Blogging: A Powerful tool for Student Self-expression, Reflection and Knowledge Construction

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Since their emergence in the mid-nineties, blogs have spread exponentially as a tool for individual and professional micropublishing. Their adoption within education has been much slower. However, there are many who advocate blogs as a transformative educational tool (Williams and Jacobs, 2004).

A blog, short for web-log or web-based log, is a Website to which an individual or group can publish content to the Internet without web-programming skills. Blog posts are habitually text-based, but can also include videos, images, voice, and hyperlinks to other posts within the blog or other pages on the Web. Most blogs also contain a "comment" button that allows others to respond to a blog post. Posts to a blog are usually published in reverse chronological order, from newer to older posts. They can also be tagged and archived. Moreover, blogs have a continuum of privacy settings; ranging from private individual blogs, to group semi-private blogs that would allow a limited set of individuals to view and comment to the blog, to public blogs that can be found by anyone on the Internet. It is due to these technical affordances for interactivity and user-friendly publication that blogs present a powerful tool to facilitate student learning.

One of the most powerful uses of blogs within education, in my opinion, is integrating it as a medium for self-expression, reflection and knowledge construction. Educational blogging for reflection is often based on the traditional learning journal or log, which is maintained by the individual student to document his/her reflections on the learning content and process. This log is usually shared with the instructor as a method to assess students' development and a venue to provide feedback, thereby encouraging engagement with the subject matter and promoting active learning. However, one disadvantage of such journals is that they leave learners with feelings of isolation and often limit the feedback and idea exchange (Hall and Davison, 2007).

Weblogs can capitalize on the advantages of keeping a learning journal while simultaneously addressing some of the concerns. Due to their communal nature, blogs provide students with a venue for legitimate self-expression, thereby encouraging them to develop their unique voices (Oravec, 2002) and increasing students' sense of ownership of their thinking and learning (Ferdig and Trammell, 2004). In addition to the instructor, the student can share his or her blog with the entire world, with the whole class or just a limited group of students. This potential for collaboration increases students' opportunities to develop their communication skills. Blogging for a group of students also allows learners to receive individualized feedback from the teacher and from their peers, thus expanding the exploration of ideas and multiple perspectives, enhancing opportunities for cognitive conflict, and thereby possibly leading deeper thinking and knowledge construction (Windham, 2007). The interactivity of blogs also develops a sense of community among learners and provides the possibility for establishing opportunities for engagement that transcend the limits of class and

course. All the above pedagogic benefits for blogs are in line with social constructivist theories of learning (Vygotsy, 1978).

A few semesters ago, I used Blogs as part of a graduate Organizational Behavior class to enhance practicing managers' quality of critical thinking and to help them make connections between abstract theories covered during the courses and their experiences in the workplace (Osman & Koh, 2013). Students felt engaged with the subject matter, made substantial theory-practice connections, developed as sense of community, and valued the use of reflection as a tool for learning.

Guidelines for using blogging at medium of reflection

- Explain the importance of reflection a vehicle for learning.

- Do not assume that students are familiar with reflection and blogging.

- Provide different forms of scaffolding to facilitate quality reflection - through modeling, examples, guidelines, facilitation, and rubrics.

- Promote reflection and critical thinking over longer durations. Building these skills requires time.

- Relate students' reflections to class topics so that students see the value of reflection as an integral and legitimate ingredient of learning.

- Provide technical orientation at the beginning of the session. Some digital natives might not familiar or comfortable with blogging as a technology.

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