Literature Review for MDDE663

EduBlogging: Weaving a Connected Tapestry of Knowing/Sharing Spaces

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**Introduction**

This literature review provides an overview of the academic literature and academic edu-blogs for descriptions of edu-bloggers’ reasons for using blogs, perceived benefits for learners, potential issues and concerns, and challenges encountered. It draws upon the knowledge of established edu-bloggers to obtain an accurate description of what edu-blogging is about. Authentic edu-bloggers’ voices are used to determine the crucial features of current edu-blogging practices and current issues.

This literature review continues with a description of ethical issues and concerns about the implementation of edu-blogging technologies for student learning. Issues such as self-disclosure, evaluation, student privacy, and student support will be examined and discussed.

Four recent case studies evaluating the benefits of edu-blogs will be described and analyzed, and followed by a discussion of the studies’ conclusions.

Based on edu-bloggers’ perceptions of what edu-blogging is, and what it is not, an alternative framework for considering edu-blogging will be presented. The context in which edu-blogging is used (self and community) requires a third context, involving an integration of the two. In addition, within each of these three contexts (self, transitional, and community) there are both private and public components. In effect, there are six contexts for edu-blogging, with competencies and expectations specific to each.

**Reasons for Edu-Blogging**

***Journaling***

Boud (2001) referred to Moon’s explanation (1999) that there are several purposes for journal writing: fostering critical thinking skills and “a questioning attitude”, enabling learning processes inquiry as a basis for learner self-assessment, (in which educators provide more choices for learners about how to learn), improving learner self-confidence, broadening learner creativity resulting through improved intuitive understanding, fostering strengthened writing voices for learners, and cultivating reflective and creative interaction in discourse within sharing circles.

***Slow-Blogging***

In a recent blog post, Barbara Ganley (2009) considered the principles of slow blogging and provided a framework for how she prefers to apply blogging to learning. She asserted the importance of brevity, but in the context of playful, slowed-down, more in-depth reflection. She explained that both common sense and a spirit of wandering need to be balanced. She explained we need to belong to the moment, the group or community, the experience; as they also belong to us, in the sense that we need to strive to engage ourselves entirely in every learning situation. She encouraged others to seek out the edges, for it is at these borders of sharing spaces and communities where true learning occurs (Ganley, 2009).

***Web of Connected Knowing***

Cranton (2002) emphasized the significance of educators acknowledging their learners as whole persons. To establish a relationship of trust and discovery with learners, it is crucial to weave a web of connected knowing. Cranton acknowledged that educators play a key role while working with adults in literacy programs to encourage a setting of openness to dialogue and connection, so that learners no longer feel silenced and voiceless.

Much of the literature on edu-blogging is emphasizing the necessity of connection, about

“…synchronizing one’s experience with others, about testing one’s evaluations against the outside world. Blogging, besides being an act of self-disclosure, is also a ritual of exchange: bloggers expect to be signaled and perhaps to be responded to” (van Dijck, 2004, pg. 7).

***Cultivating Personal Voice***

“A blog is characterized by its reflection of a personal style, and this style may be reflected in either the writing or the selection of links passed along to readers” (Downes, 2004, pg. 3). The history of personal journals is separate from blogs. Blogs are more than an online journal. “Blogs link to friends and rivals and comment on what they’re doing. Blog posts are short, informal, sometimes controversial, and sometimes deeply personal, no matter what topic they approach” (Downes, 2004, pg. 3).

***Edu-Blogging for Self-Creation***

Hiemstra (2001) summarized the potential of edu-blogging when he explained that the journal writing process involves ‘an investment in self’ through a growing awareness of thoughts and feelings. It also leads learners to trust their inner voices.

Blogging is an experience, a construction of self, a process that aids in the expression and organization of thoughts over an extended period of time. Self-definition is accomplished as a series of events, of conversations. Blogging software is “…a cultural artifact which facilitates a social process in which exchange and participation are conditions to enacting citizenship” (van Dijck, 2004, pg. 8). In effect, edu-blogging is an act of agency, of self-transformation, and it is a combination of two processes: blogging-as-action, and blogging-as-artefact.

***Edu-Blogging for Self-Reflection and Dialogue***

Reflection often involves active, engaged processing of raw emotional content and impressions of messy, confusing, experiences to make better sense of them (Boud, 2001).

Jurgen Habermas (1974) identified the pivotal role of dialogue, and identified dangers of mono-logical self-reflection, which occurs to student edu-bloggers who receive limited feedback at the initial stages of their learning journeys. To prevent this, it is crucial to extend the hermeneutic circle to develop a critical community of conversation.

