BLOGS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Value of Blogs for Academic Discourse in Higher Education

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Blogs, participative in nature, create a discourse between student and teacher in an educational forum as well as connect the student with peers, mentors, and subject experts through a digital global network. A recent survey (Ladyshewsky & Gardner, 2008) revealed that most students come to university and college digitally literate with expectations that digital resources will be accessible and available. According to Statistics Canada (2008), in 2007, 96% of people aged 16 to 24 went online at least three times a day and 20% contributed content by uploading images, writing blogs, or posting on discussion groups. Due to their digital habits, students have "expectations of education as a participative, engaging, and active environment". (Siemens, Learning and Knowing in Networks: Changing roles for Educators and Designers, 2008). Higher Education must respond to the challenges and opportunities that digital media provide. They must find ways of adapting the curriculum and teaching practice to meet learners' emerging needs in the digital media context. (Hague and Williamson, 2009) This paper will explore the value of blogs as an educational technology for academic discourse in higher education.

Overview of Blogs

Blogs have been around since 1997 when Jorn Barger in his Robot Wisdom Web site used the term Weblogs. (Blood, 2000) A blog is a website, usually maintained by an individual, with regular written entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as photos, videos, sounds and links in reverse chronological order. (Blood, 2000) A blog is instant personal publishing without sophisticated technical knowledge where people can provide comments or feedback to each blog post. Whereas maintaining a web page can be technically challenging, blogging removes those technical issues and allows the writer to focus on content.

All of these features of blogs highlight the many attributes that make them beneficial for use in educational contexts. (Huffaker, 2005)

Creating a Cognitive Environment with Blogs

A common educational use of blogs is for the learner to reflect in writing their experiences, like a personalized learning journal. (Downes, 2004) Garrison et al (2000) points out that by nature text-based communication, like blogs, provide time for reflection. "It is the reflective and explicit nature of the written word that encourages discipline and rigor in our thinking and communicating." (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 90). With blogs, students have the opportunity to bring to the table any prior knowledge on a subject or topic. At the start of any topic, the learner can blog any knowledge they have on a given topic before they more thoroughly explore it. Thoughts can be recorded at the beginning of, during, and at the end of the lesson. Since blogs are chronological by nature, conceptual change can be seen or inferred by the teacher. A comparison of a student's existing conceptions with intended learning outcomes provides an overview of the desired conceptual change and gives some indication of the extent and nature of the intellectual journey, which the learner must make. (Scott, Asoko, & Driver, 1998, p. 77)

Control of one's own thinking and learning process is one of the major tenants of cognition. (Janes, 2008) With blogging, the learner is in full control and ownership over their online content. The learner decides who can read and/or write to their blog and has the choice of letting just a few peers or the entire world see what they have to say. Learners also have the option to respond or ignore comments: if they do not want a dialogue, the blogger simply turns-off comments. They can turn comments on for topics that they want feedback. A blog essentially becomes a student's personal online soapbox where they can try out new concepts (Ferdig &

Trammell, 2004) thus controlling their own learning as well as influencing others. Downs (2004) warns that writing is not for everyone; not everyone enjoys expressing themselves in writing and therefore they should be able to participate in different ways. Although writing is the mainstay of blogs, the blogger can also embed audio and video in a post. Add-ons tools let the blogger include photo albums, guest books, surveys, and quizzes. One add-on tool even allows the blogger to phone in to make audio posts. (Dyrud, Worley, & Flatley, 2005)

Creating a Social Environment with Blogs

The ability to comment on a blog offers the opportunity for others to provide feedback and therefore allows "scaffolding of new ideas" (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004, p. 1). Comments and feedback enables students and teachers to socially construct knowledge. (Henri, 2005) Vygotsky determined that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. (Vygotsky, 1986) The research of Ferdig & Trammel (2004), drawing on educational theories of Vygotski (1978), assesses the educational value of blogs. They argue that the discursive nature of knowledge construction is best addressed by the immediacy and commentary based system of blogging. Blogs are successful in utilizing interactivity that is conversational; a mode of interaction more conducive to improved student and teacher relationships, active learning, higher order thinking, and greater flexibility in teaching and learning. Blogs can provide an immediate and social environment (Halavais, 2005, p. 1189). A blog can accommodate more than one blogger and/or bloggers can hyperlink to fellow bloggers, creating dynamic online communities known as a Blogosphere. Through these links, learners become readers as well as writers. As readers, learners get to hear the day-to-day thoughts of content experts, community leaders, mentors and magazine/newspaper writers, who in turn, hear opinions of people they would never otherwise hear. (Siemens, 2002) Ideas shared, questions asked and answered, and social cohesion

is developed. (Huffaker, 2005) These links encourage revisiting and revising of learned concepts, enriching the learning experience. (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004)

