Class journal as a possibility of encouraging pupils' creativity*

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Abstract

This action research report details the development of pupils' printed and web-based journals, the so-called class blog. The idea of recruiting students to create class journal came as a result of my personal aspirations to modernise my classes and bring them closer to the pupils' scope of interest. The desire to gain a climate of freedom, openness and joy of staying at school was also behind the journal creation. In the entire process of creation the journal, the development of creativity had a prominent role.

Planning this action research, I emphasized the development of the written, visual and dramatic creativity as very important goals. All of the planned creative activities emerged as a result of these pre-set goals.

Through the implementation of the activities students have passed the full cycle - beginning with the creation of a story and plays, through the creation of sceneries, coulisses and puppets for the puppet play, and finally through the dramatization and staged class performances. The texts from the stories and plays as well as other texts and images created by the pupils were published in the printed journals.

The purpose of the entire process described in the article was to demonstrate that the creation of the class journal may be used to spur pupils' creativity. All activities described were integral to the teaching process, or in other words, the journal was the result of the pupils' creative activities and it reflected the happenings in the class – it mirrored the life of the class.

The report is also an account of a very good cooperation with critical friends who had a chance to monitor and comment on the implementation of the planned activities on the Internet forum and through the notes from my online research diary, which I kept on a regular basis.

Keywords: Class Journal; Pupils' Creativity; Child-Centered Classroom; Action Research; Critical Friendship.

1. Story as Introduction

The king's face was hidden by a cloud of dissatisfaction and inexplicable sadness as he walked through the shady parts of his splendid gardens. White, star-shaped clematis fell in cascades down the stone walls and carpets of tiny moss-rose spread at the foot of the walls sprouting defiantly between the stone slabs along the edges of the garden paths. The king possessed all the things that a king ought to possess, and his fragrant beds of peonies, lilies, colourful tulips and gorgeous velvety roses were supposed to bring him pleasure each in its own season. Although he ordered newer, more beautiful and more fragrant varieties of flowers to be planted, his unhappiness grew and the greyness of his face contrasted more and more with the colourful flowers in his gardens.

He called on his court sage for help. "My king, I can see that sorrow is taking over your heart and you are fading away. But I think there is help for you. You must make a journey through your kingdom."

"But what am I to seek? What is there that will bring my heart peace and fill it with pleasure?" the king asked his sage.

"That I cannot tell you. Your heart will lead you and it will give you the answer." These were the sage's last words.

The king, who was himself wise, and who knew how to listen to advice, accepted the sage's counsel and set forth. For days he crisscrossed his kingdom, searching out even its most remote corners. He talked with peasants and fishermen. He met with shepherds and sought the advice of peddlers, but he did not find an answer which would ease his sorrow.

He was on his way to the farthest meadows and forest glades, looking eagerly for the appearance of the sun as it set off on its constant journey through the heavens. When he had all but lost hope of learning the cause of his sadness in some faraway, undiscovered corner of his kingdom and had almost given up, in the brush, among thorns and nettles taller than the tallest people, he stumbled upon tiny but wondrously fragrant flowers in shades and combinations of colours such as the king had never seen. There, amid thickets and thorns, birds were singing sweetly and the murmur of a nearby brook lent a singular wonder to the place. The flowers, each adorned with its own unique combination of colours, told the king an intoxicating tale and his heart fluttered wildly. In that isolated place, the king understood: it was the birds. There were no birds to sing in his garden. Completely enchanted by this vision, the king failed to notice that the Sun had already circled many times on its heavenly path while he had remained spellbound in the same distant unknown corner of his kingdom.

The king never returned. His kingdom lost its king while that other neglected corner of the kingdom acquired a servant who cared for each flower that sprouted among the thorns and nettles, moving the poisonous spines of the nettles far away from the tender flower heads as they drank up the abundant sunlight that filtered through the trees which the king slowly parted. The king's reward was the intoxicating scent of the flowers and the joyful warbling of the birds.

Many years later, when the king and his kingdom were long gone, travellers who happened upon the spot would stay near the big stone by the murmuring brook. They would listen to the singing of the birds and look at the unusual flowers which excited their imagination, but none of them knew why the stone was called the King's stone.

2. My educational context

Julije Kempf Primary school where I am currently employed has about 800 pupils and is a typical urban school with a small courtyard, several paved playgrounds for team sports and a very few green areas. This school year I teach 24 seven-year-old first-graders, of whom seven are girls.

Figure 1.   Julije Kempf Primary school in Požega

The classroom where I teach[1] is large and spacious and is equipped with an AV cabinet containing a TV set, DVD player and tape recorder. There is also a large cabinet covering an entire wall of the classroom, designed to allow the first graders to store books, school supplies and other necessary items. During this school year I was given a laptop computer, a desktop computer for the pupils' use and a classroom projector. Since the second semester, the classroom has had Internet access.

During the 2007-2008 school year, in an effort to further my professional development, I took part in the project "The Development of Creativity in Lifelong Teacher Education". One of the main goals of the project is the affirmation of creativity in the professional development of teachers. The project was organised in cooperation with Teachers' Faculty in Osijek and the Osijek branch of the Agency for Education. The project

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[1]   In Croatia "1st through 4th grade, being taught by one teacher per class, with subjects such as Croatian, mathematics, visual art (*likovna kultura*), nature and society (*priroda i društvo*) and at least one foreign language (usually English is compulsory only in the 4th grade)." ("Education in Croatia", 2009)

was carried out through learning communities, critical friendship[2], network cooperation and action research[3]. Action research, which is the subject of the current article, was the methodology used in the project. In the course of working on this project, I regularly attended biweekly learning communities. At these meetings with critical friends I had an excellent opportunity to analyze various project activities, especially those connected with the educational process.

In carrying out my action research I was supported by my critical friends, first of all by Dr. Branko Bognar, Senior Assistant Professor at the Department of Pedagogy at the Philosophical Faculty at the University of Josip Juraj Strossmayer in Osijek, primary school teacher Marica Zovko from Mihaljevci and Blanka Berger who teaches at Julije Kempf primary school in Požega. I enjoyed an excellent collaboration via the Moodle system[4] with critical friend Vehid Ibraković, who teaches agricultural vocational education at Matija Antun Reljković High school in Slavonski Brod.

