



Building an effective online learning community (OLC) in blog-based teaching portfolios



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ABSTRACT

Blog-based teaching portfolios have been operating in a teacher education program since 2007. The blog-based teaching portfolios provide a constructivist and interactive learning environment where students, in-service teachers, and faculty staff members negotiate, discuss, reflect and evaluate individual understandings of teaching practice and experience. Studies have shown a positive impact of blog-based teaching portfolios on learning and professional developments. However, the evaluation of online learning communities (OLCs) which evolve from the compilation process and the interactive nature of blog-based teaching portfolios is lacking. In this paper, a qualitative case study approach was adopted to study the functions and characteristics of an effective OLC in fulfilling the design objectives of blog-based teaching portfolios. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six student teachers, three in-service teachers who also played the role as mentors in the blog-based teaching portfolios, and one faculty staff member who was the blog designer. The interview data were transcribed, coded and analyzed to identify the perceived functions and characteristics of an effective OLC in blog-based teaching portfolios. Interview data revealed two major components and related ten factors which affected the effectiveness of an OLC from members' perspectives. It was suggested that technology proficiency is not a key factor in constructing digital teaching portfolios. What makes the learning process more meaningful and sustainable are active participation and high quality interaction which require collaborative/interactive course elements together with commitment and support from OLC members.

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1. What is an online learning community (OLC) in blog-based teaching portfolios?

With the advancement in information and communication technology (ICT), compiling teaching portfolios on blogs has become popular. A blog is a website where entries are made in a journal style and displayed in reverse chronological order. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. Blog-based teaching portfolios are, however, not just an exhibit of digitized collection of artifacts. The technical design of blog-based teaching portfolios creates opportunities for discussion, inquiry, feedback and reflection in a social networking environment and enables collaborative learning and information sharing among participants. The blogging technology allows participants to record personal voice, critical thinking and reflection. It also opens a virtual environment to deliver or support learning activity within a group of people who are bound together by some common characteristics such as identity features, values, beliefs, interests and goals (Hramiak, 2010; Ramage, 2010). This creates an online learning community (OLC).

McConnell (2006:19) explains that 'a learning community is a cohesive community that embodies a culture of learning' and community members have a shared responsibility for learning. The learning process is learner-centered. Other members such as mentors and instructors may also participate in a learning community and play the role as a facilitator or administrator. Learning in a community is considered as a social process since collaborative learning takes place (Brooks, 2010; Ke & Hoadley, 2009; Vrasidas, Zembylas, & Chamberlain, 2004). Community members act together to work through and understand problems (Whalley, 1998) and engage in meaningful exchange of ideas to co-construct knowledge (Watkins, 2005). Through collaboration, the relationship between members is strengthened and a strong bond is forged between them (McConnell, 2006; Vrasidas et al., 2004).

According to Dewey (1938), learning is an active process in which learners are highly engaged in meaning construction. In cognitive constructivism, understandings are constructed within individuals with little or no influence from the outside world and learning is a process of reasoning and inquiry (Gordon, 2009; Piaget, 1972), while cognitive growing is enhanced through interaction with others and the environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Through social interaction, the more competent learners can lead others into cognitive learning which may not take place if they work independently (Sugar & Bonk, 1998; Hay & Barab, 2001). Reflecting on the theories of constructivism, OLCs provide

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learners with space and time to acquire knowledge through reasoning and inquiry. Such a learning process is enhanced when learners communicate and discuss with other OLC members to construct knowledge through collaboration.

Wenger (1998) further exemplifies the collaborative relationship between members of OLCs through the concept of apprenticeship. The idea of apprenticeship is found in OLCs where newcomers often serve apprenticeships to master new skills and receive training in their graduate programs as well as in their first few years of employment (Schwartz & Bryan, 1998) where they see a gap between themselves and their colleagues who are more skillful and knowledgeable. Through interaction and collaboration with peers and mentors, learners acquire knowledge and practice. This 'act as a living curriculum for the apprentice' has formed the theoretical framework of Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 2006). Novices can learn in a variety of ways such as collaborating with others and working alongside more experienced members, and gradually adopt the practices of the community (Barab, Makinster, & Scheckler, 2004; Fuller & Unwin, 1999).

