

Blogging Revisited: The Unpredictable Learning Journey

Huey Zher, Ng, UNITAR International University, Malaysia

The Asian Conference on Technology in the Classroom 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Studies have shown that blogging supports active learning which brings in the process of active knowledge construction. This comprises of reflective learning. This paper aims to explore the students' learning journey through reflective blogging. Based on what blogging advocates, 45 students were asked to post their reflection via their blogs. This activity was new to the students. This was their first time blogging. The data collected was qualitative, comprising of students' reflections from the blog, and survey on student's learning experiences using blogs as reflection tool. The implications for the use of blogs as a medium to provide and promote reflection for the students are discussed. On the other hand, data findings have shown unforeseen variables which influenced the instructor strategies in encouraging the students to post and maintaining the purpose of reflection for the students' learning. This was also brought to discussion.

Keywords: blog, reflection, learning design, higher education

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Baker (2003) describes the learning log as a learning diary, created concurrently with the learning experience, and reporting on the learning content as well as the process (including time taken, sources used, and so forth).

The term weblog (Barger, 1997), refers to a personal web page, kept by the author in reverse chronological diary form. It is a “log on the web” and a “log of the web”. As a log on the web, it is kept first and foremost on the web, either on a static web page, or via a database backed website, enabled through “blogging” software. As a log of the web, it frequently refers to other Internet locations via hyper linking. (Wagner, 2003) In 1999, the web-log was nicknamed the BLOG as it expanded to accommodate diverse users ranging from families to special interest groups and from communities to corporations.

Since then, the definition of web-log continues to expand. Walker’s (2003) definition, for example, notes that: A weblog, or blog, is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first. Typically, weblogs are published by individuals and their style is personal and informal. Huffaker & Calvert (2005) described web-log as an online journal which made up of reversed chronological entries infused with text, images or multimedia, blogs embody a place where individual expression and online community development coexist. With nearly 50 million blogging in 2005, this platform for personal expressions has grown immensely (EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, 2005).

The popularity of blogging among young people has motivated educators to seek methods of adopting and adapting computer-mediated communication tools at the tertiary level (Halic, Lee, Paulus, & Spence, 2010). Furthermore, blogging has been measured and evaluated for its worth in educational environments. Prior research has revealed that blogging offer encouraging advantages for both instructors and students (Abate, Gomes, & Linton, 2011). One of the encouraging benefits is that blogging supports active learning. Active learning brings in the process of active knowledge construction. Active knowledge construction includes reflective learning. As a receptive learning tool, blogging can be used to frame assignments within a theoretical context that encourages students to acquire information and report what they have learned (Glogoff, 2005). According to Richards (2001), the basic tenet of constructivism involves a constructivist scaffolding whereby the students revisit the learning space, build upon prior knowledge, reflect on what they have learned, and drill deeper for more information. Being also known as a knowledge management tool, blogs accommodate the possibility for relatively undifferentiated articles of information passing through an organisation to be contextualized (Williams, and Jacobs, 2004). Thus, learners obtain an overall understanding in a manner that adds value, thus generating 'knowledge' from mere 'information' (Williams, and Jacobs, 2004, Du and Wagner, 2005). In other words, reflection via blogging is crucial in supporting active learning.

Dewey (1933) argued that reflection on individual experience is critical for enhancing learning and for making meaning of the experience. Quinton and Smallbone (2010) presented reflection as a mental process which incorporates critical thought about an experience and demonstrates learning that can be taken forward. Both researchers

further mentioned that a reflective student will practice and demonstrate transferable self-knowledge, based on a questioning approach to themselves, their situation and the roles of others, in order to create a new and different frame of reference. Reflection also allows the student to describe “aha” moments that synthesize knowledge and practice (Karsten, 2012). Furthermore, when students are provided with opportunities to examine and reflect upon their beliefs, philosophies and practices in relation to the contextual conditions of their field, they are more likely to see themselves as active change agents and lifelong learners within their professions (Mezirow, 2006 as cited in Ryan, 2012.)