3. The problem and the plan of action research

I try to promote democratic relations in my teaching. This means that the pupils are free to choose their own activities in some parts of the educational process. It is highly important for me to respect the personalities of my pupils, so I try to encourage them to express their own opinions freely. It is especially important for me to develop a friendly, trustful class environment, and above all, the joy of sojourn in school. The introductory lesson at the beginning of my action research project represents my professional values which I strive to affirm in my professional activity. The video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4aZySqGZ8Q) shows a math lesson with the main goal of learning how to count and write numbers from one to five. As usual, the lesson started with the morning meeting. The idea is taken from the *Step by Step* program which promotes child-oriented education (Burke Walsh, 2004). After the morning meeting, pupils continued with activities organised in activity canters. The task of one of the groups was to play the counting song about numbers using percussion sticks. Another group made models of digits from 1 to 5 out of modelling clay. The third group counted various objects, sorted them and made a list of them. The fourth group made a caterpillar with the body made out of circles with digits from 1 to 5. At the end of those activities, the pupils presented their work.

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[2] Bognar (2006a, p. 55) by the term "critical friend" understands a person in whom we have trust or a mentor assumed to have good knowledge of a research context, and who regularly talks with his critical friend about his action research. Besides those regular conversations, the critical friend visits classes in order to gain direct insight into the action research results.

[3] „The Most often cited contemporary literature defines action research as a study of a social situation performed by those who are direct participants in the situation in order to deepen their understanding of it and improve their practice." (Bognar, 2006b, p.182)

[4] The Moodle system (http://pedagogija.net/kreativnost) is designed for learning through the Internet. Participants, organised in four groups in the forum have an opportunity to participate in various courses in accordance with the phase of their action research. The participants write action research diaries, publish photos and videos and write critical suggestions to other participants in the project. They may also find literature which may be helpful.

Throughout my whole work experience as a teacher I have been interested in pupils' creativity. I have always tried to provide the conditions to develop various forms of creativity. Furthermore, I have always been advocating freedom in my class as one of the most important conditions for creativity. According to Glasser, one of the five basic human needs is the need for freedom. "Whenever we lose our freedom we decrease or lose even one of the basic human characters: our ability to be constructively creative" (Glasser, 2004, p. 44).

My personal interest in creative expression resulted in encouraging the children to engage in different creative activities. Through the carrying out of those activities there has always emerged a need that children publish their artistic, literary and journalistic work. This was the reason for producing a class journal which was issued on a monthly basis for two school years (Figure 2). As a result of publishing these class journals, my pupils were encouraged to write more and to read more. Moreover, they were encouraged to communicate more actively and more creatively with the surrounding world.

Figure 2. Class journal "Lavići vjesnik" („Lion cub's Journal")

Despite this, I was not fully satisfied because my pupils were not able to be more actively involved in the creation of the journal. In fact, I would take charge of editing the journal while they would participate in producing the journal articles. This system collided with my intention to allow pupils to freely express their creativity and to be actively involved

in educational process. In other words, it was my living contradiction because I held "certain values while also experiencing the denial of these values" (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006, p. 32). That was the reason why I decided to give an opportunity to my new generation of pupils to participate fully in the creation of the journal: from writing articles to editing and producing journals.

An additional challenge was the fact that I tried to do this with first graders. Although I had extensive experience and knowledge working with children from the first to the fourth grades, I nonetheless felt a certain fear, asking myself whether such a task would be commensurate with the pupils' ability. I was especially curious as to whether the pupils would be able to create and edit the internet version of the journal. Despite having a clear idea of what I wanted to do, I was confused at first and did not know how to bring it about. I expressed the problem of my action research in the form of the action research question: *How can I help my pupils to create a class journal?* After intense reflection and conversations with my critical friend Branko Bognar I developed a plan which would be put into action from January to April 2009.

Table 1. Action research plan

| GOALS	ACTIVITIES	CRITERIA
Encourage and improve the written form of pupils' creativity	Creative writing methods (creation of short stories and plays)	Pupils independently create short written works
Encourage and improve theatrical creativity	Creative activities on creation of puppet plays, dramatisations of short stories	Pupils independently play their puppet and other plays
Encourage and improve the pupils' art creativity	Creation of class logo Creation of the name of the journal and the journal's logo Creation of puppets, scenery (sets) etc. Creation of classical version of class journals: inserting of pupils' works, editing of the front page, illustrations, binding.	Pupils independently create various art works (illustrations, puppets, pieces of the scenery…) Pupils independently create journals in printed form
Enabling pupils to use the computer and the Internet	Issuing the Internet version of the journal, and training the pupils to edit the journal. Shooting of the class performances and publishing on the class blog. Simultaneously publish all other subjects chosen by pupils as the part of the educational process.	Pupils independently use the computer and maintain blog on the Internet

4. Looking for data

During implementation of the action research plan, data was collected using different methods:

Photos and videos[5]**.** During implementation of the action research I took photos and videos of pupils' activities which were used in my action research diary. Pupils' activities were recorded with the school video camera. I captured those activities which I considered important for the action research. All the videos were edited on my computer at home. Furthermore, all the videos were uploaded on the free service for video sharing (www.vimeo.com) via my home computer.

Action Research Diary. Like the other project participants' diaries, my action research diary was written on the Moodle system (www.pedagogija.net/kreativnost). I took notes about implemented activities regularly. Specifically, I wrote about the pupils' activities and about circumstances in which the activities took place as well as about my feelings. Notes from the diary were helpful for the reconstruction of the process and summative evaluation. McNiff and Whitehead (2006, p. 160) point out that a validation procedure could consider work in progress and also final submissions. In my case, the other participants of the project, especially my critical friends, were able to submit comments on every activity implemented in the process of action research in my class.

Evaluation sheets. At the end of some activities pupils were given evaluation sheets in order to express their level of satisfaction with the activities in which they participated. Evaluation sheets were adjusted to the abilities of seven-year-old pupils. I mainly utilized emoticons and other symbols (Figure 3) which were usually applied to evaluate pupils' satisfaction with teaching activities. Therefore, students were already acquainted with such a form of evaluation.

| Happiness and satisfaction | Pleasantness and usfulenss | Anger and dissatisfaction | Fatigue and boredom |
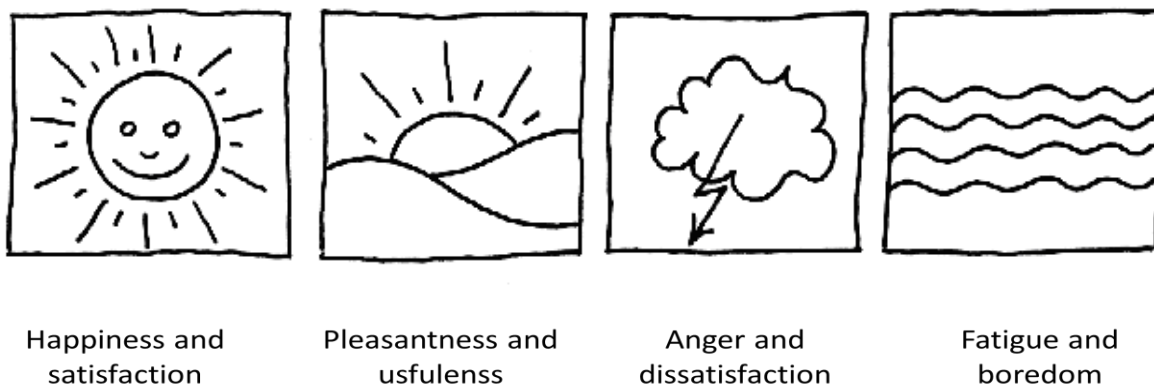
Figure 3.   **Example of evaluation sheet (Bognar, 2004)**

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[5]   At the parent meeting the parents got acquainted with implementation of the action research. I was given permission for the shooting and taking of photographs as well as for publishing of photos and videos on the Internet from all of the parents.

