

Weaving Blogs into a Constructivist Classroom

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I have never been a big believer in blogs. I am naturally not a writer or a reader so blogging for me was just noise... blah,blah,blah. Yet in the Master of Educational Technologies (Met) courses at University of British Columbia (UBC), I have met a few peers praising the use of blogs. So what am I missing? Where do blogs fit into a constructivist classroom? How can I use a blog in my teaching strategies and methods to help the learner with conceptual change?

My Teaching Context

I teach college level courses in a face-to-face environment. The college has a learning management system called FanshaweOnline (FOL); a Desire2Learn learning management system. Teachers are strongly encouraged to use FOL to post content, presentations, assignments, course information sheets and grades. Discussion forums are available but they are rarely used. This upcoming fall I am teaching a course that is getting revamped to include the use of Web 2.0 technologies as part of the learning outcomes; of which blogs are one of them. Blogs are not widely used in the college and are not included in the FOL platform.

The Learner Context

A recent survey (Ladyshevsky & Gardner, 2008) revealed that most students come to university and college digitally literate with expectations that digital resources will be accessible and available. Higher education must be respond to these consumer demands by creating more blended learning strategies that make use of information and communications technology. As Hilton (2006) notes, students want to be able to use information from others and use it in novel ways by remodeling, producing and publishing it in different forms. (Hilton, 2006).

Constructivism Context

Constructivism calls for approaches to learning in environments where learners actively participate in ways that are intended to aid them in the construction of their own knowledge, rather than regurgitating the teachers' interpretation of the world. Learners are actively engaged in interpreting the external world, reflecting on their interpretations, participating and interact with the surrounding environment in order to create their own construct of the subject/topic. (Jonassen, 1998)

Overview of Blogs

Blogs have been around since 1997 when the term Weblogs was used by Jorn Barger in his *Robot Wisdom* Web site. (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. (Huffaker, 2005)

Creating a Cognitive Environment with Blogs

A common and obvious 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 explore the topic more. Thoughts can be recorded at the beginning of the

lesson, during the lesson and at the end. 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.” (P. H. Scott, 1998, p. 77)

The learner is in full control and ownership over their online content. The learner decides who can read and/or write to his/her blog and has the choice of letting just a few peers or the entire world sees what he/she has to say. Learners also have to the option to respond or ignore comments. If he/she does not want a dialogue, he/she simply turns-off comments all together, or, only turns them on for topics that they want feedback on. A blog essentially becomes a student's personal online soapbox where he/she can try out new concepts. (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004)

Control of one's own thinking and learning process is one of the major tenants of cognition. (Janes, 2008)

Creating a Social Environment with Blogs

The ability to comment on a blog offers the opportunity for others to provide feedback and therefore "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 more generally. Blogs can provide an 'immediate and social environment' (Halavais, 2005, p. 1189)

Learners can also link to fellow bloggers, creating dynamic online communities also 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, company executives, and magazine/newspaper writers, who in turn, hear opinions of people they would never otherwise hear. (Siemens, 2002) Ideas are shared, questions are asked and answered, and social cohesion is developed. (Huffaker, 2005) These links encourages 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 or mentors from outside the classroom easy. (Richardson, Blogging and RSS — The "What's It?" and "How To" of Powerful New Web Tools for Educators , 2004) Jonassen (1998) notes that educators need to create real world environments that utilizes 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 and mentors.

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 also being wooed by companies for jobs 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)

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 his/her 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 the 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. (Richardson, Blogging and RSS — The "What's It?" and "How To" of Powerful New Web Tools for Educators , 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 when an Internet connection is available. (Huffaker, 2005) It's easy for bloggers to understand, easy for teachers to implement and with a built in archival and search feature, it 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." (Richardson, Blogging and RSS — The "What's It?" and "How To" of Powerful New Web Tools for Educators , 2004)

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 (Student Press Law Center, 2004) and threatening another student. (Bach, 2003)
2. Students are 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 don't say the

wrong things. In his weblog, Webb-Ed, Will Richardson expressed his doubts of blogs:

"By its very nature, assigned blogging in schools cannot be blogging. It's contrived. No matter how much we want to spout off about the wonders of audience and readership, students who are asked to blog are blogging for an audience of one, the teacher." (Richardson, 2004, p. ¶8) When the class ends, "students drop blogging like wet cement." (Richardson, 2004, p. ¶9)

3. Posting copyrighted or protected information. Students can get into trouble for libelous content. (Downes, 2004)
4. Writing is not for everyone. Not everyone enjoys expressing themselves in writing and therefore should be able to participate in different ways. (Downes, 2004)

Conclusion

In a constructivist classroom, blogs meet the criteria for learning. Jonassen states "Constructivism proposes that learning environments should support multiple perspectives or interpretations of reality, knowledge construction, and context-rich, experience-based activities." (Jonassen, 1998) The discursive nature of blogs leads to multiple perspectives in a social conversation that includes connections to 'real world' experiences and context, reflection on personal and social views and constructing/reconstructing knowledge. Despite the few negative criticisms of blogging, the nature of blogs weaves seamlessly with the criteria of constructivism. 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."

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