about 15 to 20 minutes per page to set up. Figure 1 below shows the invitation for the "What Japanese University Students Think About America" page.
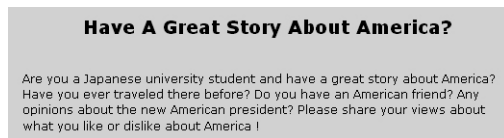
Have A Great Story About America?

Are you a Japanese university student and have a great story about America? Have you ever traveled there before? Do you have an American friend? Any opinions about the new American president? Please share your views about what you like or dislike about America !

Figure 1. Invitation for the "What Japanese University Students Think About America"

Online submission form

The online submission form is fairly painless, where students simply enter the title of their story, tell their story (up to 1500 words, but I asked for a minimum of 75), upload up to four photos, enter their name and location (optional for regular **C**2 pages, but students were asked to at least provide their first name), agree to submission guidelines, and then click "Submit Your Contribution." Instructions and help screens are in English, but because the system accepts the **UTF**-8 unicode character set, now accounting for more than half of all Web pages, submissions can be made in any language. A typical submission form for the various country pages can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Enter the Title of your Story

Tell Us Your Story! [?]

Upload 1-4 Pictures or Graphics (optional) [?]

Browse…

Add a Picture/Graphic Caption (optional)

Click here to upload more images (optional)

Author Information (optional)

To receive credit as the author, enter your information below.

Your Name   (first or full name)

Your Location   (ex. City, State, Country)

Submit Your Contribution

☐ Check box to agree to these submission guidelines.

Figure 2. Typical submission form

The National Emblem of Saudi Arabia

by Shiomi
(Tokyo)

Mention of the name of Saudi Arabia makes me think of Mecca, the petroleum, and the palm tree. Especially the palm tree, because it is the national emblem of Saudi Arabia.

On the emblem, there is one palm tree and two swords which are crossing each other. Crossing swords mean power and patience. The palm tree means vitality, growth, and prosperity.

Then, I thought "power and patience" will call up "vitality, growth, and prosperity." I was startled by this meaning.

I have started my job hunting recently, and I have been hasty because I had heard that job hunting wears students out so much.

They have to do a lot of things to sell themselves, for example, going to seminars or internships that companies hold in parallel with their university classes.

However, I am always told, "Have your power and patience!" So it was an amazing thing for me.

These words will bring a good future, like "vitality, growth, and prosperity." Now, I will keep this in mind whenever I feel tired.

Figure 3. Screenshot of "The National Emblem of Saudi Arabia" page

Sample C2 page

In our nine-month (April 2010 – January 2011) computer-assisted language learning class project, the most-visited C2 page was the one submitted by class member Shiomi entitled "The National Emblem of Saudi Arabia," a screenshot of which is shown below in Figure 3. For more discussion on the ranking of the most popular C2 pages, please refer to the Results and Discussion section below.

Sample list of links to C2 pages

At the bottom of every country page, there is a list of links to each of the C2 pages created by the students for that particular country under the heading "What Other Japanese University Students Have Said." Figure 4 below shows a sample listing of links to the students' stories on the "What Japanese University Students Think About England" page.

What Other Japanese University Students Have Said

Click below to see contributions from other Japanese university students...

"David Beckham," Famous English Soccer Player ★★★★★
Have you ever heard about David Beckham? If you've never heard about his name, let me introduce about his simple profile from now on. He is the most famous ...

English People Have a Fine Pride for their Country ★★★★★
I've been to London, the capital of England. While staying there, I was impressed about many points. Firstly, when I was seeing the sights of London with ...

Big Ben, the Very Famous Clock Tower in London ★★★★★
Thinking of England, I cannot help but think of London. Because when I was a child, my father was in London due to his work. So I would like to talk about ...

Afternoon Tea, the Culture of England ★★★★
In my image, English people like to drink tea. Tea is prepared in most homes and particularly they drink it in the afternoon. Afternoon tea is a culture that ...

England's Old Historical Buildings Not rated yet
What comes to mind when you think of England? I think of many historical buildings in England! That's the first thing which comes to mind. The buildings ...

England's Premier League Not rated yet
When I hear "England," the first thing that comes to my mind is the football Premier League. Today the number of Japanese football players who are flourishing ...

University of Cambridge Not rated yet
"It was just like Alice In Wonderland or Harry Potter's world! You had better go to the University of Cambridge someday." That is what my friend who had ...

The Most Famous Mystery Novelists Not rated yet
I like mystery novels. I imagine Britain to be full of mystery. The reason is the existence of 2 famous novelists: 1) Arthur Conan Doyle, and 2) Agatha ...

British Music in the 1990's Not rated yet
In the early 1990's British music had fallen into a state of an overabundant supply. Then bands like Oasis and Blur suddenly appeared on the music scene ...

