

ISSN 0910-500X

英文學思潮

THOUGHT CURRENTS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

VOLUME LXXXIII

2010

THE ENGLISH LITERARY SOCIETY
OF
AOYAMA GAKUIN UNIVERSITY

青山学院大学英文学会

英文學

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Using Social Networking Sites as EFL Personal Learning Networks

Brant Hardgrave



In the age of social networking sites (SNSs), where the website Facebook has become second only to Google in popularity (Alexa Top 500 Global Sites), it is obvious that online social interaction is becoming the norm, especially for teenagers and young adults. It is understandable that this trend is not welcomed by some, yet it seems that preparing English as a foreign language (EFL) university students for face-to-face (F2F) contact alone is no longer adequate. This paper will use screenshots to look at two popular websites YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/>) and Twitter (<http://twitter.com/>), with a focus on YouTube, and explain how each can be adopted in an EFL classroom to enhance learner motivation by gaining exposure to authentic target language (TL) content together with contemporary thought-provoking materials. Furthermore these websites can be used by students to interact amongst themselves, the teacher and other members of the websites' online communities. Essentially this

paper will explain how SNS websites can be used to establish an EFL *Personal Learning Network* (PLN). An EFL PLN is an e-learning 2.0 term defined by the author as online networked learning via a Web 2.0 SNS platform, tailored for use by EFL students, that enables exposure to current TL and culture, both inside and outside the classroom, and enhances the overall communicative possibilities of learners. This paper will also take a brief look at some precautions that need to be taken by both the teacher and students when using open-community SNS websites.

Defining a Personal Learning Network (PLN):

There is a good chance that increasing numbers of educators in the 21st century are involved in some kind of online PLN with either their colleagues or with students, but are simply unaware of Web 2.0 terminologies used to describe what they do. When dealing with relatively new e-learning terminology, some of the best information comes from the blogosphere. There is no authoritative definition of what a PLN is, and educational bloggers, or *edubloggers*, are still attempting to come to some kind of consensus regarding its meaning, as can be observed by reading through such blogs as one entitled *What is a PLN? Or, PLE vs. PLN?* (Alec) and another entitled *What the Heck is a PLN?* (Still).

Furthermore, the acronym PLN is competing with other seemingly synonymous terms, which are outlined below:

PLC – Personal Learning Community – According to some edubloggers PLC and PLN are interchangeable terms.

PLN – Professional Learning Network – The word *Professional* suggests this term is used to describe the online exchanging of lesson ideas etc. amongst professors & teachers; i.e. Professional Development + Web 2.0 = Professional Learning Network.

PLE – Personal Learning Environment – The word *Environment* suggests it is perhaps a broader umbrella term including F2F contact as well as e-learning 2.0 via online PLNs.

Online Learning Community – Possibly synonymous with an “online PLN” but not well adopted by e-learning edubloggers.

Networked Learning – Another e-learning 2.0 term that is rivaling PLN for a place within edubloggers vernacular. As defined by the article *Networked Learning in Higher Education*, Networked Learning involves the learners’ interaction with both materials *and* people online.

PLC – Personal Learning Community – A less commonly used acronym, but not using the term *Network* suggests its focus is F2F contact.

PLN – Personal Learning Network – So for the purposes of this paper, a PLN is an online network making use of Web 2.0 technology allowing students to personalize their learning experience while interacting not just with one another and the teacher, but also individuals from other countries, best done using such ubiquitous SNS websites as <http://www.youtube.com/> & <http://twitter.com/> as a platform. And a broader definition contributed by the edublogger Nielsen (2008):

PLNs provide individuals with learning and access to leaders and experts around the world bringing together communities, resources and information impossible to access solely from within school walls ... Personal Learning Networks are a terrific way to extend your knowledge and learning outside your classroom.

To further elucidate, PLNs create a platform for a level of synergy and communication between the teacher and students beyond that when traditionally restricted to between the walls of a classroom

during a set lesson time on a certain day(s) of the week. This can enhance a sense of community amongst the students, which is known to have a positive effect on learning outcomes (Swan and Shea 2005).

