Chapter 11
Using Blogs to Overcome the Challenges of a Research Methods Course

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ABSTRACT
This chapter describes blogs created by Net Generation students enrolled in a Master’s level Introduction to Research in Education course designed according to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is a framework for teaching and learning that highlights the need for multiple, flexible means of representation, expression, and engagement. The case study examples highlighted in this chapter demonstrate the possibilities inherent in the use of flexible digital media such as blogs. The importance of formative assessment, particularly through the use of student self-assessment and instructor feedback to close the gap between current performance and learning goals, is discussed. Examples from course blogs are shared to illustrate key points. Best practices for blog use and implications for future study are included.

INTRODUCTION

In our university, as in many others, there are some courses that students have made apocryphal: some for positive traits, others for more negative ones. Among our master’s level students in the School of Education, the introductory level research course is considered to be quite difficult. The reasons circulated among the student body include challenging content, heavy workload, and lack of real world application.

The first author of this chapter is an instructor of this course; the co-authors are her students. Examples from student course blogs illustrate the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to challenging course content. The principles of UDL encourage course design that separates learner goals from instructional methods (Rose & Meyer, 2002). The result is that learners can use a range of methods and materials to develop understanding and show what they know. The instructor’s role becomes one of facilitator, providing feedback to learners to help them demonstrate mastery of course objectives and ultimately achieve course goals.

Application of UDL at the tertiary level demands the use of flexible digital media. In this course, students use blogs to explore new content, demonstrate conceptual understanding, make connections to prior knowledge, and draft parts of a research proposal. Blogs offer students the ability to reflect using text, images, charts, tables, hyperlinks and video. For the Net Generation that thinks in images and sounds as much as words and phrases, the blog medium offers a useful canvas for constructing knowledge in a challenging course.

In this chapter, examples from our course blogs illustrate how this medium can be used to provide students with multiple, flexible forms of expression and engagement; a way to self-assess areas of mastery and improvement; and timely, specific written feedback that closes the gap between current performance and course goals.

BACKGROUND

Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for teaching and learning based on brain research (Rose & Meyer, 2002). UDL is a lens through which educators design instruction to consider student needs. An appealing aspect of this framework is its emphasis on separating the goal of learning from the instructional method, often capitalizing on the opportunities presented by flexible digital text.

UDL takes into consideration three things: recognition brain networks, which benefit from multiple, flexible representations of content; strategic brain networks, which benefit from multiple, flexible means of expression and apprenticeship; and affective brain networks, which benefit from multiple, flexible means of engagement. The strategic networks help learners plan and carry out tasks. This includes activities from whipping up a strawberry-banana smoothie in the blender to comparing prices of new cell phones on the internet to writing a formal five-paragraph essay. In each situation, we determine what we want to do (goal), determine how we will do it (plan), get started (execution), and decide how we did (evaluation) (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Affective brain networks support not the planning and execution of tasks, but one’s engagement in learning.

The strategic and affective networks are of interest in this discussion—without the former, students could accomplish nothing; without the latter, they would not even try. Recent research has demonstrated how students achieve higher educational outcomes in courses using UDL design principles (Simmons, Willkomm, & Behling, 2010); this area is worthy of further exploration.

Net Generation Learners

The university student population is increasingly comprised of “digital natives” (Prensky,