

Web 2.0 in Classics: The use of blogs for monitoring students' knowledge of ancient Greek grammar¹

Web 2.0 em Clássicas: o uso de blogues para monitorizar o conhecimento da gramática do grego antigo pelos alunos

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Abstract: This paper aims to introduce the use of blogs in the obligatory course "Greek Grammar", of the Bachelor Degree in Classics at the University of Barcelona in order to increase the students' competences in managing and organizing their learning and to make their studies more attractive and adapted to the new learning tools and trends. The methodology followed considers primarily the active participation of students in the course activities and enables students to take advantage of the available online tools to interact with each other, or even work together and with their instructor.

Keywords: Web 2.0; blogs; ancient Greek grammar; learning management; students' monitoring.

Introduction

In the last decades there is a growing interest among universities for the use of Internet in teaching and learning. In addition, the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have changed the nature of education by providing learning communities for teachers and students, where they can interact with each other even if they are situated in different geographical locations. The importance of interaction in forms of flexible, online and distance education have been researched and described at length — whether learners interacting with individualized computer programs or learner-to-teacher or learner-to-learner interaction that at a distance requires the mediation of technology³.

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³ Moore, M.G., "Three types of interaction": *American Journal of Distance Education*, 3 (2) (1989) 1-6 and Garrison, D. R. & Anderson, T., "Learning in a networked world": C. Campbell-Gibson (Ed), *Distance learners in higher education: Institutional responses for quality outcomes* (Madison 1989).

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has brought changes in the way students learn and teachers teach. The new roles require the active participation of teachers and the use of more resources and new strategies to respond to emerging needs. To carry out this process successfully it will be necessary to establish more support mechanisms for teachers (more training, more resources, better infrastructure, encouraging reflection, etc.)⁴.

The teaching syllabus for a Classics degree, in common with other undergraduate programs in Philology, does not offer students any specific training in educational science or the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Recent research⁵ has shown that the use of ICT in learning activities in language university departments is used mostly in order to support the face-to-face teaching and learning. Despite the fact that its application has offered some very important benefits to both instructors and students⁶, the current conditions in the departments of classics show that effective academic staff and ICT resources development for online activities can be difficult to achieve. One reason is that there are often limited funds available. Another is that the diverse skills and knowledge required in order to participate with success in these new teaching methods are not formally described⁷.

In this context, sometimes the students don't manage to develop important competences, which, according to the European Higher Education

⁴ Gros, B. & Romañá, T. (2004). *Ser profesor. Palabras sobre la Docencia Universitaria* (Barcelona 2004).

⁵ Vlachopoulos, D., "La influencia de la Nuevas Tecnologías en el cambio de la cultura docente de los estudios clásicos": *Ágora. Estudios Clásicos em Debate* 11 (2009) 219-229 and Vlachopoulos, D., González, Ll. & Gómez, P., "Online tutoring in Classics: a way of familiarizing the students with the use technologies in learning activities": *Ágora. Estudios Clásicos em Debate* 12 (2010) 115-132.

⁶ Vintró, E., Gómez, P., Mestre, F., González, Ll. & Vlachopoulos, D., "B-learning per al grec clàssic: dinamització en l'aprenentatge de la morfosintaxi": *V Congreso Internacional de Docencia Universitaria e Innovación* (Lleida 2008).

⁷ Vlachopoulos, D., "Introducing online teaching in Humanities: A case study about the acceptance of online activities by the academic staff of classical languages": *Digithum* 11 (2009). Retrieved on September 1st 2012 from http://www.uoc.edu/ojs/index.php/digithum/article/view/n11_vlachopoulos/n11_vlachopoulos_eng.

Area (EHEA), are necessary for their future occupation as secondary education teachers, such as the “digital competence”, for example. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted and that university and college students use actively in their daily lives social networking applications and the Web 2.0 (blogs, wikis, etc.). In addition, several studies have shown that the use of some of these tools in the teaching-learning process can work as an enriching and motivating factor for the students.

Over the last few years, Electra Teaching Innovation Group of the Department of Greek at the University of Barcelona has gradually introduced a number of different technological resources and online activities as learning tools to be used in the teaching of Ancient Greek on the university's degree and post-graduate courses. As a consequence of these innovations there has been a visible trend towards better student results, because ICT gives them more confidence, far as it makes the teaching and learning process easier and at the same time can make studying more enjoyable⁸.