EFL PLN – English as a foreign language Personal Learning Network – Online Networked Learning via a Web 2.0 platform, simplified for use by EFL students.

Perhaps the most thorough blog about PLNs is one authored by Kate Klingensmith (2009), who holds a degree in Brain and Cognitive Science from MIT. In her blog entitled *PLN: Your Personal Learning Network Made Easy* she defines a PLN quite simply as "...the entire collection of people with whom you engage and exchange information, usually online." Klingensmith points out that "Most of the 'learning' takes place on-line now, because it is simple to find and connect with others with similar interests from around the world." Visit her website to access a comprehensive list of Web 2.0 tools that can be used as PLN platforms. However like all other educational bloggers, she does not seem to be aware of the potential of using the video-sharing website YouTube as a PLN, perhaps because she does not have a background in TEFL.

Finally, to learn more about PLNs, please view the below YouTube videos. While they are not rated highly by the YouTube community, they do well to visually explain the concept of a PLN:

Building a PLN with Web 2.0 Tools (uploaded by mlbourgeois):

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxV_F63ksMg

Networked Student (uploaded by wdrexler):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwM4ieFOotA>

Personal Learning Networks (uploaded by willrich45):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mghGV37TeK8>

Precautions Wh

As most EFL SNS networks varying language author's opinion mitigate these websites like Y emphasized to s real names, not If required whe Secondly, if stu expected to navi setting back to followed by peo to *block* or *igno* glitches, in a ubiquitous, it is an online Engl classroom rathe not have any F2l

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Precautions When Using Open-Community SNSs in the Classroom:

As most EFL teachers would be aware, using open-community SNS networks in a classroom of non-native English speakers of varying language ability does come with potential hazards. In the author's opinion there are three golden rules that can be adopted to mitigate these hazards. Firstly when setting up an account on websites like YouTube and Twitter, something that needs to be emphasized to students, is never to submit personal details such as real names, mobile phone numbers, home addresses, even birthdates. If required when signing up, this information should be fictitious. Secondly, if students have a technical issue that they cannot be expected to navigate in English, permit them to change the language setting back to Japanese. Thirdly, if they get friend requests or are followed by people they are unsure about, they need to be shown how to *block* or *ignore* the person. Despite the possibility of there being glitches, in a world where SNSs are becoming increasingly ubiquitous, it is best for students to take their first tentative steps in an online English community (i.e. not Mixi) in the safety of a classroom rather than navigate it by themselves later when they do not have any F2F support from fellow classmates or the teacher.

Finally a quick note about Facebook, which is the clearly the most popular SNS, holding an Internet traffic rank of either 1 or 2 in most countries, and is steadily rising through the ranks in Japan into the top 20 (Facebook.com Site Info - Alexa). Unfortunately the author discovered that Facebook cannot be used as an EFL PLN platform like YouTube and Twitter. In Semester II 2010, within 12 hours of signing up on Facebook for four different classes, each separate account was disabled, and by a show of hands in class the following week, approximately half of all students had their accounts disabled too. The reason was explained in more detail on the *Facebook FAQ* page:

Fake accounts are a violation of our Statement of Rights and

Responsibilities ... You must provide your real first name and last name ... You are not allowed to create multiple accounts that exist solely for the usage of Facebook Platform applications. It is a violation of Facebook policy to maintain more than one account on the site.

YOUTUBE

A Closer Look at YouTube as a PLN:

According to the Top Sites page of *Alexa The Web Information Company* (Alexa Top 500 Global Sites), *YouTube* is the third most popular website in the world, behind *Google* and *Facebook*. *YouTube* is ranked fourth in Japan, and is the top-ranked English website, ahead of *Google* (7th place) and *Wikipedia* (9th place) (Top Sites in Japan - Alexa). Furthermore, 25% of global Internet users are visiting *YouTube* (*YouTube.com* Site Info - Alexa). However, while many Japanese students are familiar with *YouTube*, they simply use the website to watch videos and need to be instructed on how to start up their own *channel*, to *favorite* videos and *friend* their classmates, to complete their *profile setup* and write *comments*, etc.

