Engaging students in the curriculum through the use of blogs; how and why?

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Abstract

This paper presents an academic case for the use of blogs in higher education, and some key considerations for those planning and designing blogging activities in an HE setting. Focusing on the roles of action/activity and experience, reflection and community in learning, this paper suggests how the blogging process can engage students and enhance learning, and how specific features of blogs might be used to bring maximum benefit to the learner.

This topic will not only be of interest to those who are considering using blogs with their students, or are already doing so, but also those who have an interest in the concept of maximising social presence in learning activities and putting the student at the centre of the learning experience.

Introduction

The initial inspiration for this project was Vygotsky's description of the connection between thought and language (Cole et al. 1978); in particular that language symbolises the objects and relationships we observe and allows us to develop solutions, or new behaviours, that are independent from the structure of the concrete situation. *Metablog* (www.metablogger.edublogs.org) was created in May 2008, originally in order to gain personal experience of the mediation of thought through a blog, and its effect on the enhancement of the cognitive process. Throughout the project, it became evident that there are many aspects of blogging (besides simply articulating one's thought processes) that have the potential to impact positively on learning.

Relevant Principles

The role of Activity/Action/Experience, Reflection and Learning

Many commentators support the notion that learning requires activity – which may more appropriately be termed 'action' or 'experience', depending on the context. Chickering and Gamson (1987) highlight the importance of activity in their Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, while Kolb's (1984) learning cycle includes the gaining of concrete experience. Salmon (2002) uses 'action' and 'participation' as the basis for her ideas on
e-tivity design and moderation in online settings.

While activity or experience is evidently central to the learning process, particularly in situated learning conditions, definitions of learning, such as that presented by Daudelin (1996, p.4) often include notions of behavioural change: "[learning is] the creation of meaning from past or current events that serves as a guide for future behaviour". It could be argued that, for behavioural change to take place, the learner needs to actively reflect on the experience.

The specific relationship between reflection and learning has been emphasised by many, including Boud *et al*. (1985), who proposed that structured reflection is the key to learning from experience. We can also return to Kolb's learning cycle (1984), in which learners engage in, observe and reflect on experiences, assimilate reflections in a theory, and then deduce implications for future action from that theory.

The importance of reflection on learning is reinforced by Mentkowski & Associates (2000), whose emphasis on integrative, situated and transferable learning resonates with Biggs' (1999) ideas on fostering a deep

approach to learning. Encouraging action, and reflection on that action, is likely to lead to meaningful and long-lasting learning.

Individuality and community
Having established the importance of personal experience and personal reflection for learning, an additional dimension to the individuality of learning is the importance of engaging with a learning community. Supporting individuality and community in learning are not mutually exclusive ideas; Mentkowski (2000) shows that effective learning is both independent and collaborative. In the CBASSE publication *How People Learn*, Bransford *et al*. (1999) demonstrate that a good learning environment is student (individual) centred *and* community centred, with the other two 'centres' being knowledge and assessment. The dialogic aspect of teaching and learning also presupposes the importance of a learning community.

In specific reference to online learning situations, Garrison and Anderson (2003, p.22) claim that:

"…a community of learners is an essential, core element of an educational experience when higher order learning is the desired learning outcome…the idealised view of higher education as a critical community of learners…has become a practical necessity in the realisation of relevant, meaningful and continuous learning" (p 23).

Research on professional learning communities (PLCs) has yielded a vast quantity of literature; much of which focuses on schools, but is also relevant to other contexts and industries; for example, Collis' work with Shell Exploration & Production (Collis 2008) is based on establishing a professional learning community and facilitating collaboration within it. Stoll *et al*. (2006) list five characteristics that make professional learning communities effective:
· Shared values and vision
· Collective responsibility
· Reflective professional enquiry
· Collaboration
· Promotion of both group and individual learning.

The notion of a professional learning community is not only important for professionals working within their working contexts, but also for groups of students on professional academic courses, whether or not they are working within the same company.

The challenge for today's teachers, tutors and facilitators, including myself in my role as an e-learning developer, is how to respond to all the principles presented above. What tools do we have that will facilitate reflection-on-action and the development of learning communities, particularly when students are remote from each other? And how might these tools be used optimally to maximise the benefits?

How blogging enables us to respond to these principles

Features of blogs conducive to reflection
Although the 'spontaneous reflection' that can even occur during mindless physical activities is useful for framing the problem through the sorting of existing information, combining it with a more deliberate and conscious mode of reflection is more likely to result in a change in behaviour (Daudelin 1996). The following paragraphs describe how certain characteristics of blogs can assist the conscious reflective process.

