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Blogs as an Instructional Medium

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Abstract

Blogs are becoming more popular as an instructional medium. Yet many instructors do not know how blogs can be effectively used in instruction or their benefits and limitations. Without effective guidance, many instructors may avoid using them instructionally all together or use them in an ineffective manner. It is my hope that, with some direction and guidance, instructors can utilise this exciting tool to positive effect. This paper will give instructors guidance in utilising blogs as an instructional delivery medium and clarify the strengths and limitations of the medium. While blogging has both benefits and limitations, it is clear that it is a useful instructional medium.

Abstrak

Blog menjadi semakin popular sebagai media pengajaran. Walau bagaimanapun, ramai pengajar tidak mengetahui bagaimana blog boleh digunakan dengan berkesan dalam pengajaran ataupun faedah dan batasannya. Tanpa panduan yang berkesan, ramai pengajar mungkin mengelakkan diri daripada menggunakannya untuk tujuan pengajaran atau menggunakannya dengan kaedah yang berkesan. Adalah diharapkan beberapa panduan dan arah, pengajar boleh menggunakan alat ini dengan memberi kesan yang positif. Artikel ini akan memberikan pengajar bantuan dalam menggunakan blog sebagai media penyampaian pengajaran dan menjelaskan kekuatan dan batasan media ini. Walaupun menulis dalam blog mempunyai faedah dan batasan, adalah jelas bahawa ianya merupakan satu media pengajaran yang berguna.

Introduction

According to Richardson (2005), a new blog is created every second, there are more than 900,000 posts on blogs a day and there are approximately two million blogs updated every week. More and more educators and trainers of all ages (for both children and adults) are joining this trend and

using blogs for instruction. In fact, weblogs are becoming more and more common in universities. The University of Iowa, Harvard University and Rice University are a few prominent universities that are implementing extensive blogging practices (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). As early as 1993, the Brisbane Graduate School of Business introduced an MBA course extensively involving a group blog (Williams & Jacobs, 2004).

Blogs are quickly becoming as common as email. Instructors who have used blogging have reported remarkable success. For instance, one group of instructors reported that by using blogs in their introductory science courses, their students have moved their focus from “what” to “why” and from seeing discrete sets of facts to view them as more interconnected (Brownstein, 2006). These results are quite encouraging.

Yet many instructors do not know how blogs can be effectively used in instruction or their benefits and limitations. Surprisingly, there is little peer reviewed research published on the use of blogs in instruction (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Much more work is needed to evaluate the use of blogs as an instruction delivery medium. Without effective guidance, many instructors may avoid using them instructionally all together or use them in an ineffective manner. This paper is a preliminary attempt to develop a guidelines on using blogs for instruction.

What is a Blog?

Blogs, short for weblogs, started off as a self-publishing movement for professional and nonprofessional journalists (Kennedy, 2003). They can be described as a frequently updated website, with dated entries known as posts, often arranged in reverse chronological order with the most recent post appearing first (Brownstein, 2006). They allow writers to post ideas and thoughts quickly in an informal tone while giving a large audience access to the material (Flatley, 2005). Most often, they are used as personal online journals (Hoffman, 2006), which allow users to add audio posts, photo albums, guest books, polling tools, quizzing capabilities and numerous other add-on tools (Flatley, 2005). A quick search on *yahoo* will reveal that there are blogs on virtually every possible subject.

Blogs can be set up to perform numerous tasks (Stayffer, 2002) such as the following:

- Post articles to the website
- Categorise and organise the articles by topics
- Hyperlink to other websites (and thus other contents)
- Provide a search capability for readers of the blog
- Become interactive through creating a comment function
- Be protected by requiring commentors to register
- Send mailings
- Build an online forum for in-depth conversations
- Run polls, contests and give quizzes
- Automatically send updates to readers and websites that publicise the blog

It is this flexibility that has attracted countless people to use and read blogs with more and more frequency.

