Exploring educational use of blogs in U.S. education

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Abstract: As one of the Web 2.0 tools, blogs are widely used in US education. This paper gives a brief overview of blogs such as advantages, disadvantages, and major software for creating blogs, and then it reviews some EduBlogs, its usage, and examples in US education. The purpose is to motivate more educators to use blogs in teaching and research as well as introduce blogs as useful educational tools and its great potentials.

Key words: blogs; Web 2.0; bloggers; WordPress

1. An overview of blogs

What is a blog? Proclaimed as the "Word of the Year" in 2004 by the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 2004, a blog is a short term of "web log"—an online chronological collection of personal commentary and links.

A blog is part of the Web 2.0 family, the second generation of web adventure. There are many types of blogs, such as LibLogs (library blogs) and EduBlogs (education blogs). A blog can be regarded as an online journal, and it is very easy to maintain a blog. A blogger enters posts into a blogging application and save the post. Blogging does not require programming languages or server knowledge from bloggers. The posts can include text, hyperlinks, images, or multimedia components. The content is available online and users who have subscribed to the blog will be alerted about the new posts. Visitors can read the posts and submit the comments. Most blogs are primarily textual, but there are also audio blogs, video blogs, and photo blogs.

There are both advantages and disadvantages for blogs. Blogs engage people in knowledge sharing and reflection, and they often attract a large readership. Instead of providing static information, blogs allow users and readers to respond, to create, and to connect. It is also simple to create and maintain blogs. Compared with discussion board, blogs have greater sense of permanence. After a course is over, the discussion board is no longer accessible to the students. When a student creates a blog, he or she also has a sense of ownership. Library bloggers have much to say about the value of blogs. Blogs are "a great investment of technology and time to engage with our customers directly" as well as "an opportunity to test out how to augment employee communications" (Brookover, 2007, p. 31).

There are also some downsides of blogs such as inaccuracy of the information, intellectual property issues, and the volatile nature. Blogs are often produced and maintained by individuals, so they may include biased or inaccurate information. Intellectual property is another area of concerning for higher education since the blogs may include content that has been used without proper attribution. Blogs are highly volatile. Bloggers can edit and delete posts. This transient nature makes blogs difficult to archive or index.

There are two major categories of software: hosting services and installed applications. A hosting service refers to a website that gives access to everything needed to create a blog. People who use hosting services do not need any knowledge about HTML and the web servers. The best-known hosting service is Blogger

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(http://www.blogger.com) and Live Journal (http://www.livejounrnal.com). Bogger is a free resource, and it is easy to use and offer many degrees of comment controls. It is web-based and very popular, so Blogger is often slow to publish posts. Installed applications refer to a piece of software obtained from the provider and install on your own website. People using installed applications are more knowledgeable about technology applications. The most well-known installation applications are WordPress (http://www.wordpress.org) and Six Apart's Movable Type (http://www.moveabletype.org). WordPress is a free installation resource which has many useful plug-ins, comment spam-fighting features, and user-friendly interface. It requires more technology knowledge.

Blogging is not only about online reading and writing, but more important, about reading what is interesting to the audience. It is about engaging with the content and with the authors. Richardson commented, "This (the blogging process) just seems to me to be closer to the way we learn outside of school, and I don't see those things happening anywhere in traditional education. Could blogging be the needle that sews together what is now a lot of learning in isolation with no real connection among the disciplines? I mean ultimately, aren't we trying to teach our kids how to learn, and isn't that (what) blogging is all about".

2. EduBlogs, usage and examples

2.1 EduBlogs and its usage

How can a blog be used in education? According to Ray (2006), blogs in education or EduBlogs can be used to communicate, as instructional resources, as collaborative tools, and showcases for student projects. As an electronic bulletin board, an EduBlog provides a fast, efficient means of communication. It can be used to post class announcements for parents or providing schedule reminders for students. EduBlogs can be used as instructional resources, in which teachers can post tips, explanations, or samples to help students learn. Instructors can post hyperlinks to websites that provide assignment-related homework helpers and resources. EduBlogs can also be used as collaborative tools for student projects.

EduBlogs have some advantages in the context of teaching and learning. They can enhance learning, motivate students and foster collaboration among learners (Holzberg, 2003). Students can develop and express their ideas and receive feedback from others. The posts and comments on a blog can be updated easily and promptly (Clyde, 2005). Blogs also provide instructors an opportunity to extend learning and engage students beyond the walls of the classroom (Downs, 2004). Ellison and WU (2008) discussed several benefits of using blogs in education. Blogs can potentially enhance analytic and critical thinking skills because the critical skill of writing is central to the act of blogging. The participatory and decentralized nature of blogging discourages the traditional "sage on the stage" approach to teaching and enhances the knowledge sharing between students as well as between the instructor and the students. The ability to express oneself on blogs also enhances the development of digital literacy. Additionally, incorporating blogs into curricula also has the potential to shift learning from a time- and space-bound activity that occurs only in the classroom to an activity that is ubiquitous and embedded in real world issues and events.