While supplementing a textbook by watching related videos on *YouTube* is a great way to have students access freely available authentic English audio-visual material, doing so does not constitute a Personal Learning Network. Students must have the ability to go home, sign into *YouTube* and interact with their classmates online for *YouTube* to qualify as a PLN.

Initially each student's *YouTube* Channel within the PLN will be quite uniform, but as the semester goes on, and the students gain a better understanding of how to use the website's functions, they begin to personalize their channels more combining their English studies with their personal interests. As a PLN, *YouTube* gives students a chance to express themselves online, and gives them a window into

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Fig. 1: YouTube
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fellow classmates' interests. If they discover that a classmate shares an interest in the same Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) team, or the same obscure punk rock band, it triggers genuine motivation to communicate with their classmate, ideally but not always in the TL.

It should be mentioned that a student's YouTube Channel grade is never the key element of their overall score. It is usually only worth 10% of their final end-of-year grade, with more traditional assessment items such as Book Reports, Textbook-based Quizzes, Newspaper Summaries, PowerPoint Presentations, Vocabulary Lists, etc. making up the bulk of their grade.

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YouTube Screenshots from IE3 Core Class 1st Semester 2010:

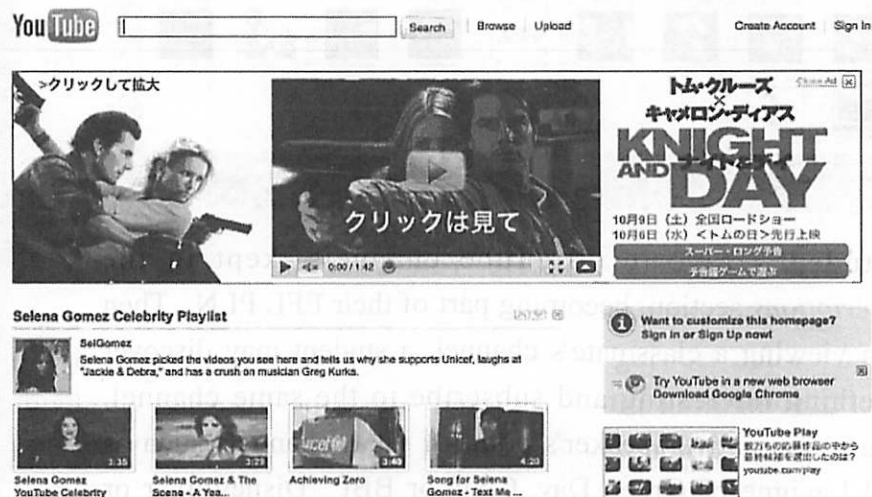


Fig. 1: YouTube main page where students first *Create Account* and then *Sign In* in subsequent classes.

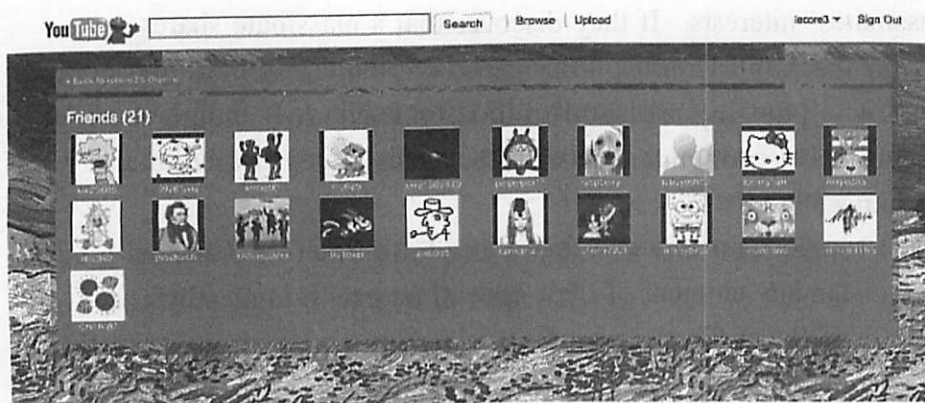


Fig. 2: Each *YouTube Friend* is a student of the class, plus one teacher. Click on the *profile image* and go to their channel. This function qualifies YouTube as a PLN platform.