Instructional Use of Blogs

Blogs can be used as an instructional medium in many different ways. They are often used to complement other technologies in distance learning or face-to-face training and education (Glogoff, 2005). Blogs can be used instructionally as a group journal where all members can post their work or each individual in a group can have his/her own blog with each linked from a single webpage (Hoffman, 2006). Instructors can also use blogs to facilitate group work as a stand-alone course delivery method (Flatley, 2005). As a stand-alone delivery method, blogs can involve outside experts or instructors in the process (Flatley, 2005). Due to the accessibility and the asynchronous delivery, experts and outside instructors can easily participate.

Several researchers have given lists of various ways blogs can be used in instruction. For instance, Hoffman (2006) suggested several uses for blogs in college courses – instructors can use the blog as an online course management tool or they can post a weekly topic and have each student respond to the topic; instructors or students can post articles relevant to the course or students can post their thoughts with regard to assigned articles. The blog can be used as a class discussion vehicle for course readings and lectures as well as being a place to post students assignments (a comprehensive portfolio). Students can be provided a virtual meeting

place to exchange course related information or they can be provided personal weblogs to use as a writing portfolio. McKenzie (2006) suggested that blogs can be used as a classroom chronicle, as a daily journal, as an anthology of the class work, as a communicator (for instance, between different classes or courses) and as a collaborative forum. Downes (2004) noted that blogs can be used to replace the standard class webpage or provide links to internet items that relate to the course.

What Enables Blogging to Work as an Instructional Medium

Glogoff (2005) suggested that instructional blogging uses three important instructional techniques: receptive techniques, directive techniques and guided discovery techniques. The receptive techniques involve creating instructional modules focusing on the transmission of information. The instruction is framed within a theoretical context and encourages the students to acquire information and report on what they have learned. The directive techniques focus on developing instructor student dialogue. Frequent response and feedback are emphasised. Guided discovery techniques involve students being led to identify conceptual processes and solve real life problems. Students revisit prior learning, develop new knowledge and reflect. Students can apply this process to pertinent real life problems.

The social components involved in blogging support many educational theories. The critical component of Vygotsky's notions of social cognition, Lipman's concept of community of inquiry and Wenger's ideas of community practice are all embodied in blogging (Glogoff, 2005).

Seitzinger (2006) suggested that blogging works well as a constructivist learning tool. Several elements are considered key components for constructive learning; problem based learning, learner centredness, collaborative learning, social presence, interactivity, support and cognitive tools (Seitzinger, 2006). Instructional blogging can be utilised to engage in all of the elements. Topics can focus on specific concrete problems. The learning can be designed to be centred on the learner. Blogs are typically designed to be collaborative and interactive. Finally, instructors can give various levels of support.

Ferdig and Trammell (2004) highlighted several pedagogical principles behind blogging. Blogs facilitate knowledge construction by providing students a space to reflect, analyse and revisit knowledge. This process is further facilitated through the discursive nature of blogs. Blogs also help contextualise the learning through the use of hyperlinks to other materials. Ferdig and Trammell (2004) also noted that blogs help students to become subject matter experts, increase student interest and ownership, give students legitimate opportunities to participate and provide opportunities for diverse perspectives. Beldarrain (2006) suggested blogs are especially suited to be learner-centred systems of instruction where collaboration is enhanced. Beldarrain (2006) also noted that blogs, as a medium of instruction, are easily customisable. This allows designers to focus on customisation of content over standardisation, as instructional design theory and experience have shown to be more beneficial.

Using blogging as an instruction medium seems to fit with Knowles' adult learning theory or andragogy. Knowles et al. (2000), the preminent theorist of adult learning, postulated that adult learning is based on several assumptions – adults need to know why they are going to learn something before they learn it and they have a self-concept of being responsible, autonomous and self-directed in their learning. Adults come with prior experiences that provide a rich environment for learning; adult learning is problem centred and contextual, tends to be life centred and focused on increasing competency and adult learning tends to be more internally motivated (Knowles et al., 2000).

