



Towards a framework for educational affordances of blogs

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ABSTRACT

Accompanying the emergence of blog technology as a dominant online publishing paradigm is a growing interest in its educational benefits and applications. This study sets out to develop an empirically grounded framework for educational blogging in the context of teacher education. A working framework was first proposed that highlights four areas: self-expression, self-reflection, social interaction, and reflective dialogue. An exploratory study was then conducted to examine the framework by involving two groups of student teachers during their teaching practice. This study revealed that the salient values of blogs centered on emotionally charged and social-oriented individual expressions as well as self-reflection. The interactive functionality of blogs was used mostly for exchanging social support rather than reflective dialogue. A new dimension – blog-reading – has emerged through the investigation and been added to the original framework. The findings can contribute to a better understanding of the educational values of blogs and their meaningful applications as educational media.

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1. Introduction

In the past ten years, cyberspace has witnessed a growing trend of Web 2.0 technology that emphasizes participation over presentation of information and encourages conversation rather than traditional broadcasting (Brown & Adler, 2008). Fundamental to the Web 2.0 paradigm is the notion of an active audience and collaborative content creation (Harrison & Barthel, 2009), which is in perfect alignment with the constructivist learning perspectives that see learners as active creators of knowledge and learning as a social process of negotiation and construction (see Jonassen, 1999). The current study centers on one major player of the Web 2.0 wave – blogs. In the past decade, blogging technology has matured from a geek niche to the dominant publishing paradigm on the Internet (Wortham, 2007) and become especially popular among youngsters (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). It is the combination of the apparent affordances of Web 2.0 tools for the constructivist learning and the growing popularity of blogs among students that gives rise to a burst of interest in the educational values and applications of blogs. However, the framework that aligns the educational affordances with pedagogy is still under-developed.

This study sets out to develop a framework for educational affordances of blogs in the context of teacher education. It starts with a review of current research and practice of educational blogging. Efforts are then made to link the affordances of blogs with learning theories and perspectives in teacher education. A working framework is proposed that highlights four areas that blogs can potentially support: self-expression, self-reflection, social interaction, and reflective dialogue. This working framework is examined through an empirical study involving two groups of student teachers at a comprehensive university in Hong Kong. Specifically, the study examines to what extent blogs can support self-expression, self-reflection, social interaction, and reflective dialogue among student teachers during their teaching practice. The empirical investigation deepens our knowledge of the affordances and constraints of blogs and gives rise to a revised framework that could guide future research in this area.

2. Blogs in education

In simple terms, blogs are “easy-to-update website characterized by dated entries displayed in reverse chronological order” (Stefanac, 2006, p. 230). They allow people with little technical knowledge to quickly publish their thoughts, opinions, and emotions online, and share their writings with their friends and families or, potentially, the entire web population. While still in its infancy, the theoretical

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discussions as well as the empirical evidence of educational blogging have begun to accumulate. In the context of higher education, quite a number of studies have been conducted to explore the role of blogs in various academic disciplines including science (Brownstein & Klein, 2006), business (Williams & Jacobs, 2004), teacher education (Stiler & Philleo, 2003), pharmacy (Bouldin, Holmes, & Fortenberry, 2006), nursing (Shaffer, Lackey, & Bolling, 2006), and language learning (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005). The exploration into the pedagogical benefits of blogs tends to center on two areas: blogs as reflective devices and blogs as interactive devices (Deng & Yuen, 2009).

2.1. Blogs as reflective devices

A salient benefit of educational blogging is the opportunities it affords for self-expression and self-reflection (Brescia & Miller, 2006; Ferdig & Trammell, 2004). In a basic sense, blogs provide a convenient platform to document experience, publish thoughts, and express feelings. They offer ample opportunities for us to project ourselves socially and emotionally (Farmer, 2004). Like personal diary, blogs can be highly emotional (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004), thus the process of writing blogs could help relieve emotional stress (Brescia & Miller, 2006). Moreover, bloggers can achieve a multi-modal expression by integrating pictures, audio, or even video clips into their blog space (Farmer, 2004). In a constructive learning environment, the authentic opportunity for learners to publish artifacts of learning is critical. Blogs afford these types of authentic opportunities by allowing students to publish their thoughts for real audiences (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004).

