The Blogosphere and Distributed Learning

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The implementation of blogging as a valid and useful pedagogical tool in distributed learning and traditional education has been under debate throughout the academic community since its widespread inception over the last five years. Proponents and supporters of the application of this learner-centered pedagogical approach feel that the use of weblogs offers many important learning opportunities for students engaged in distance and traditional education. Detractors, on the other hand, believe that little meaningful learning occurs within the framework of weblog discourse. While both sides of the argument have their respective merits, it is clear that blogging plays a fundamentally important role in the learning process for distance education programs.

The foundations of the pedagogic use of blogging in education are routed in the constructionist educational theories of Lev Vygotsky (Ferdig, 2004). Vygotsky argues that meaningful knowledge occurs through the social process of language usage over time (Vygotsky, 1978). The process of social interaction and the acquisition of knowledge through the sharing and dissemination of content has long been a factor in the learning process. Modern blogging is simply an updated form of this modus operandi.

The word “weblog” was coined in 1997 by Jorn Barger (Blood, 2006). Early blogs outside the realm of education began in the late 1990’s. Jesse James Garret, editor of Infosift, compiled a list of approximately twenty-three blogs in existence in 1999 (Blood, 2006). Often created by hand, the landscape shifted to a new paradigm with the creation of blog authoring tools such as Blogger and Wordpress (Downes, 2009). Educators were initially slow to adopt weblogs over concerns of access, usability, privacy and security issues (Richardson, 2010). The use of blogs has now become a phenomenon within the realm of education both in traditional face-to-face
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environments and in online distributed learning. There are currently more than four hundred thousand educational blogs that are hosted by such sites as Edublogs. Educators have employed the use of weblogs to support both learning and teaching since 2005 (Downes, 2009). The issue of any significant scientifically substantiated benefits and the degree of importance that blogging has in distance education is an issue that has been in debate amongst scholars in the field for some time now.

Recent research on the use of blogging in education has shown a number of positive findings. Supporters argue that blogs create an environment that fosters critical and analytical thinking. Creative, intuitive and associational cognitive processes are also considered to be at play. Blogging can promote analogical thinking and has the potential to increase and expose learners to a variety of quality resources that may otherwise go unexplored (Huette, 2006). Because blogs allow for the unique voices of every student to be represented learners are empowered and encouraged to become more critically analytical in their thinking (Oravec, 2002). A large body of empirical evidence assimilated throughout the academic community supports the findings that the social networks affiliated with the use of blogging in educational settings lead to the development of social capital that reaps meaningful learning outcomes (Huberman, Romero and Wu, 2009). Educators claim that the read and write web engages and motivates students to learn and that blogging provides a context for learning in which students can access, process and create content that has an authentic purpose and a targeted audience (Wagner, 2006). Weblogs also help instructors to implement requirements that students study on a daily, weekly or monthly basis thus preventing issues such as cramming for final examinations rather than
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ongoing knowledge acquisition throughout the semester (Lujan-Mora, S. 2006). One case study found that students and teachers were able to participate and collaborate with other learners and academics throughout the United States by using a weblog as a platform for intercourse (Lujan-Mora, S. 2006). Research conducted in Singapore found that Chinese students had perceived increased capacities in writing skills as a result of participating in blogs. In similar research undergraduate students were found to engage in critical contemplation as a result of the exchange of ideas and analysis of postings presented by peers within their blogs (Tan, Teo, Aw & Lim, 2004). Some educators feel that blogging is a powerful collaborative tool that can be utilized in higher educational settings for joint research that would otherwise be unlikely or impossible to facilitate. It has also been suggested that the creation of small project group blogs in which all participants can create and edit content is an effective approach to opening common communication channels allowing for the creation of progress reports, solicitation of questions and assistance from within the participants (Danielewksa-Tulecka, A. & Soylu, A. 2008). Blogging also provides an opportunity to contextualize and enrich the learning experience through hypertext links to additional resources related to the subjects. This encourages learners to revise and revisit their learning assumptions often generating higher order thinking. Blogging allows for efficient information retrieval through the use of built-in search engines, automatic archival of postings and automatic notification of updates from resources through RSS feeds. The exchange of ideas occurs through commentary and trackbacks and the multitude of contributors to the site. Blogs allow for rich content in the form of text, hyperlinks, graphics, pictures, video clips and audio clips. All of these features provide benefits to distance education
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programs that would otherwise be lacking in such rich content. In figure 1, Potential of Blogs, Tan, Teo, Aw & Lim, (2004) argue that there are numerous possible benefits for the use of blogs in education. These benefits can be applied to distributed learning and traditional education.