This methodology fits well with Knowles' theory of adult learning. Blogs can be designed to provide background information to let learners know why the information is important to know. The flexible approach works well with a self-directed learner. Students have the freedom to respond to different posts or comments and have the option to contextual the response to information that is meaningful for each of them. The previous knowledge and experience of individual students can be quickly communicated to other students. As Glogoff (2005) noted, blogging can be easily used to focus on problem focused instruction. The discovery focused techniques can be especially useful for developing competency.

Benefits and Limitations

As an instructional medium, blogging has many benefits and few limitations (Table 1). Some of the major benefits include its ease of use, capability for inactivity and low cost to set up. The major limitation appears to be that blogs can require a significant time investment from both instructors and students. Benefits and limitations are summarised in the following table.

Table 1 Benefits and limitations of blogging

Benefits	Limitations
Offers rich opportunities to interact with diverse audiences (outside of the classroom if the blog is public) (Glen, 2003; Williams & Jacobs, 2004).	May be faddish and a temporary phenomenon (Glen, 2003).
Allows readers of the blog to post comments of their own (Glen, 2003).	With larger classes, can involve a substantial amount of time to evaluate student's work (Kennedy, 2003).
Gives producers of the blog freedom of tone in how the blog is written (Glen, 2003).	Some courses of study might require private blogs which students might view with less passion than when viewing public blogs (Kennedy, 2003).
Lowers the cost of the publishing to next to nothing (Glen, 2003).	Content could possibly make the educational institution liable for views or content it does not hold.
Offers immediacy to users and audience (Glen, 2003).	Can be time consuming to keep the blog updated (Hoffman, 2006).
Has built-in elements of peer review; entries are monitored and responded to, (Glen, 2003; Brownstein, 2006).	Due to its casual nature, blogs may encourage sloppy writing habits (Hoffman, 2006).
Brings professors, scholars and students to a more level playing field (Glen, 2003), thus creating an equal environment of exchange of information.	Some instructional content is not appropriate for discussion and opinion essays (Hoffman, 2006).
Gives students a real audience to write to and a collaborative environment where critical feedback is given, which can improve writing and critical thinking (Kennedy, 2003).	Student may be resistant to taking the time required to blog (Hoffman, 2006).

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Table 1 (Continued)

Benefits	Limitations
Engenders community building in courses (Glogoff, 2005).	May create competition between students (Hoffman, 2006).
Helps frame personal place in virtual space (Glogoff, 2005).	Blogs formats can make following a discussion difficult (Hoffman, 2006).
Can easily be used in a learning centred format that fosters feedback and dialogue (Glogoff, 2005).	Students tend to be less enthusiastic about blogs than instructors, some seeing them as a waste of time (Wrede, 2003).
Instructors can use blogs to help students contextualise real world experiences by guiding the students through the foundations of the instructional material (Glogoff, 2005).	
Due to their public nature, blogs can encourage use of posters to more clearly communicate their ideas than they would in email or bulletin boards (Hoffman, 2006).	
Flexible in their use for instructors and students (Hoffman, 2006; Wrede, 2003).	
Easy way to improve writing skills (Hoffman, 2006).	
Gives students a sense of ownership, (Brownstein, 2006; Ferdig and Trammell, 2004; Hoffman, 2006).	
Can encourage shy students to express themselves (Hoffman, 2006).	
Provides a place for students to express themselves (Hoffman, 2006).	
Gives students and instructors feedback about students' thoughts and feelings towards the class and instructional content (Hoffman, 2006).	
The material can be shared outside the class (Hoffman, 2006).	
Offer communication anywhere any time (Hoffman, 2006; Flatly, 2005).	
Quick to update with new content (Hoffman, 2006; Stayffer, 2002).	
Convenient due the asynchronous delivery (Hoffman, 2006).	

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Table 1 (*Continued*)

Benefits	Limitations
Very useful for brainstorming (Flatley, 2005).	
Encourages peer review (Flatley, 2005).	
Can easily be syndicated and shared on other websites through RSS (Really Simple Syndication) (McKenzie, 2006).	
Can lead to students becoming subject matter experts (Brownstein, 2006).	

