

Chapter 9

The Modes of Governmentality in Language Education: Blog Activities in a Japanese-as-a- Foreign-Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the validity of incorporating blog activities in language education classes as an equalizing practice. The authors examine blog activities aimed at providing a way for foreign language learners to communicate in a space free from any teacher-student hierarchy as part of a Japanese-as-a-Foreign-Language class at a university in the United States. The authors show that a teacher-student hierarchy still seeps into the blog space, albeit in a different form. Using Michel Foucault's notion of modes of governmentality, they analyze how the blog's postings and readers' comments define the space of a particular blog by evoking modes of governmentality of schooling and of "native" vs. "non-native" speakers. They suggest the importance of acknowledging the existence of relations of dominance in what was initially perceived to be a power-free online space and encourage educators who use blogs in classes to involve learners in the understanding and transformation of such relations of dominance.

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INTRODUCTION

New communication technologies such as the Internet have changed language use and foreign language pedagogy, enabling new ways to engage, create, and participate in communities (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Kern, 2006; Kern, Ware, and Warschauer, 2004; New London Group, 1996). However, some second-language education theorists consider these technologies as mere tools and focus on how teachers and researchers can implement the options that they already have for developing second-language tasks for learners (Blake, 2007; Chapelle, 2007). These studies tend to neglect the impact these technologies have on teaching practices. Other researchers situate the effects of online communication within larger contexts of power relations and broader social hierarchies. They argue that the difference between a face-to-face or verbal communication and online communication is the absence of physical self, thus of visual and aural markers (Flanagan and Booth, 2002; Harcourt, 1999; Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman, 2000; O'Farrell & Vallone, 1999).

In such critical cyber studies, many researchers' analyses of power relations have focused on gender, race, and class (Silver, 2000). While other kinds of power relations, such as that between "native" and "non-native" speakers in the online space have arisen (Lam, 2000; 2003; Sato, 2009), many researchers' studies tend to focus on the positive side of online learning without fully examining the power relations that exist in the online space. By investigating blog activities for a Japanese-as-a-foreign-language class, we will show in this chapter that the online space can be defined and redefined variously through postings, and that power relations such as "native speaker" vs. "non-native speaker" can emerge.

A blog is an electronic journal shared by many users and upkept by one or more assigned persons (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005). Blog users can easily publish a short entry for other people to read. This

feature enables users to express their emotions, exchange opinions, and participate in or create a community. These characteristics of blogs provide foreign language learners with more exposure to language in action and more venues to use language with people outside the classroom.

In this chapter, we examine a foreign language classroom activity of blogging in terms of its specific mode of governmentality. Michel Foucault's (1991) analysis of governmentality, or the "conduct of conduct",—"how to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed, how to become the best possible governor" (Foucault, 1991, p. 87)—led many scholars to examine "practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize, and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups" (Dean, 1999, p. 12). Dean (1999) argues that understanding modes of governmentality is a starting point to transform and be more responsible for one's actions and craft ways to counter such modes.

The classroom has its own mode of governmentality. As schooling developed for the masses, practices at school were governed by the mode of governmentality of discipline which "compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, and excludes [students]. In short, it normalizes [them]" (Foucault, 1977, p. 183). This normalizing judgment is combined with observing hierarchy in the technique of examination (Foucault, 1977). Some aspects of such a mode of governmentality of schooling still exist in practice (Gore, 1998; Green, 1998).

The classroom blog project was an attempt to leave this mode of governmentality and let students learn Japanese in "communities of practice." There students are no longer deficient Japanese language speakers but novices participating in the practices of the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). While research on blogging is often perceived in this way (Lam, 2000), we argue that the blog itself has its own governmentality, which needs to be

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