The positive effects of blogging on critical reflection have been reported by several studies. Stiler and Philleo (2003) examined the application of blogs to promote reflective writing in the context of pre-service teacher education. They found that the use of blogs positively affected the depth and breadth of student reflection. Compared with the journals written by students in the previous semester, the blogs appeared to be more analytic and evaluative. Ray and Coulter (2008) focused on the blogs of language art teachers in an attempt to determine the scope and depth of reflection. The content analysis revealed that the majority of the blogs were reflective and most blogging teachers showed a critical disposition towards teaching practice. In one recent study, Yang (2009) sought to determine whether blogs could facilitate reflection and the development of a community of practice among student teachers. After analyzing the content of nearly 1000 messages, the study provided compelling empirical evidence for blogs as a vehicle for reflection.

2.2. Blogs as interactive devices

The other key strand of research on educational blogging centers on its social values, that is, its potential to foster interaction and collaborative learning. Generally speaking, social interaction through blogging is enabled through commenting and linking to other websites or blogs. The interactive and linking mechanisms open the possibilities for connections and discussion (Hall & Davison, 2007), and create a space for collaborative and cooperative learning (Ferdig, 2007). Compared to traditional journal, blogs are socially reflective medium (Farmer, 2004) that allows for interaction among bloggers and their audience (Hall & Davison, 2007). They could also help bridge or prevent feelings of isolation among online learners by providing a forum to express their feelings, socialize, and provide mutual peer support (Dickey, 2004).

A number of empirical investigations have been conducted on the social values of blogs. Ray and Hocutt (2006) probed into the perceptions and activities of K-12 teacher bloggers and noted that blogs offered an effective and timely way to engage teachers in reflection and communication with peers. Williams and Jacobs (2004) explored the use of blogs in an MBA course. In the questionnaire, most students agreed that educational blogging increased the level of meaningful intellectual exchange. Du and Wagner (2007) reported that blogs could promote collaborative knowledge construction through knowledge sharing, social networking, group work, and community knowledge stock. Luehmann and Tinelli (2008) examined how blogs offered a space for meaningful interaction among practicing teachers. Their study confirmed that blogs provided a valuable venue for social networking and allowed for meaningful discussions among like-minded teachers. Likewise, Loving, Schroeder, Kang, Shimek, and Herbert (2007) reported that blogs enabled networking and the sharing of resources and ideas in a professional learning community.

However, not all of the studies on the social aspect of blogging yielded enthusiastic results. In their exploration into the potential of blogs for peer learning and peer support, Hall and Davison (2007) found that although blogs fostered positive and productive exchanges of peer support, the evidence for reflective conversation was not compelling. Xie, Ke, and Sharma (2008) reported the similar problems in their study on peer feedback via blogs. Irrespective of the fact that the overall level of student reflective thinking increased over time, peer feedback to each other's blogs did not promote reflective thinking as expected.

Thus far, this review of the current studies on educational blogging has given an account of the educational values of blogs in both individual and social domains. However, the empirical studies on blogs for teaching and learning are still rather limited (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). The scholarly research to date mostly addresses the potential of blogs in descriptive or anecdotal accounts with empirical data just beginning to emerge in recent years. In particular, the framework that can help conceptualize the educational values of blogs and guide their applications is still under-developed. Kim's (2008) theoretical model of blog use represented an initial attempt in this respect. Borrowing the socio-technical systems (STS) approach, Kim discussed how blogging tools (a technical subsystem), blog users (a personnel subsystem), external factors (an external environment), and a blog (work system) interacted and contributed to the rise of blogging phenomenon. However, this model provided little information on how blogs could be used for pedagogical purposes. The present study intends to address these gaps in research by aligning the affordances of blogs with learning theories and models. The next section will introduce our working framework.

3. A working framework

The literature review above has highlighted the reflective and interactive capabilities of blogs for both individual and a group of students. We then turned to learning theories and models in search for a general framework to construct all the elements together. We found a constructivist model advanced by Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, and Haag (1995) especially relevant. In a general sense, constructivists posit that knowledge is both "individually constructed and socially co-constructed by learners based on their interpretations

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