The collaborative aspect of Blogs is obvious. The commenting capabilities in many of the blogging software packages allow for easy peer review for students and teachers, and make bringing in experts and/or mentors from outside the classroom easy. (Richards, 2004) Jonassen (1998) notes that educators need to create real world environments that utilize the context in which learning is relevant. The collaboration aspect of blogs brings the real world environment into the classroom. The content of the blogs emerges from the lived experiences and concrete reality of the students, experts, mentors, and teachers. In their article, Blogging for Enhanced Teaching and Learning, Dr. Marie E. Flatley from at San Diego State University, et al noticed learners using blogs in collaborative group work, which revealed an unanticipated, but much needed benefit. Since every member of the group could see who has responded, what comments were made, and when they were made, it was easy to identify non-participatory group members early in the process of a project. "It only took a couple of early prods for students to understand they needed to be fully contributing members of their groups." (Dyrud, Worley, & Flatley, 2005) Ease of Use

As Hilton (2006) notes, the rising trend of the college and university students is to move from "producer push" to "demand pull." Soon to be gone are the days of "If we build it, they will come"—a classic statement of producer-push philosophy. (Hilton, 2006) Teachers posting their content and PowerPoint presentations in their learning management systems are an example of "producer push". In "demand pull", users determine for themselves which products, services, and information they are interested in using. Rich Site Summary also known as Real Simple Syndication (RSS) is a "demand-pull" technology that is built into most blogging software. RSS

delivers content to an "aggregator" or news-feed collector. The user sets the aggregator to "subscribe" to the news-feed of a particular blog. The aggregator checks the blogs the user subscribes to, usually every hour, and it collects all the new content into a folder that the user can read anytime. The user no longer has to visit each blog to get the content; it comes to the user instead of the user going to it. For a teacher or learner, to go to every peer blog on a regular basis to check for updates or new posts would be extremely time consuming. With RSS, teachers and learners can easily keep tabs on posting by subscribing to various blogs (student blogs, teacher blogs, peer blogs and expert blogs) and simply checking their aggregators regularly. (Richards, 2004)

Ease-of-use and anytime-anywhere access make blogs an excellent tool. It offers an environment where learning is not limited to the classroom; authors can access their blogs wherever an Internet connection is available. (Huffaker, 2005) Since a basic blog like Blogger and WordPress is free and can be set up in less than five minutes, using a blog for both teaching and learning is low cost and you do not need to be a programmer to update, organize and archive your posts. A blog is easy to build, understand, and with a built in archival and search feature, it is easy for learners to find relevant posts. (Nichani & Rajamanickam, 2001)

Richardson (2004) interviewed Tim Lauer, principal of an elementary school in Portland, Oregon, who uses blogs throughout his school.

"The key is that the ease of use inherent in Weblog software makes keeping a classroom or school Web site very easy," Lauer says. "What a teacher or principal decides to note about their classroom or school is key. They can concentrate on the content and not worry about becoming a Web designer." (Richards, 2004)

Siemens (2008) sees blogs as part of the Web 2.0 social software explosion, which provides opportunities for learners to produce information by creating, discussing, and disseminating. Blogs are part of the 'Web 2.0' participatory technologies. Learners actively participate in ways that intend to aid them in the construction of their own knowledge. Learners are actively engaged in interpreting the external world, reflecting on their interpretations, participating and interacting with the surrounding environment in order to create their own construct of the subject/topic. (Jonassen, 1998)

In his weblog Confessions of an Aca-Fan; The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins, Jenkins (2008) notes a couple of examples of MIT students who used blogs around their thesis projects to not only motivate them to write regularly but to also get feedback on their ideas. By making the blogs public, the students' work brought them into contact with key thinkers and professionals. One student's blog became a favorite among industry insiders and reporters. Before long the student was receiving job offers from companies and eventually, a major company created a position specifically for him. The students' blogs are becoming resources for reputation building in the community. (Jenkins, 2008)

The Role of Twitter

Twitter, a micro-blogging tool, lets users send and receive 140 character text messages known as tweets. Tweets, sent in real-time, are displayed on users Twitter profile page or on a third party application. Tweeters can connect with other tweeters by following them or searching on a specific topic. Bloggers worry that Twitter will decrease their readership as the newest tweet on Twitter distracts everyone. (Kirkpatrick, 2009) Tweets are often re-tweeted, sent forward to more tweeters, exponentially increasing the audience of the tweet.