In this context, this paper's basic hypothesis is that changes in the approach to teaching, with a new system of guidance and monitoring for the students through virtual interaction and collaboration as an alternative and/or complement to face-to-face sessions, result in a renewal of teaching methodologies and help students to achieve the teaching objectives and better develop the skills associated with their degree subjects.

The context of the study: The ancient Greek grammar course

This course aims to strengthen students' competence to recognize specific morphological elements of the ancient Greek language. The methodology is essentially practical basically through analysis and production of forms, substitution drills, etc. In the face-to-face sessions the theoretical

⁸ Vlachopoulos, D., González, Ll. & Gómez, P., “Online tutoring in Classics: a way of familiarizing the students with the use technologies in learning activities”: *Ágora. Estudios Clásicos em Debate* 12 (2010) 115-132 and Vlachopoulos, D., *Métodos de aprendizaje de griego antiguo en la Educación Superior y uso de las TIC: la construcción de una comunidad de aprendizaje virtual* (Barcelona 2009): Universitat de Barcelona (non published PhD Thesis).

framework is taught along with the practical exercises. The contents of the course are divided in seven main modules⁹:

1. Nominal morphology
2. Irregular nouns
3. Degrees of comparison of the adjective
4. Pronominal system
5. Verbal morphology
6. Future Tense
7. Perfect Tense

Since the course is following the Bologna process directions, a continuous evaluation system is applied. The requirements to qualify, the course's characteristics and the evidences that shape the evaluation system, are defined in detail in the course syllabus that is provided by the instructor during the first week of the classes. This issue allows the introduction of different innovative teaching activities in order to improve the performance of the students and help them to develop the necessary competences.

The course's structure and content are planned in such way that after finishing successfully the course, the students would strengthen their:

- Ability to locate, critically evaluate, and make use of information contained in databases and other computer and Internet tools.
- Knowledge of the auxiliary disciplines of classical philology (epigraphy, paleography, papyrology, etc.).
- Fluency in classical Greek.
- Knowledge of the history and diachronic variations, of the classical languages.
- Knowledge of the methods and techniques of linguistic analysis.
- Grammatical fluency necessary to read and understand classical Greek texts.
- Ability to perform linguistic analysis and reviews.
- Ability to locate, critically evaluate, synthesize and use bibliographic information.

⁹ *Gramàtica Grega* (Universitat de Barcelona 2012). Retrieved on September 1st 2012 from <http://www.ub.edu/grad/plae/AccesInformePD?curs=2012&codiGiga=361364&idioma=CAT&recurs=publicacio>.

Using blogs in teaching and learning

Due to their ease of use, free availability and appeal to authors and readers alike, blogs are now one of the most common types of website found on the Internet. This easy access and the reflective nature of blog authoring mean that they are appropriate to many learning and teaching applications, particularly in higher education¹⁰.

With the popularity of blogging, the academic community has begun to experience their use in educational settings. Wikipedia¹¹ defines blogs as a “user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order”. Their possibilities are very diverse: from literature management, collections of links and resources, to more complex tasks for reflection and discussion (individual or group) on activities.

Nevertheless, a research by Williams and Jacobs¹², showed that despite the popularity and ease of use of the blogs, surprisingly, there was not a lot of refereed published material on the subject of blogs in general until very recently. Their research in ProQuest, EBSCO and Gale data bases gave only 30 results in peer reviewed scholarly journals. According to these authors, another observation one might make of the existing academic literature on blogging is that in those instances where educational applications of the blog are considered, this literature tends to be concentrated in the areas of teacher training and other professions where the use of reflective journals as a learning tool is accepted custom and practice, and where, as a consequence, there is an increased likelihood of a favorable disposition to blogs in the first place¹³.

¹⁰ *Using Blogs in Learning and Teaching* (University of Leeds 2012). Retrieved on September 1st 2012 from http://www.sddu.leeds.ac.uk/online_resources/blogging/index.php.

¹¹ *Blog* (Wikipedia 2012). Retrieved on September 1st 2012 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>.

¹² Williams, J. & Jacobs, J., “Exploring the use of blogs as learning spaces in the higher education sector”: *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* 20.2 (2004) 232-247.

¹³ Wagner, C., “Put another (b)log on the wire: Publishing learning logs as weblogs”: *Journal of Information Systems Education* 14.2 (2003) 131-132.