Prior to these beliefs, this study highlights the students' learning journey through reflective blogging. At the same time, data findings have shown unforeseen variables which influenced the instructor strategies in encouraging the students to post and maintaining the purpose of reflection for the students' learning. This study was the first cycle.

Context

The study on adopting Blogger as a platform for reflection was conducted on a group of 45 students whom were taking the course Pedagogy in Education. When graduate, this batch of degree students are to be teachers in schools. This course conducted twice in a week-2 hours per session. The session ran for 12 weeks. The course was aimed to equip students with pedagogy skills. Before informing the students on their task in the first week, the students were asked if they were familiar with the term blogging and have they blogged. Half of the class heard of the term blogging while all the students have never blogged.

“This is my first experience being a blogger.”

“Blogger is a new thing for me, because I never think or plan to have a blog.”

“Newbie in the world of blogging.”

They were also questioned on whether they have read a reflective post. The answer was negative from each of the 45 students.

“...writing weekly reflection is something new for me because before this, I never had this weekly reflection for other subjects.”

The instruction was given on the first week of class. Based on the class situation, the initial outline had to be thoroughly grounded into the students' understanding, to ensure that each student could move towards the same learning outcome. It took two weeks to ensure the students were computerized to the same wavelength on the given task. The first session of the first week involved explaining the reflection assignment. During the second session of the first week, the lecturer would make sure every student set-up their blog and the functions of blogger were also illustrated. The sole reason was due to the fact, students' zero experience of setting up a blog. Zero experience would equate to further complications of not able to complete the steps, and the possibility of unexpected technical problems. These issues should not be

taken lightly as it would be detrimental to students' motivation to start work. One example can be seen from the following excerpts taken from a student's blog post.

"I never liked putting my hands into the world of IT to be honest. It's the most complicated thing for me."

"The entire process of creating our blog (including downloading Windows Live Writer) took approximately 1 and a half hours long!"

During the session, those students who had finished setting up the blog, were instructed to assist their friends who were struggling to put their blog up. The purpose of the action was to expose them on how to teach students with zero knowledge in IT skills. On the other hand, the importance of the session was very clear. Students appreciated the preparation and efforts made for the task.

*"That is why, we are lucky that we are setting up the blogger and as well as installing the windows live writer in class. *smiley* When we face some obstacle such as the windows live writer could not be installed, we could not find the right username, we are not sure whether if our blogger was set up right and so on, we have lecturer and friends there to give us a helping hand to help and guide us."*

On the second week, the lecturer would showed samples of post which were of reflection type, to the students. The samples served as a model for the students to follow. At the same time, the students were reminded of the assignment's grading policy which they needed to fulfill in order to obtain marks for the assignment. A firm enforcement type of motivation was needed the first time in order to give that extra push for the students to move.

A different approach was taken for this assignment. Instead of giving the students the free rein in writing a post in regards to what they have learnt every week, the lecturer provided the question or theme or topic to reflect. All the topics or questions given were related to the items discussed during class. This was done every week until the end of semester. The following were samples of the questions:

- What have you discovered when you are asked to set-up your blog and guide your friends in setting up the blog?
- The best school of taught for teaching your major
- What are the important parts of a lesson plan?
- Based on today's class, identify and explain seven methods for Effective Powerpoint Slide Presentation for teaching and learning.
- What rules would you implement if you were the classroom teacher?

The purpose of this action was to guide the students on what to reflect. Moreover the students were not familiar with the act of blogging nor reflecting. This assistance would grant the students a way to "take control" of the learning process which occurred while blogging a reflective post. One question or topic was given every week for the students to reflect on. The students were given one week-duration to reflect on their learning for that week.

Methodology

The following qualitative method was used to capture students' learning process during their reflection assignment. At the end of the semester, the question –“What form of learning do you experience when writing the weekly reflection” was given to the students via forum in the Moodle platform. The students were to reply via the forum. The replies were then analyzed.

Data Analysis

The “unpredictable” association with authentic learning

The students' replies pointed to an active learning activated during reflection process which was authentic learning.