5. Description of the process

The process consisted of a series of activities, the aim of which was the creation of two types of journals: a print journal and an internet journal or blog which was intended to be edited independently by the pupils. I led my pupils through the entire process from the initial idea to the finished product in a way that allowed them the most active role possible. I strove to ensure that all planned activities fell within the parameters of creating a journal and stimulating the pupils' creativity. From these activities, it was necessary to collect enough written, graphic and video material to publish in the print or web journal.

1.1. Introductory activities[6]

Initially, I explained to my pupils what I intended to do during the action research project and what was supposed to be their role in it. I suggested that they create a class journal which would later become an internet journal. They liked the idea and accepted it immediately. Next we set out to create a class logo which we aimed to publish in the print version of the journal and in the Internet blog (Figure 4). Pupils offered their suggestions and it was decided by vote that the name of the journal would be "Mravići" ("Little Ants"). An editorial board was formed to be comprised of those pupils who already had a computer at home and were a bit familiar with its use. These introductory activities already succeeded in encouraging artistic creativity, since by creating a logo my pupils were working on several problems of visual art such as visual communication and design, rhythm, colours and contrast.

Figure 4. Logo of the "Mravići" ("Little Ants") class journal

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[6]   Since there were a lot of activities I will only describe the most important.

1.2.   Encouragement of creativity

The activities that followed were directed toward encouraging written, visual-art and drama creativity. I intended the pupils to go through an entire cycle from creating the story and writing the play to building parts for the sets, props and puppets, to rehearsing and performing the class presentation. We planned to publish the texts of the stories and plays in the class journal and in the blog. The videos of the class presentations would be published only in the class blog.

A typical activity intended to stimulate creativity took place on January 23, 2009. The activity was conceived as a kind of integration of several school subjects. The beginning of a story had been read to the pupils and they were to continue the story and finish it in different ways. One of the groups wrote the continuation and the end of the story in pairs. The second group was supposed to work out the continuation of the story and then act it out in its entirety. The third group needed to write a continuation of the story in the form of a comic strip - each member of the group was expected to draw one panel and all the panels were combined into one poster at the end. The fourth group was told to complete the story with the help of improvised instruments such as pebbles, nails, rattles, whistles and clapping sticks. From the video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kcntypWWpw) it can be seen that at the beginning the pupils were rather loud and the whole activity seemed to be rather confused (6:00-7:24). After additional explanations and examples of what to do the pupils started to consult among themselves. All groups were very creative in the course of the activity and all the stories were finished. All the pupils were active participants in the process. I was very satisfied with the pupils' activity. Nevertheless, it seems to me that my instructions in the introductory part of the lesson took too long, to the extent that some pupils became restless and lost interest. I also consider that the introductory story was not appropriately chosen because some of the pupils associated it with the well-known fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, so some of the finished stories were similar to that fairy tale.

At the meeting of the learning community, Branko Bognar reviewed that lesson and found that the pupils were relaxed and spontaneous and had the freedom to say what they wished. He also rated the pupils' cooperation and engagement very positively. He reckons that a certain level of noise is necessary to the creative process. When the room is too quiet, the pupils are probably anxious and under those circumstances they can hardly be creative. He rated the opportunity for pupils to present their works as good. He also noted that pupils listened to each other very attentively. He pointed out the teacher's overly long explanations in the introductory part of the lesson. Branko Bognar suggested that evaluations might take place with the teacher and the pupils sitting in a circle rather than on benches as it was done.

I agreed with Branko's opinion that the relaxed atmosphere and pupils' spontaneity are important preconditions for encouraging creativity. Even before Branko expressed his view, I had been dissatisfied with too long introductory explanations as I had noticed pupils' nervousness from the video record. However, I did not follow completely my critical friend' suggestion that children should sit in a circle rather then at a desk. In any case, my critical friends' suggestions had encouraged me to think through my actions and to make some changes in my practice.

In the conversation at the end of the activity the pupils expressed their satisfaction which they showed in their evaluation sheets as well. Of the twenty pupils who completed the evaluation sheets, 18 expressed their enthusiasm, one felt comfortable and one was surprised and felt a bit uncomfortable.

On several occasions in this initial period of the action research plan various creative writing activities were implemented. The logical extension of these activities in which stories and plays were created was the construction of puppets and sets for the plays. These were suitable activities to develop and encourage artistic creativity.

Figure 5. The pupils are creating their puppets

In one such activity (Figure 5) that was held on the 5th of February, the pupils made puppets for a puppet play out of various handy materials brought from home (wool, fabric, buttons, paper, ladles etc.). I was interested to see how the pupils would use these handy materials. Though such activities are noisy and strenuous, I am constantly thrilled by the products of the pupils' creativity (Figure 6):

I'm surrounded by remnants of the materials the pupils used. They didn't tidy everything up. They were active, loud, and cheerful, but also concerned about whether they would be able to make the puppets. They ask numerous questions. So typical for the first grade. They seek help in cutting and pasting, speaking loudly and all at once. A lot of noise, creative disorder we could say, but the result of all this is a true child's creation - the puppet with a soul. When the pupils start to act out the puppet-show with it, the puppet will have a brain as well. (Evocation of the Zlatko Bastalić's book – *Puppet has a heart and mind*). (Research diary, February 5, 2009.)

About this activity and about "creative mess" Branko Bognar wrote his comment:

Creativity is always connected with a certain level of disorder and uncertainty both with pupils and with their teachers. Namely, where everything is under control and where things take place smoothly; there is probably very low level of creativity. The pupils' products – the puppets made out of handy materials excellently show the significance of the matter you deal with. (B. Bognar, personal communication, February 10, 2009.)