***Edu-Blogging for Community***

Such a community also depends upon dialogical reflection to expose and remedy contradictions and distortions in thinking. Such a critical community of conversation is guided by an instructor’s scaffolding and feedback that encourages students to stay on track and remain engaged in the process, and not get intimidated by or defensive about working with concepts in a shroud of ambiguity and uncertainty (Habermas, 2004).

***Edu-Blogging for Relationship Building***

Dirkx (1997) asserted that “learning through soul is about relationship, our relationships with others and the world, but also with all aspects of our experiences, objective and subjective” (Dirkx, 1997, pg. 3).

Alan Levine supports this viewpoint related to what edu-blogging involves: “It is discourse, conversational, a back and forth with your readers” (Downes, 2004, pg. 24).

***Edu-Blogging for “Parallel Conversations”***

George Siemens (2009) explained that he started blogging through elearnspace.org and sent out weekly email summaries of his ideas. Over time, he extended it to RSS feeds. It was, for him, an opportunity to share resources in a loose network and engage in "parallel conversations". This "dialogue of awareness” was a central motivator for him to continue blogging. He also commented that it provided "limited direct engagement". He explained he preferred to tweak and post short, concise posts, rather than create long prose. It was (and is) considered “a pause-point”, a space for reflection, in which he emphasized he wrote for himself on a variety of topics of interest to himself. He has enjoyed the processes of sense-making and way-finding.

Despite the many positive reasons for blogging, several concerns were identified by ed-bloggers about introducing blogs for instruction into educational institutions.

**Some Concerns About Edu-Blogging**

Downes (2004) explained that Will Richardson, who has been blogging for eight years, had expressed doubts in a dialogue with other edu-bloggers about assigning students blogging activities as part of instruction (Richardson, 2004). He explained that blogging cannot be really blogging if it is assigned. In fact, it is contrived and artificial, with students just writing for an audience of one, their instructor. And instead of being encouraged by the experience, students are turned off by it. “When the semester ends, students drop blogging like wet cement” (Downes, 2004, pg. 24).

Downes also referred to Alan Levine’s reservations about the potentially restrictive nature of edu-blogging. There needs to be voice-back for the readers for it to be called blogging. Otherwise there is no conversation occurring for the author, locked in a monologue. Such a voice is a lonely voice, and is less interesting if there is no chance of interaction (Downes, 2004).

The concern whether blogging that carries on the same type of relationship between students and teachers from the conventional classroom captures the spirit of blogging as an empowering, transformative experience, is an important point educators need to account for when deciding to adopt edu-blogging as an instructional tool for their learners. As the number of reluctant student bloggers increases, the issue will be increasingly significant.

Dave Cormier (2009) recently raised this point again concerning the ethical use of requiring students to blog and evaluating their posts as part of coursework. He asked the question of what happens when those who blog are no longer self-selecting, when they feel they must in order to compete. He asserted that these are not things we should even be teaching people, moving learners away from the way they wish to work.

English (2001) identified two significant ethical issues concerning journal writing (and equally appropriate for blogging in educational contexts): the need to balance the personal and professional, and the concern over assessment of personal content. The issue of effectively identifying and addressing audience with authenticity and integrity is an issue that instructors need to discuss with their students. What of those cases when students refuse to self-disclose, and project a pseudo-self of inauthentic content and experiences to obtain grades? English agreed with Boud and Walker (1998) that there are some cases of inappropriate levels of self-disclosure required of students, and that demanding too much self-disclosure without also providing adequate support for learners is inappropriate, particularly in cases when learners require counseling support to work through these self-revelations (English, 2001).

Another key ethical issue is assessment, which can impede self-reflection in learners, particularly for those learners new to blogging who do not feel comfortable with the journaling process. Educators need to offer a set of guidelines, such as rubrics, outlining expectations, the nature of reflection, all framed in an explanatory context for why this journaling activity was selected, and what learning goals will be achieved (English, 2001).

Though learners may initially lack the skills and confidence to perform in the different edu-blogging contexts, and express concerns about assessment of self-disclosed, private thoughts and experiences, it is crucial for learners to be introduced to edu-blogging, to these different ways of knowing, to be better prepared for future participation online. The following section reviews four case studies involving edu-blogging within educational institutions.

**Case Studies**

In a survey of four recent case studies of how edu-blogging has been implemented for instruction, there is lower demonstrated benefit for learners than anticipated. This gap between expectation and reality is a commonly observed phenomenon. (O’Donnell, 2005).

In Gagne and Fels, (2007), student blogging activity was analyzed. There were few comments on students’ blogs by peers or instructors. 68% of students never received comments by instructors, 60% rarely received comments from peers, and 40% never received comments from peers. In this case, and equal number of students (11) agreed and disagreed that they had learned anything from blogging. In one course, the length of time assigned for blogging was two weeks, and the other group was asked to blog for the entire course. Other than a requirement to post once a week, no other instructions were given to students about what to blog. In this instance, students were neutral about edu-blogs and its impact on learning.

