Blog Phenomenology: 
Student Teachers’ Views of Learning to Teach Economics

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ABSTRACT

The higher education sector faces new opportunities and dilemmas such as budgetary constraints, changing student profiles, demanding quality assurance practices, efficient course delivery modes, the changing role of academics, and reliable assessment practices. At the same time, exciting opportunities are presented by Web 2.0, for example blogs, and information technology-integrated teaching and learning sites. This article explores the usefulness of blogs in supporting Postgraduate Certificate of Education and Bachelor of Education students who are learning to teach Economics in open distance-learning environments. An Economics blog was created for students during their teaching practice period to critically reflect on their learning processes and share teaching practice experiences to enhance professional growth. A qualitative research approach, employing an interpretive phenomenology, was used to study phenomena that are experienced by student teachers. Findings showed the usefulness of blogs as a supportive e-learning tool in constructing a teaching philosophy and the identity of student teachers. Furthermore, blogs emerged as an empowering and attractive way of fostering self-directed learning and providing evidence of achievement for warranting purposes – particularly in the context of a teacher education course at an open distance-learning university. The positive lived experiences of student teachers indicated that the subject teacher mentoring and coaching effectively facilitated teaching Economics. Moreover, it emerged that blogs embracing reflective practices presented the opportunity for self-appraisal on personal values, teaching styles and strategies of learning, thus enhancing self-efficacy.

KEYWORDS

Blogs, Bricolage, Economics, Open Distance Learning (ODL), Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE), Teaching Practice

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in the twenty-first century brought challenges as well as opportunities for the education sector to accelerate the knowledge economy – a massively impactful paradigm shift. Education is currently experiencing rapid changes due to the increase in technology-based networked communities. In order for the higher education sector to remain relevant in and compatible to this challenging society, universities need to commit themselves to the process of continuous change or become redundant. Specific dilemmas include budgetary constraints, changing student profiles, demanding quality assurance practices, efficient course delivery modes, the changing role of academics, reliable assessment practices, and the impact of globalisation. These issues place high demands on institutions of higher learning to deliver quality teaching and learning. On the
other hand, exciting opportunities and possibilities arise – in particular Web 2.0 and 3.0 information technology-integrated teaching and learning sites. One particular e-learning platform myUnisa, which uses blogs as a social media tool, emerged as a technology-integrated teaching strategy to support students in an open distance-learning approach. From the outset, blogs have served as personal social networking tools. More recently, blogs have facilitated the formation of online social networked communities and have thus expanded to more extensive uses in education. This paper explores the usefulness of blogs in supporting Postgraduate Certificate of Education and Bachelor of Education students who are learning to teach Economics in open distance-learning environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Opportunities and Challenges Facing Higher Education Institutions

The 21st century has brought new opportunities and challenges to the higher education sector. Higher education faces issues such as budgetary constraints, changing student profiles, demanding quality assurance practices, efficient course delivery modes, the changing role of academics, reliable assessment practices, and globalisation. Most institutions of higher learning in South Africa are faced with numerous challenges that have an impact on their student throughput and success rate. Although there are general problems in the system, there are those that specifically have to do with teaching and learning. Educational stumbling blocks include lack of academic preparedness, multilingual needs, large classes, distance learning and inadequate curriculum design. Research shows how specific and carefully considered interventions using technology can address these teaching and learning concerns among students and lecturers. There are benefits to technology and changing funding regimes and student profiles – and developments in learning theories (amongst other things) have resulted in more and more higher education institutions embracing blended approaches to teaching and learning. In this changing landscape many of our traditional assumptions and beliefs regarding teaching and learning are being questioned. By undertaking research and sharing the findings of this research, I hope to redefine and re-imagine open distance teaching and learning (ODL) in the 21st century.

Over the past few years there has been an increasing interest in the new generation of social media, especially Web 2.0 technologies. More recently, blogs have facilitated the formation of online socially networked communities and have thus expanded to more extensive uses in education.

The 21st century has changed the way schools and lecture rooms approach teaching and learning in order to accommodate the mobile generation, also known as digital natives. Globalisation and the digital environment are rapidly changing the world and, in particular, the global classroom. This has a huge impact on learning and teaching facilities and puts pressure on teachers to change the way they plan and present lessons in the global village. There is currently no known universal common ground where people of all different cultures, races, social and economic groups meet and interact intellectually in any routine or prolonged way, except for schools. And it is for this very reason that creating an educational environment might require moving beyond the dilemma of “understanding teaching as a black box”. It is my view that schooling in South Africa has, sadly, not fully embraced the digital revolution as quickly and seamlessly as the digital natives, social movements, culture and language have. Scholars everywhere echo the view that technology is rapidly changing, and that it has the potential to change the way education functions (Anderson, 2010a; Panda, 2010).

The dawn of this millennium saw a rapid expansion of social media as a popular social networking tool for personal and educational purposes. Over the last decade there has been a huge increase in the use of technology and social media for classroom learning globally. Web 2.0 tools provide social connection and allow internet users to take part in the presentation of materials by uploading photos and videos and publishing personalised blogs and messages on social networking sites. Panda (2010) is of the view that the social media and Web 2.0 tools may also contribute to contemporary educational
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