Figure 6. The puppets made out of handy materials

In subsequent activities held during February, pupils wrote fairy tales which were converted into the plays. In my action research diary I described one of those activities as follows:

> Today some more creative writing activities were implemented. Pupils were divided into several groups. Every group chose a certain letter and subsequently they were searching for some things which begin with a given voice[7]. They were confused in the beginning but once they began working, a noisy searching started. The next task was to make a list of discovered items in their groups. Every group read the list they made in order to determine which group had more items on their lists. In the next activity, also organised in small teams, they had to write the story which had to include all the words from their lists. I was not satisfied with this last activity because I realised that it was hard for pupils to create stories in that way. I think that I have to work with them a bit more on the simple structure of the story, as well as on the cooperative learning because pupils still lose a lot of time on quarrels and disputes. However, I am aware of the fact that it is a process and that my pupils are still first graders. They should start to learn in pairs in order to learn how to cooperate. Still, several pupils succeeded in writing stories that reflected their gift for writing. However, I would be happier if the majority of my pupils succeeded in individually writing a story which has a simple structure. (Research diary, January 10, 2009.)

I wrote down one of those stories. The rest of the stories created during this activity were recorded on the video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUN5JKJKr7w):

> There was a balloon. He met a pumpkin. They ran together. They met a bottle. The balloon, the pumpkin and the bottle went to visit their friend pencil. Together they went to a notebook. Then the bottle spattered them. Later the notebook dried up and then they ate some berries. (Pupil's work)

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[7] Croatian is mostly phonemic language. "A phonemic orthography is an orthography that has a dedicated symbol or sequence of symbols for each phoneme (distinctive speech sound) and *vice versa*" ("Orthography", 2009).

In her comment on the internet forum, a critical friend, Blanka Berger, expressed her disagreement with what I wrote in my action research diary:

Blanka: I think that we are often too demanding and that we expect too much of our pupils. When our expectations are not realized we are disappointed. Is it necessary for most of the pupils to compose a story? Some of them will not succeed in doing it till the end of the first grade, but they will be creative when doing something else. Use their intelligences…

However, I would like to be a pupil in your class because there is always something interesting going on. Would you mind me coming to one of your lessons next week? (B. Berger, personal communication, February 6, 2009)

Mario: Blanka, thank you for commenting my diary records. It is a great support if you know that someone monitors your work. Anyway, critical friends exist for that, isn´t it true? You are right when you wrote that I am sometimes too demanding in my expectations of my pupils. I sometimes forget in which class I am… I would be glad that you visit us. Could you passingly videotape us? (M. Gavran, personal communication, February 8, 2009)

Figure 7. A scene in the puppet theatre

Figure 8. The pupils behind the scene

After the pupils had finished writing the fairytales and plays I suggested to them to try to dramatise them using the shadow theatre (Figure 7). I explained that they would have to make appropriate puppets from cardboard. The activity of creating two-dimensional flat

figures for the shadow theatre was held on the 19 and 20 of March. These figures and sets for the scenery were created from cardboard without difficulties (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aE-dmcK8G-s). We used a puppet screen rearranged by our school janitor who attached a white cloth to a wooden frame. Behind the screen I switched on an overhead projector. Pupils could see the puppets made by them, animated on the screen (Figure 8). In my Action research diary I wrote the following note:

> The continuation of the previous day rush. It takes time for pupils to get the right position behind the screen, to hold their hands with the puppets properly so that puppets can be visible on the screen. I explained how to move the puppets and how far the puppets have to be from the screen. It is very strenuous for kids to stand in a narrow space behind the screen and in unnatural positions yet they have to take care about the speech, intonations, movements… The screen has fallen down again. Fortunately the screen is light so there is no danger. All that is very interesting for kids. (Research diary, March 27, 2009)

At the end of these activities I was completely exhausted. However, after I reviewed the video recordings, when the pupils went home, I can say that I am very satisfied with the children's achievements. Its simplicity and naturalness are the great values of the shadow puppet shows because they are the result of sincere children's creativity. The video is available on the address: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P-304q7Uf8 .

These activities on creation of the shadow theatre are directly connected with the pupils' internet journal because I videotaped the performances of the shadow puppetry plays. Those videos were subsequently uploaded on the class blog by the pupils so they had the opportunity to see themselves performing the show. Thus, the class performance became available to a wider audience. It may seem unlikely that seven-years-pupils were able to publish videos on the Internet, but it was not too demanding for them to learn this. All they needed to do was to execute several pretty easy procedures by clicking on noticeable links and buttons (see Appendix).

1.3.   The nascent stage of the journal

In this phase of the action research project I endeavoured to spur the pupils' interest in creating the journal. I tried to stimulate them to think about what they could publish in their journal. They were a bit confused in the beginning, but afterwards the first ideas appeared. I suggested that they explore and then write about animals, e.g. about ants since the name of the class is "Mravići" ("Little Ants"). [8] I sent them to our school library. I arranged with our school librarian to help them in their research and in searching for ~~an~~ adequate literature. After initial confusion the interest for the exploratory activities increased. This is clearly visible in my research diary notes:

> Today there was a real explosion of ideas; ideas about writing recipes for meals, about drawing of pictures for comic books, exploration of animals. Some of the pupils would like to

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[8]   In the beginning of the school year I suggested my pupils to choose name for their class in order for the class to be recognizable, and also to be helpful in creation of class community. The name Mravići (Little Ants) was chosen out of several proposed names.

do all of that at once. I will send them to the library every day after class when they have four classes and then we shall see what achievements will come out of that. I think that there could be enough material for the journal. (Research diary, January 27, 2009)

It was interesting to watch how the kids discover the value of their writing gradually:

Kids gradually bring to me the notes about their research in the library. Karla, for example has brought a paper with several simple sentences containing a few facts about volcanoes found in a kids' encyclopaedia. She drew the volcano too. She has brought her work all delighted, but also concerned about what I was going to say. I have seen the joy in her eyes. The kid felt the joy of the exploration. She has made her exploration by herself, and she has also drawn, written by herself, and somebody has read it and praised her, and her effort made sense. Furthermore, she has understood that her work will be published in the journal and that her signature will be published too. Thus, her writing is not only simple, mechanic writing, but it is meaningful writing. (Research diary, January 28, 2009)

Figure 9. A note from a pupil's personal diary[9]

Along with encouraging the pupils to make articles for the journal I introduced them to the writing of a personal diary (Figure 9) which is supposed to contain several notes about the school day. I thought that these notes would serve well for the creation of the journal too. In fact, one of the constituent parts of the journal could be a page from the pupil's diary. This is especially important for the blog maintenance because every day several posts can be published on the blog. That way, the requirement that the published content in the journal or in the blog is actually a reflection of what is going on in the class will be fulfilled. Regarding the pupils' diaries and the importance of keeping them, my critical friend Branko Bognar wrote his comment:

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[9]   "I have learned to write letters 'm' and 'l'. To me was the best jump over the rope at the physical education."

