Blogging in Higher Education: Issues, Challenges, and Design Considerations

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Introduction

Educators in higher education have started to integrate Web2.0 technologies for enhancing learning and instruction activities, taking advantages of their accessibility, ease of use, and potential in achieving various types of learning goals. Furthermore, many of the Web2.0 technologies have been designed and promoted as social tools which are conducive to interaction, communication, and collaboration (Gunawardena, Hermans, Sanchez, Richmond, Bohley & Tuttle, 2009)--the important skills to develop for the 21st century learners (Lesgold, 2009). Blog, the shorthand of weblog, is one of the Web2.0 technologies that have captured educators’ attention in higher education for its potential for cyberlearning.

Technologically, blog systems offer an intuitive platform for publishing and commenting on the web with a content delivering mechanism that automatically updates the bloggers (i.e., blog authors) and readers about the latest content (Kim, 2008). This intuitive platform opens up the opportunities for contribution and participation on the Web in this information age (Hsu, Ching, & Grabowski, 2009). Pedagogically, blogging activities can help students develop a range of essential skills, such as writing, reflection, and critical thinking skills, depending on the desired learning goals. From the perspective of learning, “knowledge is created, shared, remixed, repurposed, and passed along” (Mason & Rennie, 2008, p.10) in a Web 2.0 environment such blogs. Socially, blogs create virtual spaces for interaction between the instructor and students, among the students, and between students and the public with access to the web (Fessakis, Tatsis, & Dimitracopoulou, 2008). With this increased interactivity, blogs enable development of communication and collaboration skills and serve as a powerful channel for social networking that encourages students to establish their support groups for learning (e.g., learning communities) and/or for professional development (e.g., communities of practice) (Gloff, 2005).

Although blogs theoretically may seem to be a promising technology for learning and instruction in higher education, research findings on the educational blogging are not always positive in terms of whether blogging activities had helped students achieved the intended learning goals (Divitini, Haugalokken, & Morken, 2005). Moreover, the emerging research on blogging at various higher educational contexts reveals challenges and issues associated with designing and implementing such activities. The accumulative research findings of successful and unsuccessful blogging activities suggested valuable implications for future design and implementation of such activities. This paper systematically examined empirical research studies on educational blogging in the context of higher education. The purpose of this presentation is to provide considerations for designing and implementing effective educational blogging activities to help achieve intended learning goals. Specifically, the following research questions were asked:

1. What are the learning goals that can be achieved via educational blogging?
2. What are the issues and challenges of educational blogging activities?
3. What skills do students need to develop in order to blog effectively for learning?

Research Method

This study systematically examined more than 10 existing empirical blogging research studies published in peer-reviewed journals to answer the aforementioned research questions. In general, the included studies were published between 2003 and 2009. The research articles were selected from these years due to the increasing popularity of blogging starting at 2003. Most of the studies were evaluation research or conducted using case study method. Table 1 presents the list of the included research articles along with the participant levels, number of participants, subject matter, and research method.

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| Table 1. The articles of blogging research reviewed and included in this paper |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|
| Ellison & Wu (2008)                          | College students | 52               | Not specified                     | Writing and peer commenting to help understand course content |
| Farmer, Yue, & Brooks (2008)                 | Undergraduate freshmen | 225            | Art                              | Student interaction through reflecting and discussing on course content |
| Fessakis, Tatsis, & Dimitracopoulou (2008)   | University students | 7                | ICT applications and product development for math instruction | Design and development of simple educational applications and learning activities for technology enhanced learning environment |
| Glass & Spiegelman (2007)                   | Community college students | Students from 4 courses | Math and Computer Sciences | Information literacy skills |
| Ladyshewsky & Gardner (2008)                | Undergraduate students | 38 students in groups of 4 or 5 | Physiotherapy clinical field work | Reflective practice |
| Philip & Nichollas (2009)                   | Undergraduate students | 21               | Playbuilding in drama            | Analytically and evaluatively reflective thinking skills |
| Sharma & Xie (2008)                         | Graduate students | 8                | Instructional Design             | Reflection |
| Shoffner (2009)                             | Graduate students (pre-service teachers) | 9               | Not tied in with any courses.    | Reflective practice |
| Tekinarslan (2008)                          | University students | 42               | Computer Usage                   | Research and writing skills; blog usage skills |
| Williams & Jacob (2004)                     | Graduate students in MBA program | 51 students from two courses | Macro Economics and International Political Economy | Cross-course discussion |
| Xie, Ke, & Sharma (2008)                    | Undergraduate freshmen | 44 participated but data were collected only from 27 students | Political science course | Reflective thinking skills |
Findings

Learning Goals

The analysis indicates that blogging activities were designed to achieve a wide range of learning goals.

