

Blogging for New Audiences with Pablo Llerandi-Román [1]

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Grand Valley State University Faculty Newsletter [2] While contemplating a hallway poster on the geochemistry of a particular element, Pablo Llerandi-Román asked himself the dangerous question, “who cares?” Realizing that the answer was probably, “Geologists,” he started to think about ways to reach additional people who might care. He was quite a busy graduate student at the time and wasn’t able to address himself to the wide question of dissemination until some years later. Happily, Pablo and a like-minded colleague now at Oklahoma State shared a willingness to try an extraordinary means to reach an underserved audience through a Spanish-language science blog with emphases on earth science, geology, and science education topics –especially those relevant to his native Puerto Rico. “While in Puerto Rico last summer doing research, we got the idea to write every other week. It is still hard, real research not just opinion; it has a reference page,” Pablo explains. “It’s a different kind of blog. When it comes to science, you can’t be like what is out there in the blogosphere. We wanted to entries supported by research and in Spanish to make it fun for us. We write with our hearts in our mother tongue.” It can be hard for many English speakers to realize that science is not always communicated in the vernacular of scientists everywhere. As Pablo notes rather ironically, the “lingua franca” is English and that inhibits dissemination to some audiences he cares about very deeply. “Our agenda is to show science can be done in Spanish,” he adds. He also admits that the blog helps to reinforce and extend his composition skills. They try not to import too many terms favoring instead to be guided by the language they love in a format that is not standard technical writing. Over 150 people a week now look at the site, from nine different countries, but particularly those in Puerto Rico. The Spanish-speaking public is treated to the history of science, Pablo’s own experiences

as a child with the natural world and—some of their favorite topics—about local hurricanes and landslides. The most popular topics are often about especially large natural events that can be seen in the geological record. Despite the usual, well, geological timeframes of geology, many of these events of special interest are relatively recent, in the memory of his readers. A sample drilled inland contains sediments washed ashore by a very powerful hurricane. The very high winds will lift ocean sediments and deposit coarser grains in relation to their power. A thick, chunky layer indicates a big hurricane of longer duration. By analyzing pulverized samples, geologists can show what sort of phenomenon led to the deposit. His readers are quite taken with this research, and a blog article on a 1985 landslide is his most popular post so far. “This is highly emotional content. I remember the floods. My brothers and I took people out of their apartments with our canoe. I want to know why some topics capture the interest of our readers. We write blind at the moment, and we want a more solid picture of that,” Pablo concedes, seemingly unaware of his metaphor. “And it’s also fun for us.” “Teaching about rocks and minerals, making it not boring, local—this will be good for our students,” he says. He isn’t sure quite what his colleagues think of his blogging, but he has looked at the blogs of several of his GVSU colleagues and is impressed. “They have value.” “When I told my students, they immediately understood. When I tell my colleagues, I need to explain.” One of Pablo’s early inspirations was the work of Ciencia PR, a resource network of about 5,300, which began in 2006. It is also in Spanish but can also be accessed in English. Through his association, Pablo contributed to discussions in a Puerto Rican middle school. The students’ misconceptions about scientists included some they projected on him. Not looking a bit like a bespectacled Einstein, Pablo was told that they didn’t believe he was a scientist. This only fueled his desire for more people to come to realize that science is for everyone. His association with Ciencia PR also led him to contribute to a book edited by a renowned research scientist. This was an important experience for Pablo and has been empowering. He knows he is on the right track when he concentrates in the blog on how science is done. The blog began last August and keeping the discipline of the twice-a-month schedule is challenging. But now that teachers say they are incorporating the blogs into their lesson plans and Puerto Rican newspapers are requesting articles, he knows he has plenty of motivation to persevere with one of the only Spanish science blogs in his field. “We are becoming better communicators. I’m learning a lot,” Pablo concludes. “There are lots of benefits.” The next step is to conduct a reader survey that is “not annoying.” He hopes to consult colleagues in the School of Communication for consultation on that. Student collaborators are also on the horizon so he’ll be on the lookout for those who know their science and their Spanish. As he reflects on the experience he’s had so far with the blog, he is thinking about how it fits with his professional service, and how it provides a non-traditional outlet to increase the visibility and contacts of GVSU. “For Puerto Ricans it is important to know those of us living in the US still care about what goes on there. It goes beyond borders and has cultural value. How are we going to use our time and electronic tools?” Pablo muses. “Reaching different audiences. We need to evolve, be dynamic. As geologists we are historians of the Earth. We are doing a good job with that at GVSU.”

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