After studying the literature to the use of blogs, we realized that it is generally accepted that they differ from traditional web pages in such way that they can be used easier for educational reasons. According to Huette¹⁴ a blog has certain attributes that distinguish it from a standard web site:

new data are entered into a simple form (usually with the title, the category and the body of the article) and then submitted. Automated templates take care of adding the article to the home page, creating the new full article page, and adding the article to the appropriate date — or category — based archive. It allows for easy filtering of content for various presentations: by date, category, author or other attributes. It allows the administrator to invite and add other authors, whose permission and access are easily managed (p.3).

While blogs facilitate the management and organization of knowledge by students, they also develop skills and competencies related to the use of technology, a fundamental aspect of modern society in the European Higher Education Area. It also is a tool that encourages interaction and communication, among students but also between students and instructors, through comments and trackbacks (links established between blogs when an article refers to items posted in another blog). Instructors can monitor continuously the learning process of their students and adapt their work according to the needs that were detected¹⁵.

Oravec¹⁶ was one of the first researchers that studied the use of blogs as a tool suitable transition between classroom and virtual learning. In this context, he underlines that they are simple to use and allow students to develop a personal voice as well as their own thoughts and ideas. He claims that, because of their nature, blogs encourage critical thinking and reflective learning skills. And the fact that blogs offer the possibility of linking to learning sources or other resources can complete and improve students' learning.

¹⁴ Huette, S., *Blogs in Education* (2006). Retrieved on September 30th 2012 from <http://www.careersmarts.com/21/BlogsInEducation.pdf>.

¹⁵ Balagué, F., Higuera, E., Prats, E. & Espasa, A., *El blog com a eina d'autoregulació del process d'aprenentatge* (2008). Retrieved on September 1st 2012 from http://www.innova.uoc.org/showcase/uploads/media/article_1_in-pid0707_cat.pdf.

¹⁶ Oravec, J., "Blending by blogging: Weblogs in blended learning initiatives": *Journal of Educational Media* 28.2-3 (2003) 225-233.

The experience: Organizing the ancient Greek grammar course through blogs

In this context, the experience we presenting aims to present an innovative teaching model with the introduction of the blogs in the subject "Greek Grammar", obligatory course for the Bachelor's degree in Classical Philology at the University of Barcelona. Our proposal conserers blogs as a tool commonly used by students capable to increase their competences to manage and organize their learning.

In order to achieve this, the students are asked to create a personal blog. Although, the subject's instructor focuses on WordPress (by doing a usability seminar on how to take advantage of its possibilities), students are able to choose any hosting platform (blogger, blogspot, etc.) they prefer and feel more comfortable with to host their personal blog. During the creation, design and development of the blogs, students discover the possibilities of this tool to organize and regulate the process of knowledge acquisition and management while, at the same time, teachers can make better monitoring of the student's learning and use the blogs to improve procedures for the continuous evaluation of the subject.

It is very important to mention that, apart from the personal blogs of the students, a general blog for this subject is created by the instructor. This common blog of the course has the role of the "mother blog" and works as a link between the students' blogs, as in its side menu there are all linked.

The organization of the course is structured around 7 learning tasks (one for each module) and through the mother blog the teacher is giving guidelines and deadlines for carrying them out. Students must post at least one entry for each learning task, reflecting on it.

The organization of the course is made as follows:

1. Module 1: Nominal Morphology

In order to monitor students' knowledge on this module, the instructor is explaining the theoretical framework of nominal morphology in the classroom along with some practical exercises. The students are asked to comment in their personal the most important issues of the module, following the teacher's guidelines and instructions presented in the mother blog. In this context students post examples, difficult rules and exceptions,

mistakes they have made and interact with each other in order to solve their doubts. After the assessment activity for this module (cloze test on nominal morphology) the students are asked to write an evaluation of their learning process focusing on both its strong and weak points.

2. Module 2: Irregular Nouns

For the regulation and monitoring of the students' knowledge, the instructor is presenting (in the mother blog and in class) the most important irregular nouns of the ancient Greek language through classical texts. The students are asked to find more texts containing these forms and to translate them with the use of the dictionary. Once this work has been done, they have to post it in the personal blog so that the other students can comment, correct or propose alternative results. Once these exercises are finished, the instructor corrects them all during the face-to-face classes and publishes some general comment-instructions in the mother blog.

3. Module 3: Degrees of comparison of the adjective

During this module, the instructor explains the theoretical framework of the degrees of comparison in the classroom along with some practical exercises. The students are asked to find texts that contain forms of comparative or superlative and to translate them in their personal blogs. The other students are asked to comment their colleagues' posts and at the end of this activity they create a list of irregular comparative and superlative forms found in the texts. After the assessment activity for this module (cloze test) the students are asked to write an evaluation of their learning process focusing on both its strong and weak points.