*Reflective thinking/practices.* Most frequently, blogging activities were adopted to replace the traditional journaling activities to promote reflective thinking. Serving as learning journals, blogs provide space for individuals to express their observations and perspectives, and to make connections between what they learn and their experiences (Gunawardena, et al., 2009). Studies showed that college and master’s students improved their reflective learning because they are able to learn from peers’ experiences by reading their reflection on the blogs. The vicarious learning may augment students’ applicable knowledge by assimilating relevant experiences from peers. It can also aid on the affective aspect of learning. When students understand that they are not alone when facing certain learning challenges, they may reduce their self-doubt and become more confident in their learning.

*Critical thinking and writing skills.* In another study, college students in the area of mathematics and computer sciences developed their information literacy skills such as searching and evaluating needed resources for composing while writing blog entries (Glass & Spiegelman, 2007). Preservice teachers in a course of multicultural education had applied learned theories to analyze related events and/or news through blogging (Wassell & Crouch, 2008). By reading peers’ blogs, these preservice teachers also gained critical perspectives to understand the cultural issues that they did not have a chance to experience by themselves. Elisson and Wu (2008) explored student perceptions of blogging and whether writing and commenting on peer blogs helps students understand the course content. They found that students deemed reading others’ blogs helped their understanding of the course content the most. On the other hand, making commenting on other blogs or receiving comments was found to be less helpful. In addition, commenting activity caused uncomfortable feelings among students.

*Collaboration and communication.* Other studies also explored how students took advantage of the commenting function and the role of group blogs in supporting group interaction and activities. For example, Fessakis and his colleagues (2008) created a group blog for a group of undergraduate students in math education to enhance a collaborative “learning by design” activity, with the goal to publish a common set of activities as participants’ collaborative product. In Philip and Nichollas (2009), group blogs were also used to foster group communication and to serve as a project management platform for a collaborative playbuilding activity in a drama course. When working collaboratively on a project where communication is key to ensure a successful experience, research findings suggested that group blogs provide an alternative and valuable space for students to communicate and collaboration.

Issues, Challenges and Implications

While the empirical evidence supports the educational value of blogging activities, issues and challenges associated with designing and implementing successful blogging activities also emerged. First, the findings of the examined studies suggest that well-structured learning activities are essential for students to perform their learning tasks. Among the studies we reviewed, several of them did not inform students about the requirement for frequency, length, content, and assessment criteria for their blogging, which led to student confusion or even frustration about the learning task (e.g., Sharma & Xie, 2008). This finding suggests that course instructors and designers need to provide explicit guidelines on the activity requirement. It is essential to specify the frequency, length, and assessment criteria prior to the blogging activity. It would also be beneficial to students by making the guiding questions available to prompt their reflect on their practices. For students who are new to a subject matter, these questions can be designed to elicit deeper understanding or analysis that exemplifies expert thinking and reflection. In addition, to increase students’ motivation in participating blogging activities, reasonable weight in the course grade and sufficient time for completion has to be in place. Instructors also need to make it clear regarding the purpose (Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup, Conole, 2009) and rationale of including the activities so that students do not perceive the activity as just another piece of busy work.
Second, students often brought into the class their pre-existing perception of blogs and “proper” ways of writing blogs (Ellision & Wu, 2008; Kerawalla, et al, 2008). This perception might not be aligned with instructors’ vision of educational blogging, which could lead to confusion and low motivation on participating in blogging activities.

Depending on the learning goals, instructors may need to provide guidance for students on reconciling their perception of blogging with academic writing. If blogging is used as a way to keep reflective or learning journals, instructors may emphasize the non-formal voice that conveys a conversation regarding one’s learning progress between students and the instructor. On the other hand, if blogging is used to incubate writing ideas and compose drafts toward academic papers, instructors need to make the expectations explicit to students that the appropriate tone and writing style needs to be adopted.

Last but not least, privacy and security issues surfaced in almost all the examined studies. As a publishing platform, blogs make it easy for individuals to develop their voices on the Web. However, for individuals who are cautious and concerning about the privacy, protecting privacy while publishing on the Web is an issue. This may limit their perceived freedom of expression (Divitini, et al., 2005). On the other hand, students who are not aware of the privacy issues may make public too much personal information or may violate the confidentiality of others by accidentally publishing peers’ information when blogging due to their unawareness. Revealing personal information on the Web may lead to security issues. To address the privacy and security issues, many blog systems can be set up in a way to protect privacy by making blogs available only to designated group members (students in a course), or by making blogs/blog entries unsearchable through search engines. Students can also choose to use pseudonym and create a pseudo identity on the Web (Ellison & Wu, 2008). Nonetheless, students would benefit if instructors make the issue of privacy and security explicit and discuss good practice of protecting confidentiality with their students.