Fig. 3: A student's favorite YouTube channels, kept in the *Subscriptions* section, becoming part of their EFL PLN. Then when viewing a classmate's channel, a student may discover something interesting and subscribe to the same channel. From a non-native speaker's point of view, channels such as Avril Lavigne or Green Day, CNN or BBC, DisneyPixar or TheXFactorUK can become part of one's PLN.

Fig. 4: Students are given English (to be copy and paste a spell-check fi



Fig. 5: Commenting on in the *Channel*



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Interests:
I am interested in reading books, listening to music, playing piano and tenor-sax, and watching picture. I often visit museum. In Japan, I like the National Art Museum, which always holds interesting exhibition. In foreign, I have been to the Louvre Museum, the Musee d'Orsay, the British Museum, the Met, and so on.

Movies:
I love to watching movie. My best favorite movie is "My little Sunshine." I like movies that makes me something feel happy. My favorite other movies are "Pirates of Caribbean", "Ocean's" series and so on. These days, I watched "Twilight". The movie is very interesting and very romantic!

Music:
I love music! I listen to a lot of kinds of music: classic, pop, rock and jazz music. Nowadays, I often listen to UK rock music: U2, oasis, radiohead and Arctic Monkeys. I often go fes and live. I love to enjoy realtime music!

Books:
My favorite books in Japanese are Isaka Koutaro's books. I like his literary style. I think his literary style is like Haruki Murakami! I like his books too. About foreign author, I like Hurry Potter series.

Fig. 4: Students are given class time to fill out their *Profile Setup* in English (to be completed at home). They are instructed to copy and paste onto *Windows Word* as YouTube does not have a spell-check function.

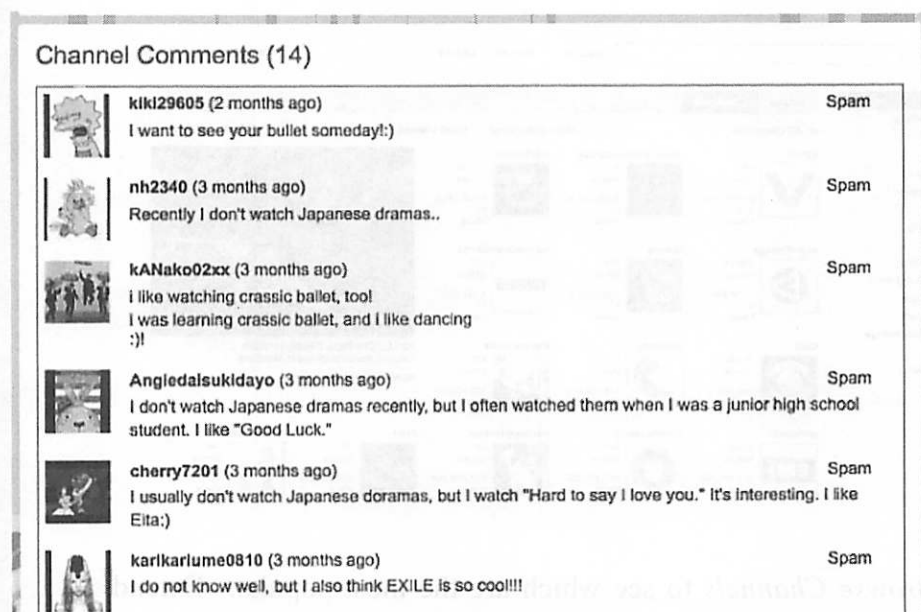


Fig. 5: Commenting on the contents of a classmates YouTube channel in the *Channel Comments* section.