The ease of use of many free blogging tools such as Blogger and Edublogs permits the author to focus solely on what they are writing, rather than the technology that is involved in the layout of the blog and the display of the posts on the screen. This not only frees up the cognitive capacity of the author to engage with deep thought processes such as structured reflection, but the ease with which an aesthetically pleasing and professional-looking blog can be produced makes posting on the blog more enjoyable (and therefore more likely), as it enhances the author's sense of satisfaction and pride in what they have produced. This

characteristic of blogging software may also contribute towards the willingness of the author to publicise their blog in the public domain.

Thinking back to the connection Vygotsky (Cole *et al*. 1978) made between language and thought, it is interesting that, years after we have internalised our egocentric speech, we feel the need to externalise it again in order to make sense of our thoughts. Given the complex nature of the reflective process, it makes sense that we might find it helpful to symbolise ideas and problems in a way that is less transient than the language of internal speech. However, there is another factor that affects the reflective process once we begin to externalise it – and that is the social context in which we publicise our thoughts. The process of writing for others, whether within a community or in an entirely public domain, encourages a blog author to articulate their thoughts clearly, and also to rationalise them ('why do I think that?') and to evaluate their relevance & implications ('so what?'), because they feel that is what their readers will be asking of them. The process of articulating a problem, or an concept not understood, is the first stage in the reflective process, and involves defining the problem, or source of confusion or doubt, and framing it in a way that has personal meaning. Daudelin (1996, p40) states; "the clear articulation of a problem is often an insight in itself".

Mortensen and Walker (2002), writing specifically about the blogging process, proposed that: "…being allowed to write spontaneously releases us of the expectation that our writing must be perfect and polished." This does not appear to have been an experience shared by all bloggers; many, including myself, having reported indecision over whether to plan, having too many ideas at once, and not knowing where to start (e.g. Miles, 2008). As a blogger becomes accustomed to the process of publishing some thoughts quickly and revisiting them later on, it may become easier to be spontaneous. In her blog, *Thinking with my Fingers* (Mortensen 2001) Torill Mortensen writes: "…I can sneak up on [a thought] at a time when my head is busy with something else, and I can surprise it in a different context." My own experience as a blogger supports the importance of this strategy for the clarification and development of ideas; the spontaneity of the original post is only the first part of the process, revisiting, revising and adding to those ideas, preferably alongside the input of others, is the next stage.

Through the use of hyperlinks, a blog post becomes an entry point, or signpost, to a virtually infinite store of related information. The author's intention may be to return to their post later on and use the links to follow on a previously unexplored path. The links may, on the other hand, lead to resources the author has already accessed, in which case the links provide a record of where the author has been and a series of signposts for the reader to explore around the topic. The very name 'weblog' is seen by some commentators to reflect the initial purpose of recording, storing for reference and sharing the author's "journey around the web" (Paquet 2002, cited in Farmer 2004). 'Pingbacks' (incoming links) can be added from other sites; these, along with Twitter and blog indexes like Technorati and, recently, Google Blog Search, are largely responsible for pulling new readers into a blog. Many blog indexes use the number of pingbacks as an indication of a blog's popularity or status. As Mortensen and Walker (2002) suggest: "…take the links out of a weblog and you are left with a web diary, a much more introverted and private form of writing".

Finally, blogging tools allow authors to 'tag' posts with keywords and link them to 'categories'. This allows readers, and indeed the author, to search for specific posts or to filter out posts on a certain topic. This ensures that related trails of thought are linked together and enable both author and audience to make retrospective connections.

Features of blogs conducive to the development of a learning community
Farmer (2004) states that: "…weblogs can offer new opportunities for the development of online learning communities", while a 2005 study by Efimova and de Moor (cited in Birney 2006) concluded that blogs serve as a true conversation tool, supporting fast and meaningful reactions, exchange of multiple perspectives and joint development of ideas; all of which are important factors in the growth and sustenance of a learning community. But how exactly do they do this? The facility for readers to comment on posts, the use of Twitter, 'pingbacks', blog directories and search engines all draw new readers in, but perhaps there is also something occurring at the affective level that impacts on the way people think and behave within the

'blogosphere'? It may be helpful to examine the notion of social, cognitive and teaching presence which, according to Garrison, Anderson and Archer (1999), are the key elements in a community of inquiry and should form the basis of the evaluation of a learning technology.

