Prompting authentic blogging practice in an online graduate course

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ABSTRACT

Blogging is characterized by an individual exploration of ideas of personal interest through frequent online posts, documenting ideas as they emerge over time. Community emerges as bloggers read and link across blogs, based on shared interests. Blogs have gained acceptance in higher education for a variety of instructional activities, among which, reflective journal writing is popular. In this study, we examine a project in which blogs were implemented within an online graduate course in order to create opportunities for students to reflect on their academic, professional and personal interests, with the goal of establishing consistent blogging that exhibits the timely, frequent and interest-driven practices of blogging practices outside educational contexts. Students enrolled in an online graduate course maintained individual blogs in which they were prompted to write about their interests and experiences as graduate students. Through an analysis of the patterns of prompt use and blog content, as well as data from a post-course survey and an online discussion, we explore how to support student engagement with blogging practice within an educational setting. Findings suggest that *frequency* of writing, *topic resonance* with the students own interests, and the *timeliness* of entries were key factors in scaffolding writing that aligns with blogging practice. By focusing on writing as characterized by authentic blogging practice, this study contributes to an understanding of how to harness the unique communicative elements of the blog in post-secondary settings.

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1. Introduction

Blogs were an early entrant into the social media ecology that now exists on the web. With the straightforward interface that allows easy posting of text, images and links, and a comment feature that facilitates interaction, blogs were popularized because the online format allowed individuals to write frequent, timely posts about their own interests. The blog interface makes publishing to the web easy and the social affordances available through linking and cross-blog reading have been found to support community formation through interlinked networks of blogs based on shared interests (Efimova & de Moor, 2005). For the writer, writing brief, frequent posts serves to document the meanings they attribute to their experiences, creating a record of emerging interests over time (Luehmann, 2008; Mortensen & Walker, 2002). Studies of blog use recognize blogging as a unique discursive practice in which bloggers read, write and link to one another, leading to diverse, inter-connected networks based on mutual interest (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006; Efimova & de Moor, 2005; Myers, 2010; Rettberg, 2008).

The blog is an increasingly accepted educational technology that is being used for a variety of pedagogical purposes in post-secondary classrooms (Davi, Frydenberg, & Gulati, 2007; Farmer, Yue, & Brooks, 2008; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). In their review of educational blogging in higher education, Sim and Hew (2010) identified six uses of blogs reported in the literature. They found that blogs were being used as learning journals, as records of everyday life, as a space to express emotion, as a means for interaction with others, as a method for student assessment, and as a task management tool. Sim and Hew (2010) also listed a broad range of anticipated effects of blogging, including improved analytical skills and reflective thinking, as well as changes in attitude. However, with an instructional technology that is so flexible, it is not surprising that Minocha (2009) observed that more guidance is necessary for educators to assist them with the design and assessment of these learning activities.

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While students typically write in relation to course topics in educational blogging, the goal in this study was to move student reflection beyond course topics in order to explore the potential for establishing blogs that could be useful as a writing space over the duration of a program. Therefore, we focused on exploring how to support student blogging practice that allowed students to focus on their own interests. Through an analysis of the patterns of prompt use and the content of the blogs, as well as student observations of blogging practice from online discussions and a post-course survey, this paper presents findings regarding the potential of prompt use to encourage consistent student blogging practice. This study provides insight into the design considerations and pedagogical strategies necessary to support blogging practice within an online educational setting.

2. Review of relevant literature

2.1. Blogging practice

Studies of blogging suggest that cross-blog networks emerge through reading, writing and linking (Efimova, 2004; Mortensen & Walker, 2002; Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004) and that a "core set of practices and beliefs" exist within these communities (Halavais, 2006, p. 117). As a technological platform, blogs resemble online journals with a reverse-chronological ordering of posts; however, blog applications offer features that serve to create a socially connected form of communication, offering timely, up-to-date entries to a public audience (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Rettberg, 2008). Each blog post has a unique address or URL (called a permalink) that facilitates cross-blog discussion. Bloggers frequently contribute to complex networks by writing posts in their own blogs about other bloggers' ideas (Efimova, 2004). Within this interest-driven writing space, posts can be brief and timely so as to capture ideas as they arise. In this way, interests emerge over time and across blog posts.