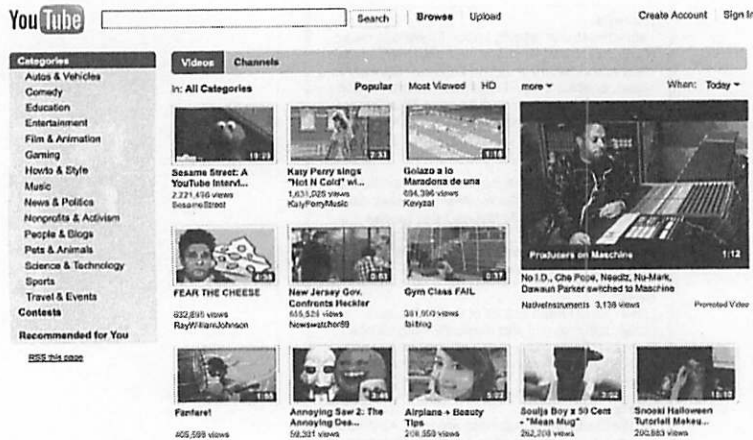


Fig. 6: Browse through the most popular videos for *Today, This Week, This Month* or *All Time* to find such videos as an Elmo interview on the Sesame Street channel. Before browsing instruct students to check they are in the *English Worldwide* mode as the *Japanese Japan* mode will not help their English.



Fig. 8: Students can find videos to American colleges. Address at

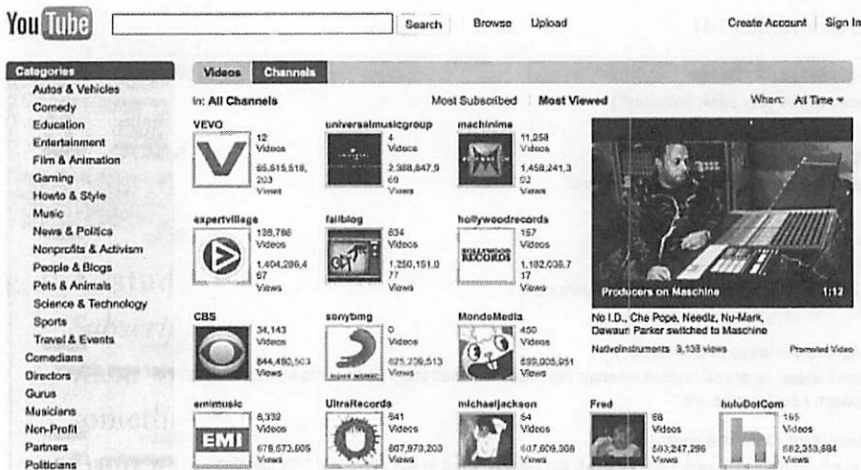


Fig. 7: Browse *Channels* to see which are the most popular. Extend ones PLN by adding some *People & Blogs* channels.

Sign In

Today



Promoted Video



Promoted Video

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Create Account Sign In

When: All Time



Promoted Video



Promoted Video

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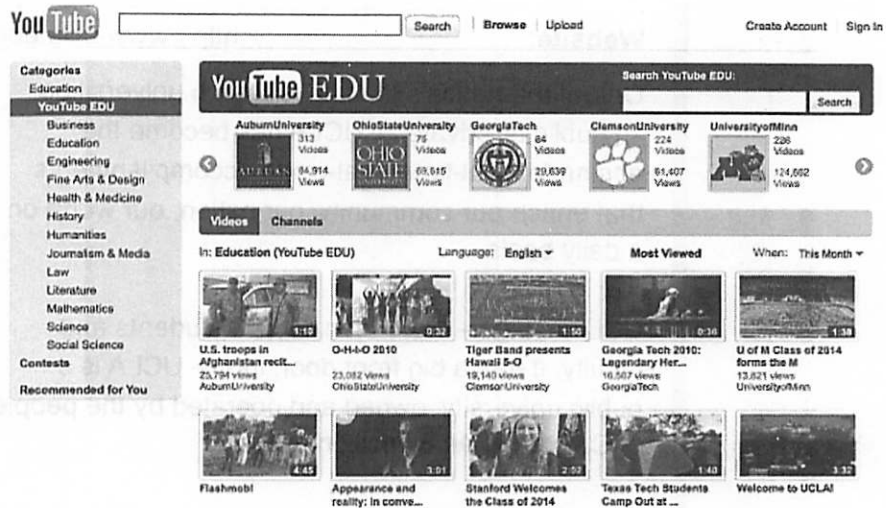


Fig. 8: Students can further extend their PLN to include subscriptions to American Universities, viewing lectures from prestigious colleges. A personal favorite is *Steve Job's Commencement Address at Stanford University*.

