THE IMPORTANCE OF AN AUDIENCE

NEWSACTIVIST AS A FLEXIBLE PLATFORM SUPPORTING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

NORM SPATZ
Retired teacher and educational consultant

Pedagogues in any discipline can learn from language teachers' insight. A core idea has already emerged through the lab: the importance of an audience. From teacher feedback set in "the voice of the reader" to the pride in getting work in front of peers, readership matters.

(Alexandre Enkerli[1])

NewsActivist[2] is a global educational network designed by and for teachers and students in order to get users to participate in civic action through thinking and writing, hence the name: *NewsActivist*. It is a platform that allows the formation of a community of learners that can evolve along a spectrum from private to public. This article portrays how the platform can be adapted to meet the pedagogical needs of higher education among a wide range of disciplines covering sociological, ethical, commercial, media, environmental, cultural, educational or international issues, to name a few.

▶ A RESOURCE DESIGNED TO ENCOURAGE FIRST-LANGUAGE REFLECTION AND WRITING

The NewsActivist site aims to maximize collaboration between classes around the world by encouraging students to "express themselves in writing on contemporary issues in a thoughtful and critical manner" (Flacks, 2016, online). The published texts are varied; they often consist of reactions to professional articles on current issues or new trends, and are intended to be read and commented on by other community members. The site operation encourages students to propose new ideas based on a posted article or a published commentary. NewsActivist thus offers unique opportunities for students to receive relevant written feedback from their peers, taking advantage of a structured approach to the analysis of published content. This has the effect of generating a dialogue between students leading to a deeper understanding of the topics discussed in a college or university environment, safe from the hazards of unsupervised online discussions.

The "Recommended Stories" feature on the site's home page contains a dynamic display of recently published texts to invite users to respond and comment on the ideas of others.

Teachers can also encourage the reading of selected texts written by students by checking the "Recommend" tab on an article they found particularly interesting. The article will then be published on the NewsActivist home page, which is a sure way to attract the attention of readers.

▶ AN UNEXPECTED RESOURCE FOR ENGLISH AND FRENCH AS SECOND LANGUAGES

The developer of NewsActivist, Gabriel Flacks, who teaches humanities on Champlain College's St. Lambert campus, never imagined that the platform's publications targeting students in the humanities and philosophy would serve as educational material for second-language classes. When English-as-a-second-language teachers contacted him, however, he did not hesitate to improve the indexing of articles and the search feature to facilitate use in a second-language-learning context. He also adapted the platform to user needs by offering a private work mode and by limiting access to an understanding user community for both publishing and receiving comments in a second language.

The site targets both English and French speakers, even though there is much less written material in French. Learners of English as a second language will find a wealth of publications in that language, such as various articles about current events and reactions to them. Teachers can use this collection of texts to model writing strategies for second-language learners.

▶ A FLEXIBLE PLATFORM THAT MEETS THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS IN ALL DISCIPLINES

The texts published on earlier versions of NewsActivist could easily be read by any user from any class group accessing the platform. That could be an obstacle for second-language students. When I assessed the appropriateness of using the site as part of my ESL course, I was particularly sensitive to

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1 Alexander Enkerli. "Pedagogical Implications of Online Readership," March 23, 2015, available online at [profweb.ca/en/publications/articles/pedagogical-implications-of-online-readership].

2 [newsactivist.com].

the reluctance of my students to publish any embarrassing mistakes online. The NewsActivist development team worked to address this problem, so that students writing in a second language could feel comfortable enough to publish online to an understanding audience. And this is where the great strength of the website lies: the variable visibility of articles, since readership access to publications is controlled. My students were able to enlarge their circle of readers throughout the evolution of their writing as the result of a scaffolded correction approach. At a certain point, they could then receive feedback from native English speakers.

The concept of "friends" in the site's first version grew significantly as the site evolved. Teachers and students can use the "Friends" tab in their account settings and select members of their class to be part of the group, selectively limiting visibility of their texts. When the content is identified as private, the student can continue privately working on their writing and argumentation. If a student wishes to submit content to be seen only by the teacher, they can set the visibility to not include "friends" during the drafting process. When the author is ready, the content can be shared with their class group or with the entire NewsActivist community.