**Figure 1. Potential of Blogs**

![Figure 1. Potential of Blogs](image)

Figure 1. A schematic drawing showing the various extensions and potential benefits of blogs. Tan, Teo, Aw & Lim, (2004)

While some researchers claim that numerous benefits have been attributed to the best practices applications of blogging and pedagogy, others believe there is no meaningful learning that occurs through the medium. Critics of the use of blogging in education point to several concerns that detract from any potentially perceived benefits that supporters claim to exist. There are concerns over the accessing of inappropriate content by students conducting research online. Issues of inappropriate and illegal sharing of information raise potential litigation concerns for both students and academic institutions. Academic honesty and plagiarism are cited as problems that many educators are facing along with issues of fraud and identity theft which are increasingly becoming commonplace as a result of the posting of sensitive private information. Cyber stalkers
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and predators are increasingly prowling student blogs leading to concerns by educators and parents over the issue of whether blogging in the public domain should be more restricted (Wagner, M.D., 2006). These issues, and more, have created a dilemma for educators who seek to utilize blogging as a platform to engage and encourage learning discourse in an open and democratic forum. Educational institutions, often by law, must impose regulations and guidelines that protect students and faculty from the above mentioned concerns. Boundaries on blog content can lead to restrictions on open discourse. Students who are forced to write as a result of grade assessments may do so unwillingly. Some educators claim assigned blogging is, in fact, nothing more than contrived content that has little merit (Richardson, 2004). Jeremy Hiebert believes when blogging is put in the context of an educational assignment in which students have little interest the resulting blogs lose authenticity and lack engagement amongst the learning community resulting in no true reflective learning benefits (Downes, 2009). Blogging is also creating discontent within the teaching community over the excessive workloads entailed in the delivery and maintenance of online web-enhanced courses that utilize blogs as opposed to traditional courses that do not. Many instructors report taking excessive amounts of time to set-up, maintain and assess the content presented by students on course blogs.

While researchers have yet to establish all the facts, it is clear that empirical observation and the elucidations from those working in academia along with the feedback provided by the students themselves supports the use of weblogs as a key element in the learning experience. Blogging offers learners the opportunity to present their concepts, research and ideas amongst a community of like-minded learners. Communities of inquisition examine the theories and
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findings posted within the blogs leading to discussions, the sharing of content and the evaluation of information distributed within the network of learners and educators. This social construction of knowledge allows for the scaffolding of meaning making which can enhance the learning experience. Blogging permits the intellectualization and internalization of knowledge as the learner reflects upon the content and assimilates the erudition into a meaningful body of knowledge. For both learners and educators knowledge construction becomes relational, discursive and conversational in nature. Blogging forces the writer to confront their own opinions and those of others and consider how their opinions and views may be interpreted and reflected upon by others. As a result, blogging has become a fundamental asset in the educator’s toolbox allowing for the creation of effective and thought provoking student-centered meaningful learning outcomes.

According to Sifri (2008) weblogs are still continuing to evolve. As educators in the field of distributed learning continue to examine the barriers and benefits that occur with the use of blogging in the content of course delivery there is sure to be debate within the academic community as to the validity of the proclaimed learning benefits that are purported amongst the supporters of this learning model. In order to appease the detractors of what surely has proven to be an extremely viable and useful pedagogical approach it is necessary for researchers to continue to assess the benefits of blogging within the framework of distributed learning academic applications. Irrefutable and replicable scientific data is required to put to rest the debate as to whether or not the creation of weblogs in a learning community has academic merit. Studies must move forth to identify and measure the benefits of this discourse and what best
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practices must be applied in order to achieve consistent learning outcomes by those partaking in programs that employ the application of this modern day learning tool.
References