Website: <http://www.ucla.edu>

One of the nation's leading research universities — public or private — UCLA has become the engine for real-time, real-world accomplishments that enrich our community, our nation, our world on a daily basis.

UCLA is big — more than 40,000 students and faculty. It has a big front door, too — UCLA is a public university, owned and operated by the people of California. All 38 million of them.

Come on in — there's a great big world in here.

Country: United States


A graphic for UCLA's social media presence. On the left, the letters 'UCLA' are stacked vertically in a large, bold, sans-serif font. To the right of this, the words 'CONNECT WITH US' are written in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font. Further to the right, there are four icons arranged vertically: a musical note (representing iTunes podcasts), the Facebook 'f' logo, a Twitter bird logo, and a group of three stylized human figures (representing social networking).

Fig. 9: Some university channels then invite YouTubers to connect on other SNSs such as *Facebook*, *MySpace* or *Twitter* or to subscribe to their *iTunes* podcasts.

Fig

You Tube

Categories

Autos & Vehicles

Comedy

Education

Entertainment

Film & Animation

Gaming

Howto & Style

Music

News & Politics

Nonprofits & Activism

People & Blogs

Pets & Animals

Science & Technology

Sports

Travel & Events

Fig. 10: When browsing, teachers can choose from several categories to find appropriate audio-visual materials to share with the class.

Student Comments on the YouTube PLN from End of Semester/Year Student Questionnaires (various classes 2009 academic year):

While the below comments are all positive, this is actually a reflection of overwhelmingly positive feedback regarding the use of such SNSs as YouTube:

"Brant sometimes gives us some information by using YouTube. Thanks to that, we could understand easily because visual information will be putted into our brain more than verbal information"

"... YouTube is good as class text."

"I think it (YouTube) was good, but the teacher should allow us to have some Japanese videos in the favorites."

"I found YouTube was good to study English. Although this semester was over, I will keep using YouTube."

"I liked our teacher using a lot of youtube and showed us worldwide videos."

"I think Youtube is very interesting, because it will let us know what happen in the world and there are many ways to access to these information easily, which I didn't know till I took this class."

"I think youtube works are really good. Through them, I could see what was happening in the world, what was popular, and so on."

"Also, I liked using YouTube in class. Until this class, I did not know how to make an account, or upload videos. I had fun with it, and I'll continue using it."

"We used many kinds of materials. YouTube is interesting."

"He gave me some chances to communicate with many people such as making YouTube account and modifying my own page."

"The good thing about this class is that I know more about youtube and that it is useful to practice English."

"I was looking forward to watch videos every class."

"YouTube is interesting because I can watch English music videos and movies."

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A Closer Look

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"YouTube is good for understanding world's culture now, I think. And its interesting and remain my mind because its eyesight information."

"YouTube was good for listening. It was interesting because we could see various genre video."

"I think YouTube is good for English learning. I enjoy searching my favorite English songs."

TWITTER

A Closer Look at Twitter as a PLN:

While the author's use of YouTube as a platform for an EFL PLN is quite unique, the use of Twitter by educators is both well documented and not unusual for those involved in employing Web 2.0 technologies into an e-learning curriculum. While authors of research papers and edubloggers who write about the use of Twitter for educational purposes do not often use the umbrella term PLN to describe their approach, when adopted for classroom use Twitter does in fact become a PLN platform for the students. On Twitter the EFL teacher is finally able to do the impossible: to monitor an English conversation class with 40 students speaking (*tweeting*) simultaneously, providing timely feedback, ensuring students understand corrections, and sharing common errors for the whole class to learn from.

Twitter Screenshots from IE3 Core Class 1st Semester 2010:



Fig. 11: Twitter main page where students initially *Sign Up*, and then *Sign In* in subsequent classes. Note that teachers need to keep up to date with upgrades to any SNS they are using.