4. Module 4: Pronominal system

In order to monitor students' knowledge on the pronominal system, the instructor is presenting various examples in both face-to-face classes and mother blog. The students are asked to find texts with pronouns and identify them. The other students are asked to comment their colleagues' posts and at the end of this activity they create a list of the pronouns found in the texts. Once these exercises are finished, the instructor corrects them all during the face-to-face classes and publishes some general comment-instructions in the mother blog.

5. Module 5: Verbal morphology

The instructor presents the structure of the regular ancient Greek verbal system and some of the most important (and frequent in the classical texts) irregular verbs. The students are asked to do some exercise of the different regular and irregular forms in their personal blog. The other students are asked to comment their colleagues' posts and at the end of this activity a list of the verbs found is presented with their translation and conjugation. The instructor corrects this list and makes important comments during the face-to-face classes and posts the corrected and final version of the list in the mother blog. After the assessment activity for this module (test) the students are asked to write an evaluation of their learning process focusing on both its strong and weak points.

6. Module 6: Future tense

After the general presentation of the verbal system, the students are asked to deepen their knowledge on future tense. The instructor during the face-to-face meetings presents the regular conjugation of the verbs in the future tense, as well as the most important (and frequent in the classical texts) irregular forms. The students are asked to find texts with future verbal forms and identify them in their personal blogs. The other students are asked to comment their colleagues' posts and at the end of this activity they create a list of the verbs found in future tense. Once these exercises are finished, the instructor corrects them all during the face-to-face classes and publishes some general comment-instructions in the mother blog.

7. Module 7: Perfect tense

After the presentation of the future tense, the students are asked to deepen their knowledge on perfect tense also. The instructor during the face-to-face meetings presents the regular conjugation of the verbs in the perfect tense, as well as the most important (and frequent in the classical texts) irregular forms. The students are asked to find texts with perfect verbal forms and identify them in their personal blogs. The other students are asked to comment their colleagues' posts and at the end of this activity they create a list of the verbs found in perfect tense. Once these exercises are finished, the instructor corrects them all during the face-to-face classes and publishes some general comment-instructions in the mother blog.

8. Preparation for the final exam of the subject

During the 2 weeks between the end of the classes and the final exam, the students are invited to interact, collaborate and change opinion on the subject's contents for their best preparation for the final exam. The instructor follows this activity and responds to the most relevant questions in the mother blog. After the final exam of the course, the students are asked to write an overall evaluation of their learning process focusing on both its strong and weak points.

The following figure shows the structure of the course in a more schematic way:

Figure 1. The structure of the "Greek grammar" course with the use of blogs.

Creation of the mother blog (instructor)	USABILITY SEMINAR (for students and instructors)	Creation of the personal blogs
CLASSROOM		VIRTUAL (BLOGS)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Theoretical Framework - Practical exercises and examples in order to understand the theory - Explanation of the homework of the students - Evaluation of the face-to-face performance of the students (competences) 	Module 1 → Learning Task 1 Module 2 → Learning Task 2 Module 3 → Learning Task 3 Module 4 → Learning Task 4 Module 5 → Learning Task 5 Module 6 → Learning Task 6 Module 7 → Learning Task 7	PERSONAL BLOGS Comment theory, post examples (drills, translations, etc.), mention basic rules and exceptions, answer questions and exercises (homework), comment other students' posts, evaluate the learning process. MOTHER BLOG Post instructions for every virtual activity, comment the most important mistakes made by the students

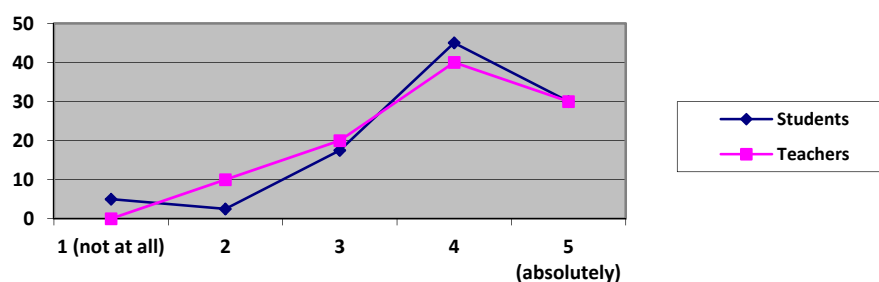
Through this structure we expect a more complete and attractive approach to ancient Greek grammar contents, which can lead to the development of the necessary competences mentioned above.