Click here to write your own.

Figure 4. Links to C2 stories on "What Japanese University Students Think About England"

Sample comments

At the bottom of each submitted C2 page is a comment section where readers can offer their thoughts and rank the C2 story on a scale of one to five stars. As the instructor, I tried to comment on most pages to give the students my feedback and encouragement. And one of my student's stories on crocodile burgers even garnered some overseas comments from students in New Zealand. Figure 5 below shows one of those comments from a New Zealand student.

Comments for Crocodile Burgers !

Average Rating ★★★★⯨

Click here to add your own comments

Jun 02, 2010 Rating ★★★★	**Misinformed?** by: Crystal
	Hi, I'm a student from New Zealand and I think you've been misinformed. Crocodiles don't exist in New Zealand and aren't eaten over here, sorry! Australia, is where crocodiles do live and are eaten and have the famous "Crocodile Burger". Just thought I would comment to say this! :)

Figure 5. Comment on crocodile burgers by student in New Zealand

Results and discussion

I would have to rate our first year using this Content 2.0 computer-assisted language learning online forum as moderately successful. Not everything was perfect, but despite some tough work, the students seemed to enjoy the class project, as validated by their midterm and end-of-course class comments. Writing the online stories seemed to reinforce the international cultural understanding they were receiving from our *World Interviews* (Craven, 2006) textbook as we "visited" 16 countries around the world. Our 12 students wrote a total of 125 C2 stories, and I was impressed that three of the students actually wrote stories for all 16 countries.

Google Analytics

Because each of the students' submitted C2 pages were encoded with Google Analytics tracking script, it was interesting to watch how popular some of the pages became and how quickly they became indexed by the Google search engine. Each time a student created a new C2 page, SBI!'s automated "World Submitter" system updated the sitemap XML file and then pinged it daily to all of the "Big 3" Search Engines – Google, Yahoo!, and Bing – which account for over 95% of all searches on the Web. It was rare that one of the student's C2 pages wasn't picked up by Google spiders within a week. The five most-visited C2 pages are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1: Five most-visited Content 2.0 pages

Rank	Page name	Student author	Date posted	Unique pageviews (as of Jan. 29, 2011)
1	National Emblem of Saudi Arabia	Shiomi	Oct. 9, 2010	170
2	Funiculi, Funicula, a Popular Italian Song	Kazuya	June 29, 2010	147
3	Irish Coffee	Eriko	June 20, 2010	123
4	Big Ben, London's Famous Clock Tower	Jun	July 3, 2010	90
5	Legend of the Red Dragon in Wales	Jun	July 19, 2010	59

It is interesting to note that Shiomi's "National Emblem of Saudi Arabia" page has received the most traffic, but has been online the least amount of time. As of January 29, 2011, her page ranked #8 at Google, #7 at Yahoo!, and #7 at Bing (without quotes), in spite of not being uploaded till October 9, 2010. Google Analytics is an amazing tool, as it records such diverse data as how visitors found the page (search engine vs. links from other pages), search keywords, time on page, visitor's language, visitor's country, and even the type of the web browser visitors use.

Student satisfaction

Human nature being as it is, I'm sure some students found this project somewhat difficult, but from all the feedback I received both during and after the course, most of them found it very gratifying and a nice supplement to the textbook. They seemed to like the idea of sharing their views about some cultural aspect of the 16 countries we studied and becoming an instant online author with their own webpage and URL they could give to family and friends. Here is a short sampling of those student comments:

"The Web project was very interesting and exciting for me. I found out about various cultures, religions, and many things through the process of my research."

"This program gave me a chance to make contact with foreigners, and I was able to feel a different culture through the Internet! I am really surprised."

"The 'What Japanese Students Think About…?' (Wolff, 2010) project was good for studying English writing and learning about diverse people in the world."

"The textbook and online project was good for me because it helped me learn about many more countries than before. It made me wanna visit places where I've never been. For sure I will!"

"This class was very fun! It was difficult for me to write the online stories. But I think it was nice homework because writing online stories helped improve my reading and writing English skills."

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Class project shortcomings

While overall I was very pleased with the outcome of this computer-assisted language learning class project, there are some things I may do differently next time. Although in my dream world I envisioned a more robust online forum with students naturally being eager to make comments on other students' stories and more actively sharing their stories and unique URLs with friends and family, unfortunately that never really materialized. Actually, the only comments besides my own came from the students in New Zealand and a Scottish businessman in Tokyo. With the regular weekly homework and class work preparation required by the textbook, most students did well just to keep up with submitting their online stories. And although the intent of our online project was for them to share "what they think" about the countries (a requirement I had to continually remind them of throughout the course), there was a tendency for some students to simply go to Wikipedia and write about some popular sightseeing spot in the target country for that week.