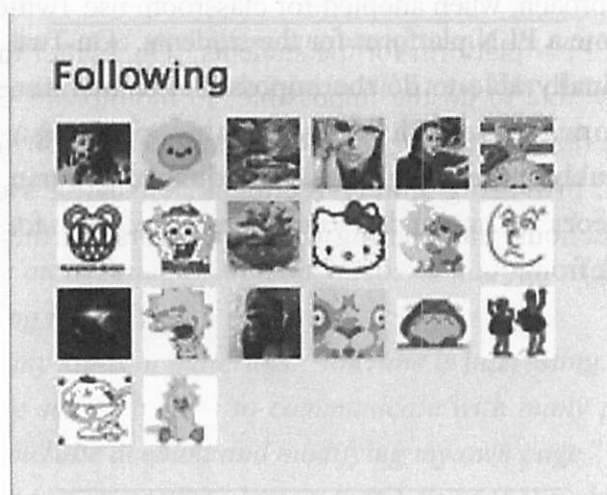
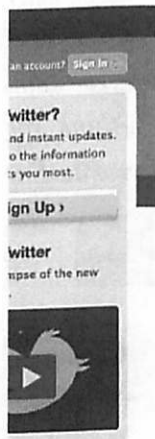


Fig. 12: Each person the teacher *Follows* is a student of the class. Initially it is best to only follow the students, and use the *Block* function on unknown followers.



Fig. 13: Shar
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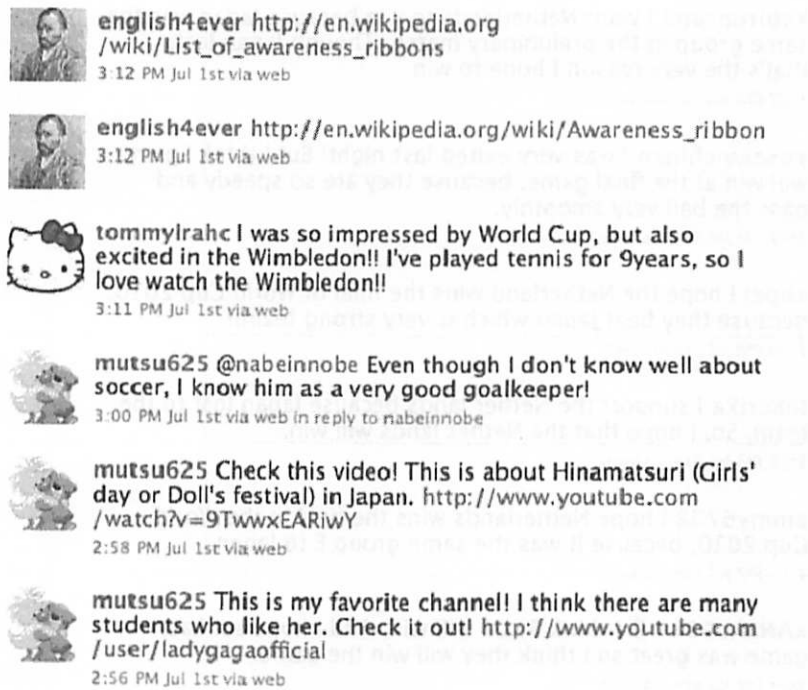


Fig. 13: Sharing websites, favorite YouTube videos and channels, comments and replies on Twitter

f the class.
and use the









-  **kabirunrun3** I want Netherlands to win because Japan was the same group in the preliminary match. Though Japan lost, that's the very reason I hope to win
1:27 PM Jul 8th via web
-  **yusakuichiban** I was very excited last night! But I think Spain will win at the final game, because they are so speedy and pass the ball very smoothly.
1:27 PM Jul 8th via web
-  **aopei** I hope the Netherland wins the final of World Cup 2010, because they beat Japan which is very strong team!!
1:26 PM Jul 8th via web
-  **takerika** I support the Nether lands because Japan lost to the team. So, I hope that the Nether lands will win.
1:25 PM Jul 8th via web
-  **ammy6732** I hope Netherlands wins the final In the World Cup 2010, because it was the same group E to Japan.
1:25 PM Jul 8th via web
-  **kANako02xx**  I think Spain will win. And I hope so! Last game was great so I think they will win the game.
1:24 PM Jul 8th via web
-  **nh2340** I hope Spain wins the final of the World Cup 2010 because Japan lose Netherlands.
1:23 PM Jul 8th via web
-  **krw58** I support Spain because they have been really great throughout FIFA World Cup. I don't think even Netherland can beat them.
1:23 PM Jul 8th via web

Fig. 14: Exchanging tweets about the FIFA World Cup 2010 finals.