The idea of a child's diary is perfect for two reasons at least: firstly, the first graders learn to write that way, and secondly, the answers to the diary questions are the lesson evaluations at the same time. Of course, keeping the diary will help pupils to do the same on the blog, but without the obligation of answering the proposed questions. Even when the pupils start with the blog editing, it would be good to continue with the keeping of the diary, the structure of which you had mentioned previously. (B. Bognar, personal communication, February 10, 2009.)

Since the parents had already been made acquainted with the action research project, I liked the fact that several parents decided to participate in some activities. For example, Magda's mom, who is a journalist, joined one of the activities. Magda went to the nursery school with her mom, and there she interviewed her former nursery teacher. Magda's mom took pictures during the interview, sent them to me and offered help in the journal editing.

Pupils inserted the written stories, fairy tales, plays, drawings, art works and interviews in their portfolios[10]. After some time a sufficient amount of material was collected for our journal. For the whole week from 16th to 20th of February the editorial board[11] (Figure 10) was occupied with the editing of the journal.

Figure 10. The editorial board of the "Mravići" - class journal

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[10]   Pupils' portfolios are the folders in which the pupils insert their works (writings, drawings, the results of their explorations etc.) It is up to them to decide what to insert in the portfolio. Choosing between these works in portfolios the editorial board published some of the inserted works.

[11]   The editorial board consists of eight pupils. The editorial board sorts the supplements by theme and independently decides what is going to be published in the journals. The editorial board pupils participate in the creation of the journal by pasting supplements, creating the front page, pagination etc. My intention is that pupils take turns at the editorial board in order for all of them to participate in the editorial board during the second grade.

It was a really huge job to sort, edit and bind the ten pages of the class journal. I suggested to the editorial board to sort supplements by theme: story, drawing, interview, recipe, small research papers, cartoon etc. The pupils independently named the columns and according to my occasional suggestions classified their supplements in the journal. On pre-prepared A3 format papers the pupils pasted their supplements. The front page was edited by several pupils. I scanned and printed the logo of the journal[12] which was pasted on the front page (Figure 11). Below the logo of the journal pupils drew the anthill which, in my opinion, is not only decorative, but it illustrates the journal title. It is an intuitively symbolic expression of the diligence and fellowship needed for the creation of the journal. Since the binding machine requires a lot of skill and precision I bound the pages. Pupils made only one copy of the journal which they, in turns on a daily basis, brought to their homes in order to show it to their household members.

Figure 11: The first issue of the class journal "Mravići"

After the diary notes about these activities were published on the internet forum, we received words of support and encouragement from critical friends:

What beautiful news from your class today, about completion of the journal and about new equipment you are going to get and not to speak of the children's pride once when they bring the journal they themselves made to their homes. We are all happy with this achievement and also looking forward to the continuation of the activities because this is only the beginning of the carrying out of your plan. (M. Zovko, personal communication, February 25, 2009)

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[12] The creation of the logo of the journal was one of the initial activities. After the conversation about the visual identity and about the symbol as a means of communication the logo was created. The pupils chose between two offered solutions. Since they could not agree between two logos they independently came to the idea to take the letters from one work and drawing from another and subsequently to merge the two pieces into one logo. VERY creative solution!

Very often we adults underestimate pupils' abilities, and they always pleasantly surprise us when we give them freedom and possibility to express their creativity in meaningful way. Despite the fact that you will soon have the Internet edition of the journal, I consider that this "paper" version will never lose its beauty and authenticity and my suggestion is to keep both versions of the journal. In that way the pupils will be able to compare and recognize the specific values of classic journal as well as the values of the journal made by modern web technology. (B. Bognar, personal communication, February 28, 2009)

1.4.   Starting of the class blog

Along with the realisation of the creative activities and the creation of the first issue of the class journal, the preparations for starting the class blog also took place. In order to start the blog it was necessary to have a computer connected to the Internet in the classroom and then to choose some of the available blog services. The first condition was easily fulfilled because it had been earlier arranged with our school computer technician that he would give me a desktop computer that he had previously used which was absolutely suitable for our needs. However, a problem connected with the second condition appeared; our classroom was not connected to the Internet at that time. The internet connection was available only in the new part of the school building. Since our classroom is in the part of the building which is a protected cultural monument and was recently renovated, I had to wait till the technicians solved the problem of implementation of the network installation. During the process of choosing an appropriate blog service I was intensively talking to Branko Bognar who had already had certain experiences in that field. It was important for me that the blog be functional and simple at the same time so that the first graders could use it independently. After I had found an appropriate service I decided to start the trial blog.

> Branko, I registered the trial blog… It seems that it is a suitable and convenient internet service for the first graders. The system is exactly the same one that I use to maintain my web site. I think that it could be one of the possibilities. (M.Gavran, personal communication, February 11, 2009)

Finally, after the hesitations about technical issues were solved the blog was started. In the first few days, while we still did not have the classroom internet connection, pupils had maintained the blog via a computer in the school common room. These first blog steps can be seen on address http://bigblog.tportal.hr/Ivamar. We started to receive the first comments on our blog:

- Congratulations to the Ants and their teacher! I will show your blog to my pupils tomorrow. Some of them will write their comments. (Aneri, personal communication, March 8, 2009)

- Hey ants, you are so diligent, you have the blog. You are connected over the net with other diligent ants of the beautiful and our only planet Earth. Bravo! Regards to you and to yours best teacher. (Vehid, personal communication, March 4, 2009)

- Bravo Mravići (Little Ants)! It's nice to see you. Greetings to all of you. (Gokone, personal communication, March 4, 2009)

A few days after the blog had been started we finally got the Internet connection in our classroom. However, we realized soon that we could not edit our blog using the available connection. I was getting more and more worried. My critical friends expressed their encouragement and support:

> Mario, cheer up! You will solve the problem. When you come to think of the research and the action, and we are dealing with it now, if we had no problems and if everything went all right we would not need the research, and there would be no action at all. Therefore, each problem, particularly of technical nature, may well serve you to get stronger and to corroborate your story with the facts about real status of the Internet and the Information technology (IT) of our schools in the 21st century. It is reality. (V. Ibraković, personal communication, March 8, 2009)

Pondering about the problem I realised that it could not be solved on the existing internet service so I decided to find some other solution[13]. After the blog had been started at the new address (http://mravici.blog.hr) I could devote the energy used for solving technical problems, to my pupils so they can gain the culture of communication on the internet by maintaining their blog.