For their part, teachers have the opportunity to create an entirely private class whose membership is restricted to students admitted by the teacher. As students refine their work, the teacher can gradually increase readership to encourage meaningful dialogue between peers. When classes are made public, they are visible on the "Classes" page, whose content is accessible to all NewsActivist users.

Although the site's structure is mainly suited to the needs of humanities and philosophy classes because the published articles are indexed according to themes in these areas, teachers and students from other disciplines can largely ignore these classifications and use NewsActivist for collaborative writing. The private class is then a very useful option.

NEWSACTIVIST FAVOURS INDEPENDENT AND COLLABORATIVE PRODUCTIONS

A student registered in a class can post independent productions and elect to share opinions with a wider audience. Comments from enlightened readers can become a great motivation to write for pleasure.

In addition to the "private class," a teacher can also use the "collaborative-class" approach developed, in part, to adapt to the increasing number of second-language teachers working online with another class. NewsActivist allows a teacher to invite collaboration from another class. In this case, all student publications are shared between the two classes, often located at great geographic distance from each other.

From there, a host of opportunities are possible, such as two second-language classes at the same level collaborating by sharing their views on specific topics. Two second-language classrooms (one French and the other English) can cooperate by exchanging advice in their respective mother tongues. Humanities classes can work with second-language classes to gain experience with a multilingual clientele. Students in different disciplines can contribute to a common project based on their particular expertise.

In 2013, as part of a grant obtained under the Canada–Quebec Agreement[3], I proposed using the site structure to help my second-language students enrolled in a business program to develop their own business plans. Due to the NewsActivist's orientation regarding civic engagement, I insisted that my students design business plans for ethical companies (Spatz, 2014). Excited about the actual interactions with the English-language network, my students enjoyed their experience.

CONCLUSION

Although NewsActivist was first developed as a course supplement to promote writing and debates among students, its power to stimulate student engagement and break down the barriers between physical classes became evident from the start. Success is now measured by the number of users that have adopted the site and the number of publications: there are over 6800 members in 81 affiliated schools, and nearly 9400 articles or comments have been published (NewsActivist, 2016).

As Enkerli mentions in the introduction to this article, the audience is a great catalyst in stimulating learning, with whom students can share their achievements with pride and receive meaningful feedback. NewsActivist is a resource to explore to enable students to:

- develop reading and writing skills;
- debate current events, while encouraging the participation of students who, for various reasons, do not feel comfortable about taking part in discussions in the traditional classroom environment;

[3] Editor's note: The full name is "Canada–Québec Agreement for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction."

- improve their critical thinking and deliberation skills by receiving and providing feedback;

- demonstrate openness and tolerance through discussion and debate between students from different cultures and countries;

- acquire skills related to literacy and the use of media by exploring various sources that deal with contemporary issues according to the curriculum; and

- promote civic engagement, particularly through the learning of peer views and ideas (NewsActivist, 2016).

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Since NewsActivist targets academic success, the initial project funding came mainly from Champlain College, a fact that facilitated interactions between site administrators and users in order to constantly improve the site. This kind of flexibility does not always occur in commercial projects (Flacks and Reid, 2014). The more user-friendly interface has evolved through feedback from users about their needs and difficulties.

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This dynamic mix of personal inspiration from Flacks with collective development and user involvement in changes perhaps gives a glimpse of what NewsActivist will become in the future, given the growing participation of teachers and students and the rapid evolution of information technology. ◗

Norm SPATZ taught English as a second language at the Cégep du Vieux Montreal from 1997 until his retirement in 2015. For 9 years, he also act as the English-language editor of Profweb, a service available to the teaching staff within the college system to promote the integration of ICTs into teaching and learning. Mr. Spatz started his college career in 1989 as a teacher of architectural technology at Vieux Montréal, but, as the result of a decline in enrolment in this program and the reform that made English a compulsory subject at his college, he was able to focus on teaching English as a second language.

normspatz@gmail.com