Authentic learning

The first white paper in Educate Learning Initiatives, 2007 series on authentic learning, “Authentic Learning for the 21st Century”, described authentic learning activity: “An authentic learning activity is designed to draw on the existing talents and experiences of students, building their confidence through participation and helping them see the connection between personal aptitude and professional practice.” It was further explained that the activity is conformed to the needs of the new “participatory learner,” one whose expectations for active, hands-on involvement in learning have been increased by the proliferation of creative chances made accessible through Web 2.0 applications.”

According to the analyzed data, students argued that reflecting via blogging was a form of authentic learning. It was interesting to note that the feedback given by the students fit according to the characteristics based on the prior description on authentic learning extracted from the white paper series on authentic learning.

The active and hands-on involvement in learning, according to the students, were translated as expressing what has been learnt in class in a form of reflection. The student described the form of reflection or *so-called products were our experiences and our creativity in writing....*”which are then finally known as “*creation of meaningful blogs*”. One student equate the blog reflections akin to *tangible, useful product which to be shared with the world*. As mentioned earlier, the questions given for their reflection task were guided

“... weekly reflection also let us learn directly from learning experiences in classroom.”

-forum reply student 1

“...we tend to relate what we have learn to the real life situation. By writing the weekly reflection, we learn how blend the information into our own perception.”

-forum reply student 2

“...the tasks given by the lecturer is always based on the real tasks, or simulated tasks that provide us with opportunities to connect directly with the real world of teaching.”

-forum reply student 3

“...I and my friends have the opportunity to express own form of understandings and explain how we applied it in our nature of living, also get the chance to exchange blog posts to grasp the identity of each individual perspectives.”

-forum reply student 4

According to the comments given by Student 3, real life tasks, or simulated tasks refer to the guided questions. The guided questions made them reflect based on practical situations for teaching. It was also interesting to note on phrases and terms used in regards to authentic learning such as “*nature of living*” and “*grasp the identity of each individual perspectives*”.

A specific narration of practical situation was described by Student 5:

“It is based on whatever we have discussed in the classes that week. Sometimes they are not direct, but our tasks actually require us to really focus in class and learn directly from our environment. For example, when we were assigned to choose a best mock teaching presenter, we had to really remember why he/she was effective and how their teaching style affected the class and especially how we personally felt about the lesson. This kind of personal experience becomes more meaningful and is remembered better because we can relate to it and apply it to our own teaching style. This is a form of authentic learning.”

-forum reply student 5

What was narrated by Student 4 reflected the same argument made by Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino (1999). The team mentioned that authentic learning “allowed students to explore, discuss, and meaningfully construct concepts and relationships in contexts that involve real-world problems and projects that are relevant to the learner.”

In other words, despite being new in the world of blogging and reflecting, the students were able to identify the relevance of the task in assisting their learning process. Moreover, the students were also able to pair it with the appropriate pedagogical method-authentic learning. Besides that, it is also a clear illustration that reflection via blog platform provided an open space for meaningful engagement. This further demonstrates that reflection via blog is extremely valuable to support learning in an authentic context.

The “unpredictable” association with other items

There were other “unpredictable” association which the students brought up.

1. Brainstorm

This teaching and learning technique encourages the students to go through a process whereby the students are to generate ideas, let their creative juices flow, and solve problem. A techniques which can be individually managed, it is applied to a variety of activities such as case study writing, and mind maps.

“...allows them to brainstorm the things they have learned during the class hours by somehow allowing the learners to actually relate their knowledge or understanding into the reflections”

-forum reply student 6

Student 6 believed that reflection was not the end of learning. Reflection via blogging granted the student to write down new ideas or modify received information into a different level of knowledge. The continuous process of “branching new knowledge” of learning was a right condition for brainstorm.

2. Memorization

Memorization is seen as a method of knowing without learning, of answering without understanding. Lately, memorization has garnered a hike of defenders. They argued that memorization keeps the brain running and even fuels deep insights. Unfortunately, this might not happen if one goes the same path as Student 7, sitting by a desk and taking down notes.