Garrison *et al*. (1999) define **cognitive presence** as: "...the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication" (p.89). They go on to state that: "…cognitive presence is a vital element in critical thinking, a process and outcome that is frequently presented as the ostensible goal of all higher education". Indicators of cognitive presence may include an articulation of a sense of puzzlement, the exchange of information, the connecting of concepts and the application of new ideas. **Social presence** is defined by Garrison *et al*. (1999) as the extent to which the medium of communication allows participants to project their personal characteristics into the community; i.e. to present themselves as 'real people'. The primary role of social presence is the indirect facilitation of critical thinking, while a secondary role is in helping participants to enjoy the interaction and gain personal fulfilment from it. **Teaching presence** incorporates the design and the facilitation of the educational experience; the extent to which the tools support and enhance social and cognitive presence for the purpose of realising educational outcomes.

Do blogs have cognitive presence? Do they enable participants to construct meaning (more so than, for example, a reflective journal)? They can certainly support sustained discourse if they have an active readership, as suggested by Bloom (2003), although the degree of reflection and critical analysis taking place can vary. Farmer (2004) cites the work of Herring *et al*. (2004), proposing that: "…there is a possibility that weblogs encourage significantly more in depth and extended writing than communication by email or through discussion board environments".

Farmer (2004) also argues that, in terms of establishing social presence, "weblogs offer a significant opportunity for users to project themselves as real people", the primary reason being that the blogger is writing within their own space and has control over how they express themselves to their audience. The option to add photos, audio and/or video to blog posts brings further opportunity for the author to present their full personality. But the issue of teaching presence, however, raises interesting questions. As Farmer (2004) points out, blogs can be "less potent than discussion boards in their ability to empower the teacher to design, facilitate or direct cognitive and social processes towards valuable educational outcomes". Here we begin to recognise a trade-off between teacher and learner control of the learning environment; a suggestion of potential conflict between 'social presence' and 'teacher presence'. Farmer (2004) offers the example of a teacher authoring a central blog which students subscribe to and comment on, and suggests that in this case, the teacher would be well-placed to facilitate and direct cognitive and social processes, but the social presence may be considerably diminished, as students would be working within the teacher's online space rather than their own.

To conclude this section, it is suggested that the particular strength of blogs as a tool for learning may be their 'social presence', and that they function particularly well when they are used freely and voluntarily by a community. Used in this way, blogs offer very little 'teacher presence', if any, but this trade-off is one of the contributing factors to the very special type of learning that results from a community blogging together out of choice. There are other ways of using blogs that allow a teacher or facilitator to direct cognitive and social processes, and may still allow more 'social presence' than other tools such as discussion forums. However, the effect of a directing or facilitating presence on the blogging process should not be underestimated. The importance of the context in which reflection takes place has been explored thoroughly by Boud and Walker (1998), who argue that the social and cultural context in which students find themselves has a significant impact on their reflections; this has implications for the types of reflective task that can be usefully incorporated into a course of study, and the way in which these tasks should be presented to students.

Guidelines and Considerations for the use of blogs in activity design

If blogs are being used for 'reflection', ensure that there is something of sufficient value upon which to reflect.
A blog is a reflective medium (Farmer 2004) and is therefore most appropriate for use in contexts where questions are to be asked about an experience; where there are "uncertainties, discrepancies and dissatisfactions which precipitate, and are central to, any notion of reflection" (Boud & Walker 1998).

Ensure students are aware of what constitutes reflection.
Daudelin (1996) provides a simple breakdown of the reflective process as follows:
· articulation of a problem
· analysis of that problem (finding material that will resolve the doubt, and dispose of the perplexity)
· formulation and testing of a tentative theory to explain the problem
· action (or deciding whether to act).

Daudelin writes that the final stage, action (or deciding whether to act), "brings closure to the cycle and is the final 'test' of the hypothesis. It is only through this last stage that true learning occurs" (p.41).

Avoid being too prescriptive about the reflective process.
Asking students to 'reflect' by following a set format or checklist can lead to false expectations of reflection being a linear and unproblematic process that can be memorised. Boud and Walker (1998) suggest that stages or elements of the reflective process should be presented as conceptual elements rather than an operational process. However, there is potential for tension here: "…without some direction, reflection can become diffuse and disparate so that conclusions or outcomes may not emerge" (p.193).

Frameworks for reflection such as *John's Questions* (Pee *et al*. 2002), which were originally designed for use in the nursing profession, and those developed by Bourner (2003), may be of use when introducing a reflective task, but care should be taken to ensure that students use them as tools for engaging at depth with the experience, rather than as a rigid format or checklist.