CoPs regard learning as a social process and emphasize mutual engagement and social interaction which foster learning. It started to rise amid the criticism of the traditional way of knowledge transfer which separates learning from practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Through interaction, ample opportunities for tacit and explicit knowledge sharing as well as lifelong learning are offered in CoPs (Baran & Çağiltay, 2006) and they bring about construction and co-construction of new knowledge. As Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) put it, CoPs are:

"groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis... Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity. They become a community of practice." (p. 4–p. 5)

Studies on blog-based teaching portfolios have shown positive results in scaffolding reflection (Barrett, 2007; Perschbach, 2006), mediating teacher education reform (Berge & Collins, 1998), fostering teacher competencies (Kalibah, 2005), and asserting individual behavioral changes and overall impact on the institutional environment (Tang, 2009). Existing studies on OLCs have also illustrated the positive impact on teacher professional development (e.g. Hramiak, 2010; Pearson, 1999; Starkey & Savvides, 2009, etc.). Over the past 10 years, despite a plethora of research regarding OLCs in teacher education, only a few attempted to look into the characteristics of effective OLCs. Ke and Hoadley (2004) suggested what features an effective OLC should have after an examination of the activity theory. Vrasidas et al. (2004) listed 16 characteristics of an effective OLC simply based on a reflection of their own teaching experience. Carr and Champers (2006) discussed the features of successful online communities with reference to previous literature. Levin and Waddoups (2000) investigated the features of a successful OLC and took into account the learners' views; however, with insufficient information about the research methods, the research is low in both validity and reliability. In most other studies, characteristics of an effective OLC are often not the focus of the research (see Carr & Champers, 2006; Ke & Hoadley, 2004; Levin & Waddoups, 2000; Vrasidas et al., 2004). Most importantly, members' views and perceptions of their needs are neglected (see Barab, Kling, & Gray, 2004; Trinidad & Pearson, 2008).

2. Significance of the study

In Hong Kong, blog-based teaching portfolios were developed in 2007 (hereafter called 'the blog') for a pre-service English language

education program and they continue to operate. The blog is available at <http://plate.fed.cuhk.edu.hk>. It is an asynchronous blog-based platform developed with the Web 2.0 concept for the student teachers taking a 4-year language education program at university. Members of the blog include student teachers, in-service teachers and faculty staff members. As such, an OLC is formed in a blog environment. The purpose of the blog is to 'promote a reflective, collaborative and dialogic environment for academic and professional developments' of the learners (Tang, 2009:89). Learners are required to compile their own teaching portfolios and actively participate in discussion during their Teaching Practicum (TP). To compose their teaching portfolios, learners have to upload their lesson plans, reflections and video-taped lessons and initiate discussion and exchange views by leaving and responding to comments on the blog. To enrich the TP experience, a *Mentorship Scheme* was introduced to provide support and professional advice to the learners in an e-environment. Experienced front-line teachers are invited to serve as mentors and attend the pre-and post-TP meetings as well as taking part in the interactive discussion on the blog. Structural groupings were introduced so that mentors would have more focused interaction with a small number of student teachers on the blog. More specifically, two mentors were assigned to a group of six students. All members in the same group were teaching in similar schools. There were altogether eight mentors and 24 students on the blog. The documentation uploaded and their participation in discussion on the blog accounts for 20% of the total TP grade.

This present study aimed to identify how members of a blog-based teaching portfolios platform defined an 'effective online learning community'. A qualitative case study approach was adopted to investigate the role of an OLC for pre-service teachers in fulfilling the design objectives of blog-based teaching portfolios and the students' needs. The evaluation was conducted through semi-structured interviews with different members of the blog, including student teachers, in-service teachers who played the role as mentors in the community, and a faculty staff member who was the designer of the blog. Results can be used by the developers of blog-based teaching portfolios to improve OLC design and development to enhance collaboration and learning.

The research aims to address the following questions:

1. What are the functions of an online learning community in blog-based teaching portfolios?
2. What characterize an effective online learning community in blog-based teaching portfolios?
3. What are the factors which affect the effectiveness of an online learning community in blog-based teaching portfolios?

3. Research design

A qualitative case study which entails an intensive and in-depth analysis was conducted in this study. The approach best achieves a fuller understanding of the important aspects of any new and contemporary phenomenon in its natural setting and allows a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of meanings constructed in its context (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2005; Yin, 2003).

3.1. Subjects

Purposive sampling, in which subjects with different characteristics and background are chosen, was adopted. By examining perspectives from different community members, a one-sided case which only gathers data representing a single point of view is less likely to occur (Yin, 2003).

The level of participation in the blog was also used as the selection criterion. Members with varied levels of participation may have different views towards the characteristics of an effective OLC. The

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