On the other hand, some of the stories were absolutely stunning, and very culturally enlightening for me personally. It was a fascinating world tour, where my students educated me about things like Brazilian cocktails, Scottish breakfasts, the Belfast shipyard where the Titanic was built, Singapore Airlines' largest passenger plane in the world, Italian smoking manners (or lack thereof), railway trips through the Canadian Rockies, Japan-China relations, and even Russian folk religions.

Content 2.0 vs. other CALL systems

To my knowledge, Content 2.0, which is primarily used by online e-business owners worldwide, has never been adapted for educational purposes as it was for this project. The beauty of C2 is that it is already a well-structured, user-generated content creation system that requires very little setup, yet retains the design flexibility of being adjustable to satisfy most desired applications. Because I had no intent to use C2 for course management purposes, such as the administration of quizzes, homework, surveys, attendance, etc., nor to incorporate student blog-style journals or collaborative authoring among students, the C2 system fared reasonably well compared to other forms of CALL, such as CMSs, wikis, blogs, etc.

As for what worked well and what didn't, regarding the use of C2 compared to other CALL systems:

Pros:
1. No need to secure your own server, as required with systems like Elgg.
2. No need to worry about system crashes, plug-in failures, students inadvertently deleting or overwriting other student entries while two users are using the system simultaneously (e.g. with Wikispaces), or entire sections of student blogs being removed by Google due to the submission of inappropriate or offensive photos.
3. Stories can be submitted from any smartphone or PC with internet access, without any need to register for an account, set up a profile, or ever having to remember a username or password.
4. Students are notified by email when their stories are published or whenever anyone comments on their stories.
5. Because this particular application of C2 was for single-purpose use only (just submitting online stories), students didn't feel overwhelmed by the intimidating nature of

having to learn fully-collaborative environments, such as with some applications of Moodle.

Cons:

1. As with some other **CALL** systems, some students were reluctant to participate in an online English-learning system (Yamauchi & Uchida, 2011).
2. **C**2 system lacks navigation structure to facilitate easy access between student pages, and lacks a listing of stories submitted by each student author.
3. **C**2 system lacks a method for tracking student progress in writing their stories.
4. Students failed to comment on other student stories, and thus, no real online community or "forum" ever materialized.

Conclusion

The **SBI!** Content 2.0 online forum, which was specially adapted for use with this university class project, resulted in above-average success in its first year of application. The "What Japanese University Students Think About...?" (Wolff, 2010) project enabled students to enhance their global cultural awareness, as it served as an effective online supplement to the class textbook, *World Interviews* (Craven, 2006).

The primary reasons the system worked well are:

- The Content 2.0 system is easily accessible, where Japanese university students worldwide are invited to build **C**2 pages about selected 16 countries from any smartphone or computer with internet access, without the need for any registration, login, or password.
- The administrator has complete control over all new content and comments, unlike the "wild west" uncontrolled mayhem at some social networking sites.
- Because the site's **RSS** feed is updated every time a student creates a new **C**2 page, and **SBI!**'s "World Submitter" pings the "Big 3" search engines daily, these new pages get indexed quickly and, in turn, attract more visitors.
- The "What Japanese University Students Think About...?" (Wolff, 2010) theme turned out to be a nice match for the class textbook, *World Interviews* (Craven, 2006), and was an effective supplement to the classroom listening and speaking activities.
- After the new **C**2 page is created, the system is relatively maintenance free. Luckily, the students all had at least average English writing skills, so I didn't have to spend much time editing pages. The editing philosophy was not to aim for perfect grammar nor to eliminate Japanese-English, but rather to just make enough minor edits to ensure readability, while at the same time retaining the Japanese flavor of the student's message.
- The class size of 12 seemed optimum. If the number of students had been much larger, I worry that the administration of file management, editing, and uploading may have become much more daunting.

Although the system was not perfect, it worked admirably for this particular set of circumstances. I will need to rethink the system, and provisions will likely be put in place during the next cycle to make it more attractive for students to make comments, for example, to implement a bonus point system where students receive extra credit for commenting on **203**

other stories. And although this class project for the 2010–2011 school year is now finished, the student-created C2 pages are still "live" on the internet and so will undoubtedly continue to attract attention and comments well into the future. Obviously, only **SBI!** website owners can use this particular Content 2.0 system, but it is quite possible a similar system can be implemented on another platform, such as wikis, blogs, or **CMS**s, where a thought-provoking question could be posed in a student survey module, for example with Moodle. It is my hope that sharing details of this experimental class project will spur additional thinking and spawn new ideas for other similar innovative methods of computer-assisted language learning.

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