Setting Up a Blog

There are several ways to set up a blog. The most inexpensive option is to utilise a free web-based blogging service (Ferding & Trammell, 2004). Blogger.com and Schoolblogs.net are two examples. Another option is to purchase blogging software (Brandon, 2003; Downes, 2004; Embrey, 2002; Ferding & Trammell, 2004). This approach still requires internet bandwidth to store the blog. Additional options include creating the blog in html on a traditional website which requires technical knowledge and a utilising fee for service web-based blogging services for high amounts of bandwidth (Downes, 2004). Some institutions may have in-house blogging software and storage (Ferding & Trammell, 2004).

Guidelines for Using Blogs Instructionally

In order for instructors to effectively use blogs instructionally, they need guidelines. Currently, there are few guidelines for using blogs as an instructional medium in the research. Effective guidelines will include planning how a blog will be used, how the blog will be implemented, and how the students' work will be evaluated in the blog(s).

Beldarrain (2006) postulated that several principles should be kept in mind when planning to develop an instructional blog or when using blog-based instruction. The blog or blogs should encourage contact between the student and the faculty. The instructor must use the medium to develop and foster cooperation and intellectual sharing. Blogs work best when active learning techniques are used. Students need feedback in a timely

fashion. While relationship is important, the instructor must emphasise the importance of task and direct students to use their time on the blog working on assignments. The instructor must also let the students know that he or she expects quality work. Finally, the instructor should honour the diversity of the students and their learning styles. Beldarrain (2006) suggested that these principles, when paired with a solid understanding of the technology, will lead to a more effective learning experience for students.

Once blogging has been chosen as a medium for instructional delivery, the instructor must determine how he or she will implement the blog or blogs. Brownstein (2006) suggested several rules to follow when implementing blogs in the classroom or at a distance. The instructor must decide on the purpose of the blog. Is the blog primarily aimed at learning or interaction? While an instructional blog can have elements of both, the blog will generally work better if one main focus is chosen. The instructor must also decide who will be the main author of the blog: individual students, the whole class or the instructor. Student created blogs tend to work well with individual projects or a class focused on individual construction or knowledge. Once those decisions are made, the instructor must give structure to the blog through clear guidelines and examples.

Many non-instructional blogs have rules and norms that will hinder the effectiveness of an instructional blog. With clear guidelines, students will know what is expected of them. The instructor must also consider the institutional guidelines at his or her institution pertaining to blogs. Knowing the policies will enable the instructor and the students to follow them. Since blogs can be public or private, the instructor must decide if the blog will be public or by invitation only. The instructor must also develop a means to teach students blog etiquette. While these suggestions and considerations will go a long way, instructors should recognise that implementing and maintaining a blog is always a work in progress. Flexibility and continual adaptation as needed are required for effective instructional blogging.

In addition to planning on how the blog will be used and implemented, instructors must also develop a means to evaluate the students' work on the blog or blogs. Kennedy (2003) forwarded several suggestions for evaluating students' work in blogs. She indicated that as with all

assessment and evaluation, instructors should realise assessment is an ongoing challenge. Instructors should start off slowly and have students post specific assignments once a week. If they have individual blogs, they should be allowed to personalise the blogs. She further suggested that instructors should evaluate the students' writing over time not in just one testing event. She indicated that instructors should involve students in the assessment process by assigning written self-evaluation before giving term grades. This will help engage the students in self-reflection. She also suggested that instructors who use individual student blogs should give the students models of well written blogs through the bookmarking of exemplary blogs.

While these guidelines are preliminary guidelines and more research is needed, instructors would be well served if they use these guidelines in design and implementation. As research continues, instructors will have access to more in-depth guidelines. Instructors should remember that the guidelines are best used as supplements to a comprehensive instructional design process.

Conclusion

Blogs offer instructors a flexible, inexpensive instructional medium that can enhance student learning. As an instructional medium, blogging fits well with learning theory and adult learning requirements. Educators and trainers will greatly benefit from adding blogs and blogging into their instructional tool kit.

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