In this way a blog comes to represent a trail of individual interests and understandings that connects to others through links in a loosely distributed network (Mortensen & Walker, 2002). By writing in a personal space in the public sphere, boyd (2005) suggests that "Bloggers are consistently producing content that they are passionate about, directed at an audience they feel can best support them. In the process, they build up digital representations of identity and artifacts that serve as cognitive histories" (p. 7). Examining the rhetorical characteristics of the blog, Miller and Shepherd (2004) suggest that blogging is personal in that "self-expression serves the intrinsic self-disclosure functions of both self-clarification and self validation, enhancing self-awareness and confirming already-held beliefs" (p. 29). Blog content is therefore personal in that it represents a writer's interpretation of their experiences, thereby revealing their interests and providing frequent insight into the communities in which they participate.

2.2. Educational blogging

The technological and social affordances of blogs make them an appealing technology for a broad range of educational purposes. Students are fluent with many existing written genres and forms of engagement that are instructor- and content-centered, but Burgess (2006) suggests that blogging practice brings "*emergent* systems of literacy, including new computer literacies, and *unstable* contested genres" (p. 107, *italics* in original) in contact with writing practices that have yet to become fully defined. Chong (2010) investigated the value of blogs as a platform to document the student research process and found that the informal nature of the blog allowed students to reveal their "emotions and subjective thoughts" (p. 802), which aligns with Burgess (2006), who asserts that students must be encouraged to experiment with blogging and ultimately take ownership, investing personal interest in order to appropriate blogging practice and resonate with the process.

In educational settings, blog use has been credited with improving student engagement with course material (Davi et al., 2007); however, more importantly, blogs have been examined as a means to increase student reflective capacity (Stiler & Philleo, 2003; Williams & Jacobs, 2004) and facilitate collaborative learning. Deng and Yuen (2011) suggest that the benefits of educational blogs center on two broad pedagogical uses they describe as interactive and reflective. In their study of undergraduate students who used blogs during internships, Chu, Chan, and Tiwari (2012) found that students valued the commenting and information sharing opportunities afforded by the commenting feature in the blog. In the study, two cohorts of students (information management and nursing) used blogs to reflect on learning and to comment on each other's blogs. Chu et al. report that information sharing was rated as one of the top two perceived values of blogging. The study also identified mixed results in terms of the value that the cohorts associated with student comments. While the nursing students learned from each other about problem solving through the blogs, the information management students reported the opposite experience because of "limited applicability" (p. 994).

Because blogs are individual, blogging has been used to provide students with a personal writing space in which to reflect on learning in a range of disciplinary settings including: internship (Chu et al., 2012), teaching practice (Deng & Yuen, 2011; Yang, 2009), group processes in collaborative projects (Robertson, 2011), language learning (Miceli, Visocnik, & Kennedy, 2010), and research (Chong, 2010). Yang (2009) examined the use of blogs as a reflective platform for student teachers and found that all students used the blog platform for reflection and for commenting. Luehmann (2008) followed the learning process of a teacher throughout a year of practice by studying her blog entries and found that the teacher used the blog to revisit ideas as they emerged in her teaching. Further, the teacher's reflection extended beyond her classroom, and in her writing she brought the strands of her life together to make sense of her experiences.

Yet there are many challenges in promoting educational blogging for particular instructional purposes. Reports of blogging in post-secondary settings suggest that students may need to learn how to write for the medium (Leslie & Murphy, 2008) and that student blogging can be intermittent and uneven (Deed & Edwards, 2011; Farmer et al., 2008), which compromises the timeliness of blogging. Burgess (2006) believes that "because of the ongoing and accretive practice that constitutes blogging, it is ultimately up to the students to determine for themselves their preferred format (length and style of post, frequency of posting, and depth of engagement with external materials)" (p. 107). In addition, Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup, and Conole (2009) point out that the blog has a range of affordances requiring instructor foresight to effectively match blog implementation to instructional task (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007).

Minocha (2009) reviewed 26 case studies of social software use and suggests that instructors are hampered from implementing these new tools because there is a "lack of guidelines for designing effective learning activities" (p. 1632). For example, in Chu et al.'s study with