> I like the idea of recording everything and publishing your work in your web journal which becomes an excellent example of pupils' creativity on the Internet. Besides, pupils learn to use computers in a practical way and that way they become IT literate, but what is more important they develop their IT culture. Being literate doesn't mean being cultural. Literacy may be used in an uncultured manner and in your case that's not like that. Namely, culture is the result of creativity, and you are offering your pupils the best way to learn IT culture - by acting creatively. (B. Bognar, personal communication, March 29, 2009)

After the relocation of the blog at the new address it functioned very well and contents from the class journal, art works, drawings, notes from the diaries, news about class pet Phillip[14] were published on the Internet. We published videos of pupils' drama performances at the blog too:

> Today I gathered the pupils from the editorial board and explained to them how to publish a video previously uploaded on Vimeo at our blog. Karla, who as it seems to me, has shown the best IT literacy advancement, successfully uploads the video on the blog. I observe my pupils while they watch the video. According to their reactions I can see that it is all very interesting to them. They are delighted noticing themselves while speaking, recollecting how it was to act on Friday and how the screen (of the shadow theatre) fell down. The other pupils were watching the video too when they came to school. It was very interesting for all of us. (Research diary, March 30, 2009)

The majority of pupils from the Editorial Board managed well. They learned how to independently use video/image hosting services on the Internet and to include the photos

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[13] We could use the free of charge internet service only via computers connected to the Internet over the provider which was the owner of the mentioned blog service. Since the school is connected to the Internet using another service we were not able to edit our blog.

[14] Trying to apply the Step by Step program I introduced the class mascot. In our case it is a plush dog that children carry to their homes, and later they talk or write about his adventures during those visits.

and videos from those services (e.g. Photobucket available at http://photobucket.com) at our blog. They learned how to add a new post and how to edit previously created posts as well. Videos showing pupils using computer and editing their blog can be seen at the address http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xamVamnp4I .

Pupils from the Editorial Board took turns on a daily basis to edit the blog in pairs. Most of the time they decided autonomously which content should be published, while my role was to encourage them to choose as topical themes as possible in order to follow the class events. Pupils transcribed their stories and published them on the blog. "It is interesting how the story was published on our virtual bulletin board immediately after it was written and was available to a large number of people who can read it, but also to comment on it" (research diary, April 8, 2009).

Figure 12: The pupils are editing the blog

Furthermore, the pupils independently chose the contents from their print version of the journal and then transcribed them on the blog. I wrote down my impressions about pupils' advancement which was clearly visible and about the perspectives of the blog in my action research Diary:

> In fact I believe that the pupils are not yet able to edit their blog in an entirely independent manner at the moment, but that they are very close to accomplishing that task. I'm still present at the moments when the pupils edit the blog, offering them help, although I never solve the problem by myself, but by giving them the instructions I lead them to the solution of the problem. Kids are very fast and easy learners so I hope that by the end of the school year the majority of the pupils from the editorial board will be able to edit the blog quite independently. In the ensuing period of time, probably during the second grade, I expect the pupils from the editorial board to teach the rest of the pupils to edit contents of the blog. Thus, and that is my goal, all of the pupils will be actively involved in the editorial activities learning at the same time how to use computer and internet. (Research Diary, April 2, 2009)

In all these activities the pupils managed very well and were always very active. In the interview with Branko Bognar they expressed their satisfaction about creating the journal and their participation in that process. The statements they made about liking the printed version of the journal more than the internet version were very interesting. A girl named Karla, when asked which of the journals she liked more, answered that she liked the journal on the papers more because she could carry the journal home where she could look at it whenever she wants while that was not possible with the internet journal (personal communication, April 8, 2009).

6. Interpretation

The idea of creating a pupils' journal is not new. In the beginning of the 20th century, the French teacher Celestine Freinet used a printing machine for printing various written materials as well as for creating pupils' journals. I consider that Freinet's opinion on pupils' journals as a collection of children's free compositions which should express the interests of pupils in their own terms is important (Freinet, 1990, p. 32). Naturally, we used technology which is adequate for our time – a computer linked to the internet instead of the printing machine. This is proof that creative pedagogic ideas have permanent value, if we approach them in a creative way.

In the recent literature, a growing number of authors (Risinger, 2006; Brooks-Young, 2007; Hamilton, B., 2007; Armstrong, 2008; Seitzinger, 2008) see many potentials of blog in the classroom. Thus Warlick (2007, p. 151) considers "weblogs[15] natural for the classroom, because blogging is about literacy. To blog is to read and write. When students are blogging as a class, they are writing in order to read, and reading in order to write." Zawilinski (2009, pp. 652-654) points out four common types of blogs found in elementary classrooms: (1) *a classroom news blog* "is used to share news and information with parents and students"; *a mirror blog* "allows bloggers to reflect on their thinking — hence the mirror metaphor"; (3) *a showcase blog* makes possible publishing students' art projects, podcasts (audio clips), and writing; (4) *a literature response blog* "simply moves this idea online where the teacher may sometimes post a prompt and invite student responses to a text." For the purpose of this study a showcase blog was used

Although many interesting classroom blogs could be found on the internet (see http://classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger_id=1337) as well as detailed explanations of the blogging technical side (Richardson, 2008, pp. 47-54) I was not able to find any action research report from the teachers who use blog in their classrooms at the international level. Fortunately, in my enquiry, Vesna Šimić's (2009, pp. 10-11) and Branko Bognar's (2008, pp. 347-352) experiences were very helpful to me. Vesna Šimić with the help from Branko Bognar conducted the action research project in which she decided to encourage pupils' creativity and to develop their digital literacy by using the class blog. In order to obtain that,

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[15] A blog is a Web-based publication of periodic journal entries ('posts'), usually presented in reverse chronological order with the most current post appearing first. One way to think of a blog is as an online journal with one or many contributors. Because a blog is a personalized, dynamic Web page, it is much easier to maintain and design than a traditional, static Web page. Using a blog is similar to facilitating a focus group online. (Pitler, Hubbell, Kuhn & Malenoski, 2007, p. 34)

she created classroom blog entitled "Klik-klak" (http://www.cvrcak.net/blog/Klik-Klak/). On this blog, pupils, in agreement with their teacher, published written and visual-art works which they created in school or at home. Works connected with folk-custom and old games were particularly interesting.

Comparing Vesna's class blog with mine I noticed many similarities. The most important one was connected with the pupils' independently created posts and the editing of their blogs. The most noticeable difference was that in my project blog was created by seven-year-old first-graders, whereas Vesna's class was comprised of seven to ten-year-old pupils. In addition, multimedia resources were more used at the blog "Mravići".

Figure 13.   An older classmate helps first-graders use a computer (Šimić, 2009, p. 11)

In the nascent phase of my action research I hesitated and even doubted a bit whether my pupils would be able to create the journals. Nevertheless, deep in my heart I believed in my pupils. Branko Bognar's words were a certain sign post telling me that I'm on the right way and therefore they were very important to me.

> I believe that pupils will be enthusiastic about the idea of creating the class journals. However, it might go wrong if the idea exceeds their abilities. According to my previous experience I think that the first graders are capable of carrying out the idea without difficulties. Of course, it would not be appropriate to expect the journals to be similar to those made by older pupils, but I believe that the first graders will be able to edit various sorts of journals. (B. Bognar, personal communication, December 7, 2008.)