Skills for Participating in Blogging Activities

To participate effectively in blogging activities, students need much more instructional support in addition to a technological tutorial on how to navigate through the blogging systems. Our review found that blogging activities were designed to help learners in the higher education to develop important skills, such as reflective thinking, writing, information literacy skills, and communication and collaboration skills. Many of the reviewed studies incorporated a tutorial on the basic functions of blogging systems to train students on using the technology. These studies indicated that students usually are able to learn the basic mechanisms of authoring and commenting on blogs from a less than one hour of training (e.g., Tekinarslan, 2008). Yet, students were usually inadequately prepared for the learning tasks and wished for more instructional guidance on, for example, writing properly for specific purpose (Tekinarslan, 2008) or reflecting on learning and/or field experiences (Xie, et al, 2008; Farmer, Yue, & Brooks, 2008). When the blogging activities asked students to comment or provide feedback on others’ writing, it was found that undergraduate students were ill-prepared for confronting such task due to lacking experiences or skills. Students typically did not feel comfortable critiquing, or failed to discuss or comment on peers’ work in depth (e.g., Xie, et al, 2008; Wassell & Crouch, 2008; Farmer, et al., 2008; Fessakis et al., 2008). Thus, their feedback to peers’ work may only scratch the surface or focus on the technical aspects of the writing. Commenting skills involve critical thinking and questioning skills. Students will need to develop these skills before they are capable to provide constructive comments comfortably. They would benefit from instructional support on how to provide constructive feedback for their peers.

Recommendations for Instructional Design

The findings of this review indicated that many studies used blogging activity as an individual activity, meaning that no interaction or collaboration was required as part of the activity. While some instructors may request or expect that students voluntarily engage in the reading and commenting on each other’s blog entries, the results of this review suggests that the interaction between students may not happen without guidance. In their article, Gunawardena and her colleagues (2009) compared the focus of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 technologies and the learning paradigms accompanied by these technologies. They distinguished Learning 2.0 from Learning 1.0, suggesting that Learning 2.0 emphasizing more on collaborative learning and peer-to-peer interaction, which are fundamental value promoted by Web 2.0 technologies. To promote Learning 2.0, instructional design of the blogging activities will need to build in mechanisms for interaction or collaboration. Instructional designers may consider incorporating instructional strategies that promote pair or group work when designing blogging activities.
To promote interaction between students and to develop critical thinking skills, a peer review mechanism can be built into the blogging activity. Engaging in peer review activities, students are encouraged to develop skills in critical examination and exchange, as well as consider multiple perspectives (Boud & Falchikov, 2007), and identify the aspects that had been overlooked. Students are also exposed to opportunities of developing academic discourse and reflection of their own learning (Lavy & Yadin, 2010). Research studies also found that the feedback provided by peers was taken seriously by students and helped refine students’ original thinking (Lavy & Yadin, 2010). To guide students in peer review activities through blogging, guidelines on how to interact and how to provide constructive feedback need to be in place. For example, the length, frequency, and time for providing feedback should be specified. As far as the content of the feedback, it would be helpful to provide questions that direct student attention to key areas for constructing feedback. Depending on how familiar students are with the peer feedback activity, instruction may be needed to deliberately develop students’ peer review skills and assess formally on such skills to increase motivation in skill acquisition (Macdonald, 2003). To close the learning loop, a reflection activity will offer an opportunity for students to examine their learning as reviewers and as review receivers. This would allow students to be more metacognitively aware of their roles and how each role contributes to their understanding of the subject and/or development of other important skills such as critical thinking skills.

Designing authentic tasks for blogging activity is likely to promote Learning 2.0. This review found that far too many existing research studies used blogs as a publishing platform instead of a space conducive for interaction, communication, collaboration and critical thinking. To elicit desired interaction and collaboration among students, blogging activities need to be designed to incorporate authentic tasks that involve collaboration. Authentic tasks have the following characteristics: ill-defined, real-world relevance, opportunities to collaborate, a sustained period of time for investigation, and opportunities to detect relevant vs. irrelevant information (Herrington & Oliver, 2000). When engaging student learning in such an authentic task, blogs can be incorporated as collaboration and communication tools. For example, in Philip and Nichollas (2009) study, students collaboratively created a play over a period of time and performed the play to real audience. During the process, group blogs were used effectively for coordination, communication, and management purposes, as there was a real need to interact and communicate among the members toward a common goal. As a result, the group blog was used effectively and desired learning goals were achieved. On the other hand, when the blogging activity does not involve interaction or collaboration with peers, it is unlikely that students will work with each other and view each other’s blogs.
Reference