Tweeters often placed URLs in tweets to point to their own blog posts. Blog posts now have a longer life span and increased audiences thanks to Twitter. One can tweet about ones own blog post, or, with the help of a third party add-on, a blogger can publish a post that will automatically be sent out on twitter. Bloggers can also post their own Tweets on a blog. This cross-referencing of tweets and blog posts helps drive traffic to the blog. Statistics show that 52% of bloggers syndicate their blog posts to their Twitter account to push traffic to their blog, and 41% do so while also posting tweets that are not associated with their blogs." (Sussman, 2009)

"While the real-time web is all about lowering the latency," Grigorik says, "the pervasive nature and number of people engaged in their communities and conversations (the Social Web) is helping with information discovery. It's so easy to spread information now that it lasts longer and finds more niches - this trend is helping content travel further."

(Kirkpatrick, 2009)

In higher educational, Twitter has been used by ESL students to practice language skills and as a communications tool for group work. (EDUCAUSE, 2007) At the University of Texas, Twitter has been integrated into a face-to-face class of over 300 students to discuss ideas and express their views in a concise manner.(Rankin, 2009) "Twitter can be a viable platform for metacognition, forcing users to be brief and to the point—an important skill in thinking clearly and communicating effectively". (EDUCAUSE, 2007) One of the major concerns professors have with Twitter is that content is only archived for 1.5 weeks and the more popular Twitter gets, the less time a tweet will stay in the system. (Perez, 2009) The question becomes, how can you evaluate tweets if they can't be archived? There are several third party applications available to get around this shortcoming. Tweetake, TweetDumpr, Tweetscan, BackupMyTweets, and

TweetBackup(Perez, 2009) are just a few, but there are more ideas and applications listed on

http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/10_ways_to_archive_your_tweets.php

The Negative Side of Blogs

Criticism of using blogs in an educational institution can be summarized into four basic

areas of concern.

1.   Censorship:

Usually in formal educational settings, necessary rules and boundaries of the system are

imposed on students who are writing blogs. There have been documented occurrences of

conflicts between the blog writer and educational institution's administration. Students have

been suspended for calling a teacher an inappropriate name (Miss. school suspends student

for calling teacher 'perverted' in online journal., 2004) and threatening another student.

(Bach, 2003)

2.   Write for Grades

Students forced to write for evaluation criteria. Grades are assigned in order to get students to

write and then posts are monitored to ensure that they do not say the wrong things. In his

weblog, Webb-Ed, Will Richardson expressed his doubts of blogs stating that blogging for

marks are contrived. Blogging for an audience of one (the teacher) is not blogging at all.

When the class ends, "students drop blogging like wet cement." (Richardson, 2004, p. 9)

3.   Authority and Authenticity

Concerns of authority and trust are not yet fully understood. When participatory

technologies, such as blogs, are used to duplicate the academic functions of peer review and

formal publication, the authority, and authenticity of the resulting information is potentially

suspect. (Siemens, 2008) The Internet is a new experience of contradictions. One can be

orientated and disoriented within a community. Identity can be authentic or made up. Stories can be authentic or invented. Unique ideas can be formulated or stolen. An audience can be known or unknown. Information can be regulated by peers or unregulated. (Gough, 2000)

4. *Digital Divide*

Digital divide in Internet use exists and is rooted in social economic basis. 91% of Canadians earning more than $95,000 used the Internet while 47% of Canadians earning less than $24,000 were online. In terms of education, 84% of individuals with at least some post-secondary education used the Internet in 2007, compared with 58% of those who had less education. "This highlights the continuing challenge of improving access to technology and to the resulting opportunities for technology-enhanced learning."(Statisitcs Canada, 2008)

Conclusion

In higher education, blogs meet the criteria for learning. The discursive, participative nature of blogs leads to multiple perspectives in a social conversation that include connections to 'real world' experiences within context, reflection on personal and social views, and constructing/reconstructing knowledge. It therefore, by its very nature, becomes a potentially powerful learning tool. As Steve Downes (2004) states, "The process of blogging—of reading online, engaging a community, and reflecting it online—is a process of bringing life into learning." Blogs are an evolving technology with the advent of Twitter adding to its scope and potential. In allowing the adaptation of curriculum and teaching practice to meet learners' emerging digital needs and expectations, blogs are an extremely valuable tool for today's educator.

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