As time passed, my hesitations and doubts lessened. Changes and achievements accomplished by the pupils became more visible. One of the first visible changes was in the

way the morning/daily meeting were being realized.[16] After my introductory lesson Branko Bognar suggested I should introduce certain changes in some parts of the morning/daily meeting:

> The greeting at the beginning of the lesson (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4aZySqGZ8Q, 0:30-1:10) represents a class ritual probably taken from the Step by Step program which contributes to the sense of co-operation and acceptance of all of the pupils. I wonder if you might use a different variation of the greeting and what do you think about the possibility of creating some other variation of the greeting by the pupils themselves. (B. Bognar, personal communication, November 19, 2008.)

As a result of the critical friend's suggestion I made a proposal to my pupils to create a new greeting to start every new school day. They accepted this idea and very soon the new greeting which can be seen at address http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kcntypWWpw (00:05-00:18) was created.

The class and journal logos and various drawings published in the pupils' journals were the visible result of pupils' creativity in the field of art (Figure 13). Furthermore, the pupils created puppets and parts of the stage scenery which is also an example of the visual art creativity.

Figure 13: The class logo

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[16] Trying to act in accordance with the Step by Step program, the mentioned activity consisting of the series of rituals (greeting, news, determining the date and day of the week or weather situation, announcement of daily activities and play in the end) is implemented three times a week.

At that time some of the pupils were able to write a story independently and then convert the story into a play which is a great achievement in my opinion, since the first graders were still in the process of becoming literate. In certain moments of the writing process I was not fully satisfied as I had thought that most of the pupils should finish their stories independently. Critical friend Blanka Berger showed me that these expectations were unnecessary and unrealistic. I realized that it was not necessary to expect great results at the very beginning. It is more important to have confidence in the pupils and they will show their creative potential over time. This is an example of how the critical friend can help us with his/her comments and suggestions in dealing with the problems we encounter in the process of action research.

The incentives for writing were also little research activities on various topics chosen independently by the pupils. Good cooperation with the school librarian and pupils' activities in the school library shows how other people involved in school life contributed to the learning process and how it spread outside the classroom[17]. Likewise, the process of learning gains a new quality because it is not imposed from the outside, but rather the desire to learn originates from the pupils' internal motivation because they want to learn something and write something to publish their findings in their journals.

When compared to my former practise, the process of the creation of the "Mravići" journal was an improvement because the pupils were more actively involved in the journal editing process, accomplishing most of the editorial activities independently, of course with my help and support. If we believe in our pupils, offering them a chance to take the initiative as well as the responsibility for the implementation of certain activities like the creation of a journal, they will justify our confidence and successfully develop their creative potential. In other words "when we expect a lot of children and challenge them, within their possibilities given their ages, etc., often they will surprise us by what they can achieve" (C. Dean, personal communication, July 30, 2009).

The published journals and their content respectively, helped me to gain better insight into the pupils' interests and to estimate their progress more successfully. Pressley and his colleagues (in Woolfolk, Hughes & Walkup, 2008, p. 685) found that teachers used journals for three purposes:

- As communication tools that allowed pupils to express thoughts and ideas.
- As an opportunity to apply what they have learned.
- As an outlet to encourage fluency and creative expression in language usage. (Ibid.)

At the same time teachers may use journals to learn about their pupils in order to better connect their teaching to the pupils' needs and interests better (ibid.).

Publishing of class journals on the Internet allows pupils to feel the joy of creation but also to see the results of their creativity. Thus, their writings are not reduced to a simple

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[17]   In addition we discussed about our ongoing projects within the school learning community which was held biweekly. It was also an opportunity for our mutual professional learning and spreading results of our action enquires.

mechanical activity but they acquire a broader social meaning. This is further emphasised by the fact that, while publishing their articles on the internet, the children got positive comments from people who visited their blog. Positive feedback may be especially advantageous for the group process and creativity since:

> …signalling that a group has performed well or is making good progress towards its goals may enhance members' affective reaction to the group. Members may come to identify more strongly with their group when performance feedback indicates that others (nonmembers) perceive the group as successful, because individuals generally are motivated to belong to social groups that hold high social status or possess socially desirable features. (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, as cited in Milliken, Bartel, & Kurtzberg, 2003, p. 51).

It is equally important to mention that all the activities which I implemented were part of the teaching process and the published accounts in the journals were the results of this process. To be specific, the connection between the teaching process and publication of the journals makes the idea of pupils' journals meaningful and vital. Since pupils had a meaningful experience of the teaching process, they were able to express their creativity. I could agree with Duffy (1998, p. 19) when she states that:

> …creativity is learning at its most powerful (Claxton, 2003). We are being creative when we find solutions to problems we encounter in our lives or when we make new connections which deepen our understanding. For me creativity means connecting the previously unconnected in ways that are new and meaningful to the individual concerned. (Duffy, 1998, p. 19)

By editing their journal on the Internet the pupils gained not only digital literacy[18], but also the culture of expression and communication in the virtual space of the Internet which is a very important educational achievement of this action research project. I agree with the opinion of my critical friend Branko Bognar who considers the developing of digital culture to be a very important issue. He thinks that being literate doesn't mean being cultured because literacy may be used in an uncultured manner and that culture is the result of creativity. In this case the pupils have learned how to use the computer and the Internet to create their web journal which is much more than merely being able to use the computer.

Substantial changes occurred in the class which is visible from the achieved results: publishing of two issues of the hardcopy journal "Mravići", editing of the class blog with the same name, and realisation of various creative activities in which the pupils were very active. The atmosphere of these changes should be the foundation of our future creativity.

7. Instead of a conclusion

For me personally, this lengthy period of time was very strenuous but also very beautiful and exciting. I have gained priceless experience in terms of critical observing of other people's activity, along with a self-critical appreciation of my own professional activity

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[18]   "The capability to use digital technology and knowing when and how to use it" (Ribble & Bailey, 2007, p. 21).

through taking part in the learning communities. Conversations in the learning communities and on the web forum with my critical friends were valuable because I learned how to reveal myself through this communication with other people and how to share my thoughts and feelings. The hardest thing was to reveal my lessons, to watch myself in the process and to see all my flaws and imperfections. However, "video can certainly help us to see ourselves as others see us" (P. Bruce Ferguson, personal communication, July 20, 2009). Till now I have often thought that a teacher is all alone in the educational process having no one with whom to share his or her good or bad experiences. Very often, I went home after my classes without a sense of what exactly happened there, because I did not have appropriate feedback. "That's why action research, with its emphasis on collective action, is so valuable" (P. Bruce Ferguson, personal communication, July 20, 2009).