Based on his experience with high school students, Richardson (2006) listed four things that blogging allows students to do: (1) reflect on what they are writing and thinking as they write and think it; (2) carry on writing about a topic over a sustained period of time; (3) engage readers and audience in a sustained conversation that leads to further thinking and writing; and (4) synthesize disparate learning experiences and understand their collective relationship and relevance.

Downs (2004) discussed five major uses for blogs in education. First, teachers use blogs to replace the regular class web page. Instructors post materials such as class times and rules, assignment notifications, suggested readings, and exercises. Blogging software makes such posting much simpler for instructors. Second, instructors begin to link to Internet items that relate to their course. For example, people can maintain a blog to pass along links and comments about different topics. Third, blogs are used to organize in-class discussions. Fourth, some instructors also use blogs to organize class seminars and to provide summaries of readings. Finally, students may be asked to write their own blogs as part of their course work.

2.2 Example of using blogs

In the United States, there are national technology standards that are adopted in K-12 education. Currently, 98 percent of states in U.S. use the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS). Guided by the technology standards, instructors do not only use technology in teaching, but also require students to create projects with technology. Below are only a few examples of blogs used in U.S. education.

2.2.1 Using blogs in scholarship

There are a number of blogs in scholarship in the U.S. higher education. Two blogs are typical examples which created by two professors. The first one is Trey's E-Learning at http://teachable.org/blog created by Trey Martindale, a professor of instructional design and technology in the University of Memphis. This blog is about news, research findings, tools, and some other interesting items about online teaching and learning. The other is http://opencontent.org/blog/, a blog created by David Wiley, a professor of instructional technology and Director of the Center for Open and Sustainable Learning at Brigham Young University. He dedicated to increasing access to educational opportunity for everyone around the world.

2.2.2 Using blogs in instruction

Some professors use blogs in instructions, from using a blog as a teaching and learning resource to asking students to create a blog on their own. Discussed below are two examples of instructional blogs, one in K-12 setting and the other in higher education.

As a Fulbright scholar and media specialist in an elementary teacher, Riddle (2008) went to China in summer 2007. She used a blog for her third graders for book reviews, recommendations, research and summary for her ancient Asian studies class. The blog kept her readers knowing about her trip in China. Embedding slide shows, Google maps, and video clips with the blog, she informed and engaged her readers and created a small learning community about Chinese studies. Her blog was responded by students, former students, teachers from her school and neighboring schools, parents, grand-parents, and community members. The blog continued to play a role as a learning and communicative tool for the third graders as they begin their studies of ancient China.

Quible (2005) shared the use of blogs in the business world for his undergraduate students. Some common usage in business education include communication and collaboration for a distributed team, using it as a tool for reaching out to a customer community, for project management, for quick information communication such as project updates, research, and product and industry news inside and outside the business, and managing and improving the flow of information among employees. He used blogs in written business communication courses. Based on his own experience, Quible summarized the advantages of using blogs in written business communication courses: (1) students can become familiar with another Internet application that has powerful communication capabilities; (2) information is shared with students electronically, which makes it available to them more readily and easily compared with hard-copy format; (3) the class administration cost is reduced with the use of the electronic format; and (4) examples of students' writing are easily and readily shared with others.

2.3 Research about EduBlogs

Some researches have also been done regarding the use of blogs in education. Wassell and Crouch (2008) incorporated blogs into an undergraduate preservice teacher education course that addressed diversity and multicultural education. This qualitative action research investigated the preservice teachers' engagement with the blog project and evaluated its effectiveness as a teaching strategy. Four sets of data were collected from 24 students: the materials published on the blog or the textual artifacts, the anonymous survey of the preservice teachers at the end of the semester, the instructor's reflections, and the personal communication between the instructor and the participants, including email messages and face-to-face conversations. This study found that the benefits of using blogs in a multicultural education course include fostering students' critical thinking about important issues, connecting theoretical and popular texts and practice, encouraging dialogue among the class community, and using a form of instructional technology that can be adapted to students' teaching in the future.

Through a study of 52 undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university, who completed a series of writing assignments as traditional hard copy papers and blog entries and completed a survey instrument exploring their experiences and perceptions. Ellison and WU (2008) found that students enjoyed some aspects of blogging such as the novelty and convenience of the medium, the less formal voice it encouraged, exposure to the divergent perspectives of their peers, access to a wider online audience, and the interactive features of the medium, specifically reading other students' ideas and getting feedback from other classmates. This study also found that reading other students' blogs is more helpful to content understanding than writing their own entries and reading comments from others on one's blog entries.

3. Conclusion

As one of the Web 2.0 tools, blogs continue to be explored, used, and studied in U.S. education. Rather than an information resource, blogging has changed the role of readers. Readers are no longer passive recipients of the information from the web but become creators of the content by either posting entries on the blog or making comments on the entries posted by others. As a powerful tool that enhances communication, foster critical thinking, and encourages collaborative learning, blogs have great potential in education. The examples and research discussed above indicate that blogging will not independently or automatically increase student learning. Instructors need to utilize education blogs in ways that support content area in a pedagogically and technically sound way.

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