

TO BLOG OR NOT TO BLOG? USING BLOGS IN ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

'Higher Education in a Web 2.0 World' published in March 2009 raised some important issues for HE practitioners: how to capitalise upon the web-based skills of students in teaching and assessment. Recognising the valuable employability skills derived from confident IT usage, this paper outlines the initial stages of an investigation into the use of blogs or weblogs to replace reflective notebooks in a free choice elective designed to develop entrepreneurial skills in creative students. Specifically, the research will consider how students go about starting their blogs; what they blog about and whether there is any resistance to using blogs in learning. The study which takes a mixed-methods approach is in the initial stages of data collection and analysis.

Background

In March 2009 the report of an independent Committee of Inquiry into the impact on higher education of students' widespread use of Web 2.0 technologies was published. Web 2.0 is known as the 'Social Web' where software is available through the Internet that supports group interaction (Shirky, 2003). The Committee's report 'Higher Education in a Web 2.0 World' recognises the impact and potential challenges of Social Web technologies faced by the various higher education stakeholders in the UK.

The Report highlights what many academics in higher education had already realised: students entering higher education today exist in a digital world, where the use of Web 2.0 technologies is high and pervasive from high school entrance upwards. As a consequence of the use of these technologies, there has been the development of a new sense of 'communities of interests and networks' (ibid p.6). It seems that a majority of young people have a clear awareness of the use of different on-line facilities (Luckin et al, 2008). Whilst some sites are essentially personal (messaging sites such as MSN); others involve groups (e.g. Facebook) and still more are about publishing or collaboration (e.g. Blogger.com and YouTube). These Web 2.0 technologies have appeared and their use accepted very rapidly. Facebook (social networking) for instance appeared in 2004 with YouTube (social media) in 2005 and yet a survey of most young people will reveal both a high level of familiarity and usage of these two sites (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

The challenge for higher education is how to capitalise upon the web-based skills of their students in both teaching and assessment, since the skills developed through the Social Web align closely to 21st century employability skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity, leadership and technology proficiency (Grunwald Associates, 2007).

In July 2009, blogs replaced handwritten reflective notebooks as one assessment method in a free-choice elective run by the Northern School of Design to develop entrepreneurial skills in creative students. A Blog or weblog is 'a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an HTML browser' (Winer, 2003). Software to set up blogs is easy to use, interactive, flexible and most such as Blogger.com, Wordpress.com are free to use, develop and maintain (Herring et al, 2004). The blog would represent 30% of the final mark for the module.

Aim and objectives

The purpose of this research study is to evaluate the success or otherwise of using blogs as a method of assessment. Specifically, the research questions are:

- ▶ How do students go about starting their blogs?
- ▶ What do students blog about specifically?
- ▶ Is there any resistance to using blogs in learning and what might be the cause of this resistance?

Why Blog?

Over the last few years there has been increasing interest in the potential of blogging in teaching and learning. Since blogs 'provide a space for students to reflect and publish their thoughts and understandings' (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004) they are useful in helping students to think about and process learning. Vygotsky (1978) emphasises the importance of knowledge construction and meaning making in education. Further, Schon (1987) commented 'reflection is a well-accepted practice for helping to integrate theory with experience and is a key to learning'. Clyde (2005) suggests that blogging may develop these reflective skills. Blood (2002) postulates that blogging makes people more thoughtful and articulate observers of their world. Research by Chretien et al (2008) supports this view, whilst research by Bouldin et al (2006) suggests that blogs not only promoted reflection but deeper learning which can be transferred to situations outside the classroom.

Students using blogs are more actively involved in their learning (Forster and Tam, 2004), and following feedback from tutors and fellow students work is easily developed and revised (Herring et al, 2004). This feedback enables greater understanding of ideas and concepts and encourages meaning making (Boud, 2001). Indeed, student bloggers may form the basis of a learning community (Chuang, 2010; Holzberg, 2003) which improve motivation and enhance learning.

Blogs are not only an outlet for thoughts and feelings and a form of personal communication and expression (Nardi et al, 2004), they encourage a sense of ownership of learning. Downes (2004) research proposes the idea that blogs can bring learning to life. Blog postings are available to readers as soon as they are posted (Forster and Tam, 2004), thus thoughts can be published whilst they are fresh in the student's mind. Further, blogs are connective, since the author can link to relevant material on websites or other blogs (ibid).

However, there may be barriers to using blogs. Students may be reticent about revealing their real feelings since blogs are available for open access, although it is possible to restrict readership (Catalano 2005; Lenhart and Fox, 2006). Herring et al (2004) propose that reflective blogging may be more attractive to some groups than others, particularly young females. In their study, males preferred a more factual style of writing. Guadagno et al (2008) concur with this view in their investigation of personality predictors of blogging, suggesting that more creative individuals are more likely to enjoy blogging than others. Bouldin (2006) reports that some students find blogging time-consuming and academic staff should consider how they encourage reflection and deliver positive feedback.

Finally, Ferdig and Trammell (2004) recommend that students should be made explicitly aware of what is not appropriate on a blog and that a set of rules for blogging etiquette should be devised with the student group.

Study Design

The study comprises a mixed-methods approach involving a number of stages:

1. A brief questionnaire designed to uncover any barriers to using blogs;
2. Analysis of a selection of blogs to uncover particular themes;
3. In-depth interviews, designed to explore issues highlighted in the questionnaires and the emerging themes of the blog text.

Participants

There are 80 students enrolled on the elective being researched. These are first and second year design students from courses such as Textiles, Illustration and Graphic Design. All students will be asked to complete the questionnaire, followed by an analysis of between 8 and 10 students' blogs. Students contributing blogs will also be interviewed and asked to describe their experiences of blogging, what they perceive the potential benefits are and what if any challenges they had experienced. Students will also be asked how they felt blogging had assisted their learning.

Participants will be made aware of the purpose of the study. All respondents will be offered the opportunity to read the analysed, anonymous results. Consent to be interviewed will be sought and interviewees may read their respective transcripts.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire is designed to identify any barriers experienced by students in setting up and maintaining their blogs: such as access to computers, a lack of confidence in using information technologies or a resistance to the nature of reflection itself. These data will be analysed and presented as descriptive statistics. The blogs will be analysed using NVivo8: a software package which aids qualitative analysis of text. Themes will be identified and subsequently explored during the interview phase of the study.

Anticipated outcomes

This research project will investigate the benefit and value of using blogs both as a learning tool to encourage reflection and as a method of assessment. There may be a variety of reasons why participants may not enjoy blogging, or indeed, why they found it an effective means of learning and assessment. Further, participants may see the beneficial aspects of blogging as part of their professional practice as designers, and subsequently set up blogs to promote their work. This would require a follow-up study to determine what percentage of participants subsequently established blogs as design practitioners.

Stage of Project

The project is currently in the early stages of data collection, with completion of the project anticipated as the end of June 2010.

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