Using Blogs as a Technology Tool to Promote Teaching Goals in Education

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored graduate students’ use of blogs to support the achievement of teaching and learning goals. Blog postings and comments were analyzed and coded with the aid of HyperRESEARCH qualitative data analysis software. Once the blogs were coded, themes emerged from the data. The blogs were found to function in an integrated manner as a forum for students to engage other learners in discipline-specific conversations, espouse theory, reflect on professional and academic experience, and cogitate. Study results demonstrate the potential for blog technology to enhance the development of higher order thinking skills.

Keywords: Blogs, Education, Higher-Order Thinking Skills, Students, Technology

INTRODUCTION

Blogs began as a personal approach of documenting thoughts, as in a “web log” or journal, and is commonly used teaching and learning as a tool to enhance communication (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Blogging can be seen as a public enterprise when students post blogs via the World Wide Web (WWW) or it can be more private with blogs viewable only to selected members when used in a course management system such as Blackboard. There is a large amount of experimentation with blogging technology, including implementation in content areas such as science and math (Brownstein & Klein, 2006; Greer & Reed, 2008; Loving, Schroeder, Kang, Shimek, & Herbert, 2007; Luehmann & Frink, 2009), language (Dippold, 2009), business (Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2009; Williams & Jacobs, 2004) and many areas within education (Deng & Yuen, 2007; Oikonomidoy, 2009).

Blogs are being implemented to facilitate the exchange of ideas and resources (Luehman & Frink, 2009; Oravec, 2003), to provide opportunities for reflection on course content and to foster professional learning communities (Hernandez-Ramos, 2004; Loving et al., 2007; Windham, 2007). Students are being asked to blog with the hope that they will come better
prepared for class (Greer & Reed, 2008). The development of soft skills, as well as other positive outcomes such as a familiarity with information technologies, interdisciplinary benefits, better use of time, collaboration, and instructor development, was accomplished through blogging when marketing students blogged (Kaplan et al., 2009). Additionally, blogs can potentially be valuable tools for peer feedback (Dippold, 2009; Windham, 2007).

Professional networks, communities in which members continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they learn among educators, are a growing trend (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2007; Schlager, Farooq, Fusco, Schank, & Dwyer, 2009). The importance of collaborative learning and the need to share collective knowledge of an organization for professional growth of teachers in the P-12 school is demonstrated by early research. The literature reflects a growing interest in cyber-enabled professional learning networks but to date their value is not yet well understood. Writers make optimistic claims for online communication tools. This call to arms by Ferriter (2009) highlights the importance of technology: “Blogs and wikis are changing who we are as learners, preparing us for a future driven by peer production and networked learning. All you need to get started is a willingness to explore and a sense of the kinds of tools that make this work easy” (p. 38).

Research looking specifically at distance learning is showing that students who are dispersed feel a sense of connection when blogs are integrated into the class (Deng & Yuen, 2007; Dickey, 2004). Others, who have used blogs in distance courses, suggest that they are effective in that they help students document their learning, share experiences and knowledge with one another, and offer direct contact with their peers (Lin, Kakushko, Yueh, Murakami, & Minah, 2006). Not all researchers are as positive about the use of blogs as a tool for education (Divitini, Haugaløken, & Morken, 2005; Oikonomidoy, 2009). Divitini et al. experienced a low participation rate of students using the blog. Oikonomidoy (2009) undertook an analysis of a blog assignment or “prompt” and found that students’ responses were “quite superficial and to a degree meaningless” (p. 136). Despite these findings, there is general agreement by these authors that with modifications, blogging has great potential to promote student learning.

It is important to provide learning objectives prior to blogging so that students understand its purpose (Brownstein & Klein, 2006; West, Wright, Gabbitas, & Graham, 2006; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Deng and Yuen (2009) provide evidence from a review of the literature that “structure, dialogue and learner autonomy” are important “dimensions” in blog implementation (p. 95). Divitini, Haugaløken, and Morken (2005) recommend aligning teachers’ and students’ perspectives about the technology as well as course objectives and the learning process. If students perceive blogging to be useful to their learning, they are likely to accept it (Theng & Wan, 2006).

Content analysis of blogs is emerging. Kaplan, Piskin, and Bol (2009) cite specific examples from blog posts demonstrating that students met their objectives for critical thinking since blog entries “lengthened and were enriched with multiple arguments and examples to justify the author’s point of view” (p. 8). Hatzipanagos and Warburton (2009) mapped processes of formative assessment that blogs and wikis can affect and these include power, dialogue, timeliness, visibility and reflection (p. 55). However, a thorough analysis of what students are saying in blogs is needed to be able to justify the role of blogging in teaching and learning.

Angelo and Cross (1993) Teaching Goals Inventory guided our inquiry into what students were learning and demonstrating in the blogs. The course instructors completed Angelo and Cross (1993) Teaching Goals Inventory prior to the start of classes. The Teaching Inventory is a self assessment of 52 separate teaching goals. The purpose of completing the Teaching Goals Inventory was to provide a starting point for a discussion about teaching and the adoption of blogging technology to improve student learning. The authors entered a more reflective state.

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