Is the reflective blogging process to be assessed?
The multiple effects of context on reflective activities are discussed in depth by Boud and Walker (1998), who point out that the assessment of reflection is a questionable goal (citing Sumsion & Fleet, 1996), while supporting the use of specific criteria for the recognition of reflective writing, such as Hatton and Smith's criteria (1994).

There is general consensus in the literature that, if a reflective task is to be assessed against an external standard, it is important that the criteria for that assessment are focused on the quality and depth of the reflection taking place, rather than on the content of the reflections. An environment where students fear that they may be penalised for revealing lack of understanding is not conducive to reflection. Boud and Walker (1998, p.194) argue that, if students begin to censor their reflections, they may "fail to engage with their felt experience and avoid learning". Bearing in mind these challenges, Bourner (2003) suggests a way forward in assessing reflective thinking that has parallels with approaches commonly used to assess critical thinking. The use of the phrase 'reflective thinking' in place of 'reflective learning' is important as it separates out the process of reflection from the content. Bourner's approach is to look for evidence of certain searching questions that the student may have asked about their experience.

It could therefore be argued that, provided the process of reflective thinking is being assessed against an appropriate learning outcome, such as "the capacity to capture the lessons of the experience" (Bourner 2003, p.272), and is therefore distinguished from the content of the learning, there are no significant obstacles to assessing reflection, provided it is appropriate to do so.

Birney (2008) argues that existing models of reflective practice focus on reflection as a solitary activity rather than a collaborative one, and that new ways of assessing reflective practice are needed that consider the effect of interaction and feedback on students' reflections. In certain contexts it may be appropriate to

assess the degree to which students are contributing to the development of the learning community, through collaborative activity such as commenting on peers' blog posts. There are a few examples of rubrics for marking online discussions that may be adapted for this purpose; one example being the discussion scoring rubric from the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (date of publication unknown).

Is the blog an appropriate medium?
Depending on the context of the activity, it may be preferable, and sometimes essential from an ethical point of view, to restrict access to reflections and comments within the community of learners. Many HE institutions have a blogging tool within their virtual learning environments (VLEs) that will at least restrict access to persons within the institution, and often within course groups. In the absence of VLE blogs, other tools such as wikis can be used for reflective work and set up with access controls so that only named individuals may read and comment. If the content of the reflection is highly sensitive, it may be more appropriate to use personal journals. In all cases it may be helpful to initiate a discussion at the start of the activity about what constitutes an appropriate level of disclosure. However, given that learning has affective dimensions in addition to cognitive dimensions, participants should ideally be reflecting in an environment where "the expression of feelings is accepted and legitimate" (Boud & Walker 1998, p.194), which leads us on to another important consideration:

Are you prepared to open the floodgates?
Presuming one has carefully fostered an environment conducive to open, honest reflection, and developed a community of learners who communicate willingly with each other through their blogs, it is naïve to assume that all the students' personal reflections and/or discourse will be positive, productive, discreet and tactful, and within the boundaries the tutor has set, explicitly or implicitly, for the activity. Boud and Walker (1998) warn of the power of reflective activity to tap into difficult issues, from personal distress to perceived faults with the programme of study.

When and how should reflective blogging be introduced?
Boud *et al*. (1985) suggest that reflective activities can (and should) be used at each of the three stages of experience-based learning: preparation, engagement, and processing. If blogging is to be used within a community of learners, the existing relationships between the participants should be considered; are they all sufficiently prepared to contribute and engage with the task? Are there technical obstacles that need to be overcome before the activity should be introduced? Is there likely to be an imbalance in activity with some participants posting and commenting much more profusely than others? The latter situation is common with the distance learners we work with here at Bath, but it should also be noted that early adopters have a key role to play in supporting and encouraging other participants. However, a 'critical mass' of active participants is often needed in order for anyone to gain significant benefit. In maximising initial participation, our experience supports the importance of giving participants a degree of ownership of the design of the activity, including the aims and expected outcomes.

Conclusions

Setting the scene with the role of action/activity and experience in learning, the importance of reflection, and the role of community, it has been presented that the establishment of an active blogging community can maximise student engagement and enhance learning, by providing a route to learning that is active and interactive, independent and collaborative. It has also been argued that the blogging process can facilitate the development of connections across topics and contents, and can be conducive to reflection on situations and experiences. Particular emphasis is given to the concept of social presence in learning activities, and how blogs can place the student at the centre of the learning experience.

A discussion on how the specific features of blogs might be exploited to bring maximum benefit to the learner concludes with a number of guidelines and considerations for planning and designing blogging activities in a higher education setting.

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Biography
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