Evaluation of the experience by students and instructors

Previous research¹⁷ has shown that the subject of the ancient Greek grammar is considered as one of the most difficult ones in the Bachelor's degree of Classical Philology. So it is very important, before applying this innovation, to know the opinion of both students and instructors. The purpose of this evaluation mainly is to see if the new structure/dynamics or the course is considered as facilitating elements or simply as an additional problem, since apart from the content difficulties, we add the use of the ICT.

In this context, we created an online survey with the help of experts from the Department of "Research Methods and Diagnostics in Education" of the University of Barcelona. The survey was answered by 10 faculty members with specialty in Greek Philology and 40 undergraduate students of Classical Philology that have already passed the grammar course with the previous traditional methodology (1 final exam and only face-to-face interaction). The level of acceptance of the new structure for teaching the ancient Greek grammar course was really high to both students and teachers. The figures below give information about the most relevant questions of the survey:

Figure 2. Question: The new structure helps the students to improve the knowledge acquisition.

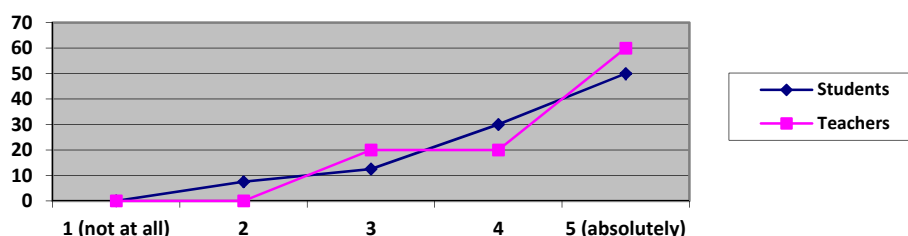


As it can be seen from the figure above, more than 70% of the participants strongly believes that the new structure is going to facilitate the

¹⁷ Vlachopoulos, D., *Métodos de aprendizaje de griego antiguo en la Educación Superior y uso de las TIC: la construcción de una comunidad de aprendizaje virtual* (Barcelona 2009): Universitat de Barcelona (non published PhD Thesis).

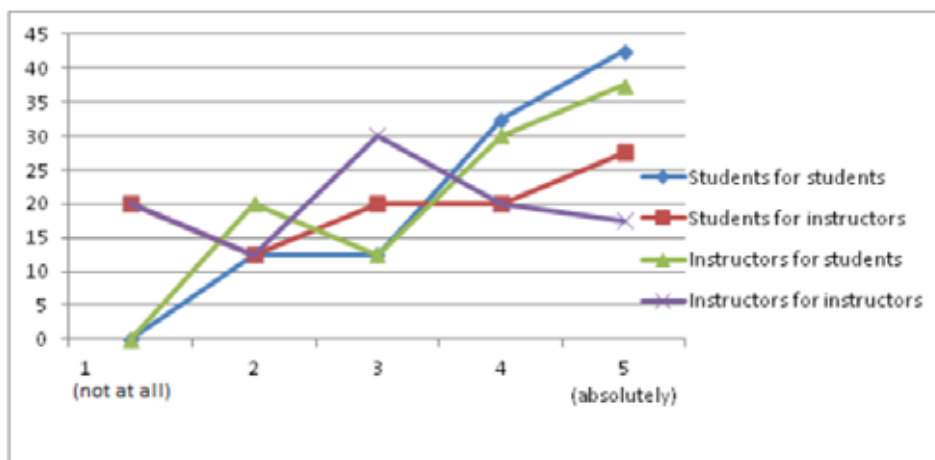
knowledge acquisition. Less than 10% of the students and faculty find it as a bad idea and these people present as a major argument the lack of experience this brings and generally with ICT and not its methodology.

Figure 3. Question: The new structure will motivate the students more to study the ancient Greek grammar.



Even more positive is the evaluation of the participating students and faculty about the motivation that the new structure offers to the students, since more than 80% strongly believes that this new methodology will encourage them study the ancient Greek grammar more than the traditional methods.

Figure 4. Question: Do the instructors and students of classics have the necessary technological knowledge to participate with success in such activities?



Somehow different was the evaluation of the faculty and the students about their knowledge on using ICT. More analytically, less than 40% of the participating instructors and students believes that the instructors have the necessary knowledge for participating with success in such activities. The results are much better for the students' knowledge, where this percentage is approximately 70%.