-  **coccc** my fr
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-  **kabir** impro
progr
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-  **nabei** books
1:42 PM
-  **mutsi** movie
myste
1:41 PM
-  **09281** planni
1:41 PM
-  **aopei** speak
1:40 PM
-  **Chihhi** do my
1:40 PM
-  **ammy**
1:39 PM

Fig. 15: Tweeti
2010 s

-  **cocco29605** During this vacation, I will plan to go U.S.A with my friends, so I want to read some travelers guidbooks. And I must study hard for TOEFL.
1:42 PM Jul 22nd via web
-  **kabirunrun3** This summer vacation, I will visit Guam. So, I improve listening comprehension watching NHK english program.
1:42 PM Jul 22nd via web
-  **nabeinnobe** I will go to Good Day Books, and find interesting books. I want to read three books at least.
1:42 PM Jul 22nd via web
-  **mutsu625** I want to read English novel and also watch English movies. Especially I want to read or watch love story or mystery.
1:41 PM Jul 22nd via web
-  **09281aaa** I am going to Hawaii in September, and I am planning to speak English with local people!!!
1:41 PM Jul 22nd via web
-  **aopei** I want to go to Asakusa, and talk with a lot of english speakers. I want to introduce Japan.
1:40 PM Jul 22nd via web
-  **Chihhii87** This summer, I will prepare to take Eiken, and I'll do my part-time-job to go overseas next vacation.
1:40 PM Jul 22nd via web
-  **ammy6732** This summer vacation, I'll read a English book.
1:39 PM Jul 22nd via web

Fig. 15: Tweeting about plans for English study during the upcoming 2010 summer vacation.



Fig. 16: Replying to tweets about summer vacation plans.

Student Comments on the Twitter PLN from End of Semester/Year Student Questionnaires (various classes 2009 academic year):

"To use Twitter is first time for me, but I enjoyed it."

"I don't know how to use twitter, so I'm glad that I can learn it."

"Twitter was quite interesting!! I did not know about it, so I could learn new thing."

"Twitter was good for communication with us. We could share informations."

"I think twitter is good for study of English."

"YouTube and Twitter was very interesting. I got to communicate in

English."
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English.”

“Using twitter in class is unique.”

“YouTube was very interesting, and Twitter was good for English communication or vocabularies.”

“Twitter is interesting too because it is easy to chat classmates.”

“Twitter is very good because of writing.”

“Twitter is fun too! I can practice English and write twitts.”

“Twitter is very useful and makes me feel fresh. Twitter is hot site now, so I’m happy to use this site.”

“Youtube, Twitter, Myspace are very interested! I could know things I didn’t know and about world.”

Conclusion:

SNSs like Facebook are no longer a fad but are increasingly adopted both by individuals and organizations as a necessary tool for communication and collaborative networking. While there are legitimate concerns regarding this trend which is changing the dynamics of modern-day communication, it is the author’s opinion that EFL students need instruction. They need to learn how to set up an account in English, write a profile or bio, write comments and respond. They need to understand how to avoid divulging too much personal information when setting up their profiles, and what to do when approached by someone online they do not wish to interact with. English classes at universities need to incorporate this into their courses, giving students a chance to interact both F2F and online via popular SNS networks. And given the low number of English-speaking immigrants in Japan, perhaps it is also more likely that students will be coming into contact with native English speakers online rather than F2F anyway.

While computer-mediated online learning used to be the forte of distance learning education programs (Kearsley 2005), with the rising popularity of SNS networks over the last several years, online

communities can now be formed with ease using popular freely-available multilingual intuitive websites as platforms. This enhances the collaborative potential among students of traditional Japanese university EFL classes that usually meet only 15 times during an academic semester, and gives learners 24 hour access to current authentic L2 materials according to their own personal interests.

Finally, if considering setting up an online PLN for your own classes using either YouTube or Twitter and have any questions, please email me: ibrant@mac.com

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