Student 7 consider memorization was more than just taking notes and engraved in the brain. This flat situation of regurgitating the notes was indeed sufficient to drown the student’s method of studying. On account of that, the student felt reflection gave “strength” to memorize the topics “effectively”.

“By just sitting at a desk, taking notes and regurgitating curriculum content, I won’t be getting 100% absorption of the information to the brain, but by doing this weekly reflections it gives me the strength to memorize more effectively all those topics I studied for the particular week.”

-forum reply student 7

It was enlightening to note that reflecting via blogging enable Student 7 to bravely “memorize” all the topics for the subject.

3. Observation

It was unexpected to come across this item from the student reply. For this reason, it was noted such occurrence could be due to the question given for reflection. The guided questions (though it was given after the class) force the students to be alert and not to miss out anything. Of course, the habit was further enforced by the grades

which they needed to collect. This silent happened technique would train the students on observation skill, a much needed for one for the teaching profession.

“... I learnt in how to evaluate and observe the lectures every class. Because we need to write the daily reflection, so that we need to really observed what happened in the class. Of we are not attending the class it very hard for us to write the reflection.”

-forum reply student 8

Conclusion

“I also managed to learn the way of the Blog, something I thought as something easy, but didn't expect how hard it would be.”

-forum reply student 10

Despite the hardship and struggle which the students had to face when completing their reflection via blogging, the unexpected learning compensates for it. The feedback from Student 11 and Student 12 furnished the overall learning experience from reflection via blogging.

“...writing blog posts throughout our course as part of learning has been an effective approach to assess students in terms of understanding, ability to translate learning into writing and be proactive in remembering one week's worth of lesson...weekly blog posts has the ability to bring out the best out of students' cognitive development as it requires students' full effort into translating the lessons into their own terms of understanding.”

-forum reply student 11

“If the lecturer gives the topic and tell the answer too for surely I won't have chance to learn by myself. It also help me to remember what happen in class. Always after class I will forget what happen in the class but in pedagogy class I can remember because I'm writing the weekly reflection. Because the lecturer gives the weekly reflection, I recall back and remember back if not I will just forget what happen in the class.”

-forum reply student 12

In order for the students to receive a full positive exposure from reflection via blogging, it is suggested to provide the questions for their entries. Besides acting as guide in fulfilling the learning objectives of the course, the students may not need to waste their time thinking what to write. On the hindsight, this statement would only worked to certain situations and students. Therefore, the lecturer needs to identify the type of students he/she is teaching at the beginning of the semester. Another suggestion would be only to provide the questions for the first three weeks of the course. Decide the need of giving guided questions after analyzing the content of the entries.

References

Abate, L. E., Gomes, A., & Linton, A. (2011). Engaging students in active learning: Use of a blog and Audience Response System. *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, 30(1), 12-18.

Baker, J.H. (2003) "The Learning Log", *Journal of Information Systems Education*, 14(1), 11-13.

Barger, J. (1997) Weblog Resources FAQ, RobotWisdom Weblog, <http://www.robotwisdom.com/weblogs>

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educational process*. Lexington, MA: Heath.

Donovan, M. S., Bransford, J. D., & Pellegrino, J. W. (Eds.). (1999). *How people learn: Bridging research and practice*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Halic, O., Lee, D., Paulus, T., & Spence, M. (2010). To blog or not to blog: Student perceptions of blog effectiveness for learning in a college-level course. *The Internet and higher education*, 13(4), 206-213.

Huffaker, D. A., & Calvert, S. L. (2005). Gender, identity, and language use in teenage blogs. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(2).

Karsten, K. (2012). Using ePortfolio to demonstrate competence in associate degree nursing students. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*, 7(1), 23-26.

Quinton, S., & Smallbone, T. (2010). Feeding forward: using feedback to promote student reflection and learning—a teaching model. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 47(1), 125-135.

Ryan, M. (2012). Conceptualising and teaching discursive and performative reflection in higher education. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 34(2), 207-223.

Wagner, C. (2003) Put another (b)log on the wire: Publishing learning logs as weblogs. *Journal of Information Systems Education*, 14(2), 131-132

Contact email: nhzher@unitar.my