Through discussions with my critical friends in the learning communities and over the Internet forum I received feedbacks which were not superficial, unlike incidental, short conversations in the school staff-room. Those substantial suggestions coming from critical friends encouraged me to think and they did not leave me indifferent, but motivated me to change both my teaching and myself. They helped me develop my professional competences and become a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1982):

> Working closely together with colleagues from other schools can broaden teachers' perspectives. Teachers experience that they are part of a larger education community. It helps to see the particular and the common in your own experience. You have to reflect on your educational practice together with colleagues that become 'critical friends'. It gives you information about other practices. You know better what to do or what not to do in your classes and in your schools. You become a critical-reflective practitioner. (Veugelers & O'Hair, 2005, p. 46)

Dealing with this action research I have realised that the results of practitioners' research could hardly be explained by decontextualized scientific knowledge which often is not too helpful to practitioners. Furthermore, according to Laidlaw (2008, p. 89):

> …educational action research is a dialectical process whereby individuals and groups can come to know their practice better in order to improve it and to transform the contexts in which they find themselves for the good of all involved… These must be in dialectical and developmental relationship to the contexts in which the practices are undergone. (Ibid.)

Therefore, my intention in this article was not to give ready-made answers to the vital problems which emerged from my practice, but to encourage other practitioners to produce creative response to their specific teaching situations which cannot be easily understood and explained out of "the contexts in which the practices are undergone" (ibid).

In the end, I think that all of us, who deal with this beautiful but demanding vocation, should follow the way which was chosen by the king from the story at the beginning of this text. We should leave our small kingdoms where all is fine indeed, but where no one can hear the singing of the birds. We should look for true beauty, and true beauty lies in creativity. Awards are the joyful warbling of the birds and the whiff of freshness in some new areas where the sad kings have now become joyful subjects.

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Appendix

Four steps to publish a video at the pupils' blog

Figure A1. First step: Click on the "Embed" button to get the code

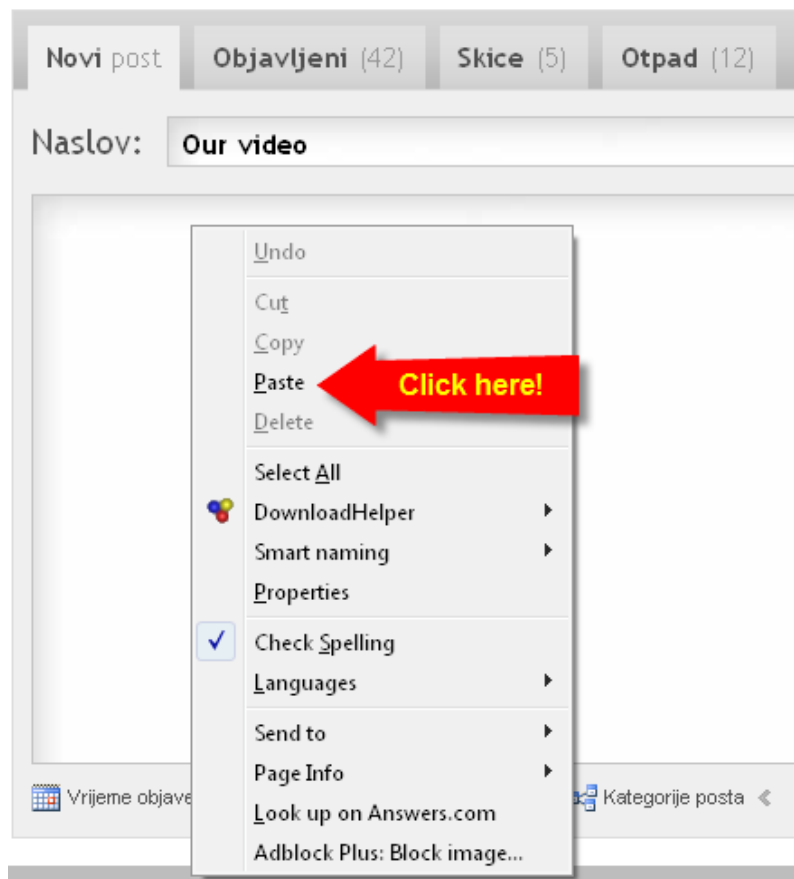**Figure A2. Second step: Copy the code from the "Embed" box**

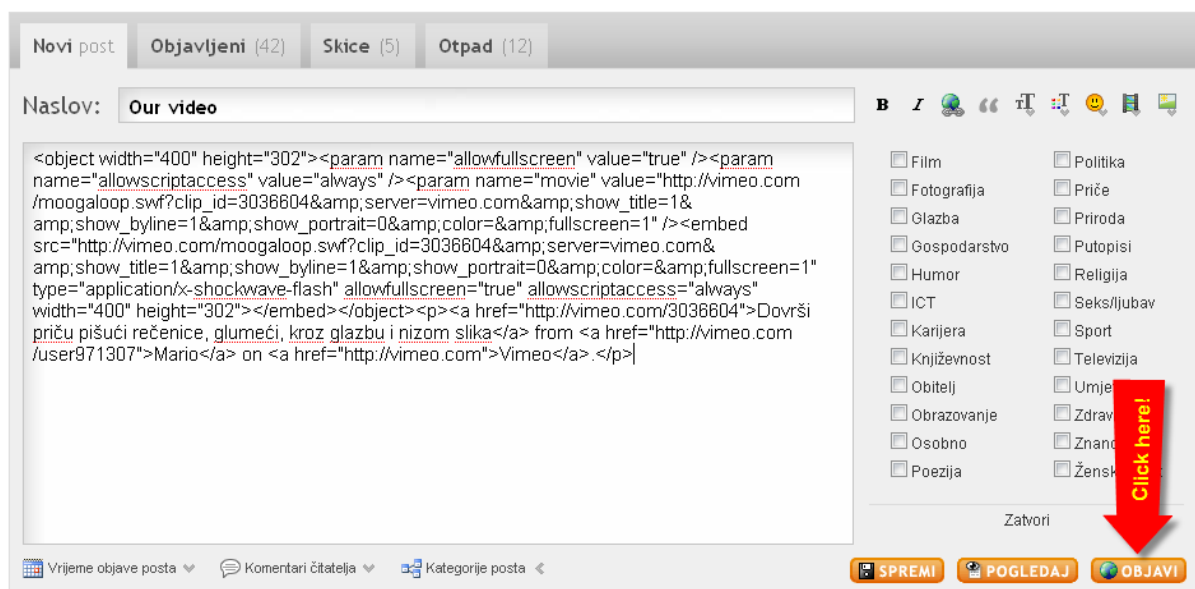**Figure A3. Third step: Paste the code in the blog text box**

Figure A4. Forth step: Publish the video by clicking on the button "Publish" (*Objavi*)