Table 1. Question: Which are the main weak and strong points of the new methodology?

Weaknesses	Strong points
Lack of experience with ICT Lack of time to dedicate in the new methodology	Development of more competences Teaching methods adapted to the today's society More complete assessment of the acquired knowledge Closer monitoring of the students Very motivating learning methodology

Finally, as far as the most important weaknesses are concerned, the participants only mentioned two: the lack of experience with the use of ICT and the additional time that the new methodology requires to both students and teachers. On the other hand, as the most strong points of the new structure of the teaching process for the "Greek Grammar" course, the participants mentioned the development of more competences, its modern character adapted to the students' needs and habits, the closer monitoring of the students' control, the most complete and rigorous assessment and its motivating character.

As far as the weak points are concerned, we can say that the lack of experience with the use of ICT can be defeated by organizing seminars on how to use the blogs and the ICT in general in teaching and learning. During these seminars both students and instructors could learn how to use the most important functions and applications, necessary for the teaching experience we propose. Finally, a good planning of the courses study

volume, can avoid a higher amount of dedication from both students and faculty.

Conclusions

A general conclusion of this experience is that the process of convergence towards the EHEA involves changes in teaching and learning where, among other factors, ICTs play an important role. In this regard, we strongly believe that blogs have some characteristics that make them a suitable tool to support a change in teaching methodology in Classics. The results deriving from the students' and faculty evaluation on this new methodology confirm the above argument.

In the study conducted we observed advantages and difficulties of using blogs in such "conservative" studies, such as classics, with more than two thousand years of teaching tradition and the main conclusion is that blogs are well accepted and therefore can be considered as a suitable tool for learning that can successfully reflect the learning process.

In this context, we believe that the application of this new experience can obtain the following results:

- Development of the digital competence for students and teachers, not much examined in Classics.
- Increase satisfaction of learning achieved by students.
- Complete monitoring for students' learning and continuous assessment of their own personal process of learning.
- Increase motivation of students for ancient Greek grammar through the use of blogs.
- Increase skills acquisition, such as the organization and management of knowledge by students.
- Increase students' participation in the activities of the course.
- Improvement of the dropout rate of the subject.

Resumo: Este trabalho analisa a introdução do uso de blogues na disciplina obrigatória "Gramática Grega", da graduação em Filologia Clássica da Universidade de Barcelona com o objetivo de aumentar as competências dos estudantes na gestão e na organização da sua aprendizagem e tornar mais atrativo o estudo desta matéria, adaptando-o às novas ferramentas de aprendizagem. Nesta metodologia é fundamental a participação dos estudantes nas atividades da disciplina, para poderem aproveitar em pleno, as ferramentas disponíveis em linha para interagir com o professor e com os outros estudantes e, inclusivamente, para trabalharem em conjunto.

Palavras-chave: Web 2.0; blogues; gramática do grego antigo; processos de aprendizagem; tutoria de estudantes.

Resumen: El presente trabajo analiza la introducción del uso de los blogs en el curso obligatorio "Gramática Griega", del Grado en Filología Clásica de la Universidad de Barcelona, con el fin de aumentar las competencias de los estudiantes en la gestión y organización de su aprendizaje y para hacer más atractivo el estudio de esta materia, adaptándolo a las nuevas herramientas de aprendizaje. En esta metodología es primordial la participación activa de los estudiantes en las actividades del curso, con el fin de que puedan aprovechar plenamente las herramientas disponibles en línea para interactuar con el profesor y con los demás estudiantes, o incluso trabajar juntos.

Palabras clave: Web 2.0; blogs; gramática del griego antiguo; procesos de aprendizaje; tutoría de estudiantes.

Résumé: Ce travail analyse la participation de l'usage de blogues dans la discipline obligatoire de "Grammaie grecque", du cursus en Philologie Classique de l'Université de Barcelone, avec l'objectif d'augmenter les compétences des étudiants en gestion et en organisation de son apprentissage et rendre l'étude de cette matière plus attractive, en l'adaptant aux nouveaux outils d'apprentissage. Il est fondamental que dans cette méthodologie les élèves participent aux activités de la discipline, pour pouvoir profiter pleinement des ferramentas disponibles en ligne pour interagir avec le professeur et avec les autres étudiants et, inclusivement, pour travailler en groupe.

Mots-clé: Web 2.0; blogues; grammaire du grec ancien; processus d'apprentissage; tutelle d'étudiant.