The researchers concluded that having more involved instructors in the blogging process, as well as providing clearer goals and objectives, and expectations to students, would help students use their blogs more effectively for learning. In addition, the researchers recommended blogs be maintained for longer duration (Gagne & Fels, 2007).

In Liang (2007), 41.3% of ESL students generally felt comfortable blogging in English. Although 79.3% were comfortable with posting news summaries, almost half (48.3%) were uncomfortable with reading and commenting on others students’ blog posts.

In some cases, the students were not provided with adequate structure nor rationale for using edu-blogs, but allowed learners to make their own choices about what to blog about. In another case, students were provided with guide questions to frame posts and comments.

For example, in Farmer, Yue, and Brooks, (2008), 30% of the grade was for twelve weeks of learners’ blog posts. Guidelines on structure and content were minimal. They needed to post once a week, and interact with others’ blogs through comments. They were assessed on frequency, consistency, and knowledge of subject matter. Grades were awarded for “…active and respectful engagement with the ideas and opinions of others…” (Farmer, Yue, and Brooks, 2008, pg.126).

In this case, students were offered support by instructors, and weekly F2F feedback sessions were held for students to discuss issues or challenges of using blogs. Despite this, 20-25% of students had not been blogging, or had not blogged as required. Thus, students were required to present to peers a snapshot of their blog to encourage greater participation, used as “a motivating spur” (Farmer, Yue, and Brooks, 2008, pg.126). Overall, 89.4% of students used blogs sufficient to meet the criteria, and passed the exercise.

In Leslie and Murphy (2008), 266 blogs were created at the outset, but then only 77 blogs were selected for evidence of interactive responses. Thus, of the 266 blogs, only 29% of these had at least one comment attached to the posts. This group was further reduced to 47 blogs, then down again to just 9 blogs when evaluated for both social presence and social construction of knowledge. In effect, only 3% of the bloggers demonstrated the characteristics the researchers were looking for. The researchers explained that there was little effort from students to continue conversation with one another, either though comments, or replies to others’ ideas (Farmer, Yue, and Brooks, 2008).

**Discussion**

In every case, instructors encountered challenges with providing instruction using blogging. In most cases students were not adequately prepared to participate in blogging. Though students generally agreed or remained largely neutral about the potential benefits of edu-blogging when asked during summative assessments, they mentioned that those actual benefits had not been experienced during the courses they took. In fact, both students and instructors struggled with learning new technologies and learning how to use them effectively. In general, most students neglected their blogs, and did not post regularly or comment on other learners’ ideas. Students needed more structure and support than expected. In addition, the rates of participation, the depth of engagement, and the amount of reflective blogging and discourse among students and their instructors was less than anticipated.

Much of the confusion surrounding the effectiveness of edu-blogs is attributed to the various ways edu-blogging is described in terms of its benefits to learners. The lack of focus on purpose, combined with confusion over which instructional strategies are effective for edu-blogging, can result in poor choices when deploying edu-blogs for instruction with beginner bloggers (which is applicable for both students and instructors). Combined with the lack of experience instructors have with actually maintaining one’s own blog over an extended period of time, there is insufficient feedback and support from mentors with the required expertise. Cognitive apprenticeship and mentoring cannot occur effectively under such condition. Moreover, when instructional strategies associated with other forms of instruction are being grafted on to edu-blogs (such as learning journals or forums), instruction will not be as effective. Blogs are not threaded discussion forums or hard-copy personal learning journals, and yet the benefits from these other strategies are anticipated by educators for edu-blogs. However, edu-blogs should not be considered hands-off by instructors, considered as students’ learning spaces that act as virtual sandboxes without guidelines, support, feedback, or direction from instructors. In effect, a more inclusive framework for using edu-blogs needs to be developed, based on providing the appropriate level of support, the appropriate instructional strategies, and the most effective assessment tools. Such an alternative framework needs to account for the various ways blogs are used, but also account for the ethical concerns.

**Alternative Instructional Framework for Edu-Blogging**

There are six educational frameworks within which edu-blogging needs to be considered. Each of these frameworks refer to edu-blogging environments, each of which have unique characteristics. Each learning environment is characterized by specific knowledge, skills sets, attitudes, and learning journeys. All of these frameworks need to be considered by educators in online instructional strategies if potential transformative learning is to occur in learners. The key to successful implementation is soliciting feedback from learners on how they would like to blog, providing a choice of which edu-blogging learning space they would like to learn within.

O’Donnell (2005) referred to James McGee’s (2002) explanation of the hurdles students face when using edu-blogs to move from reluctant blogger to avid blogger. First, beginner bloggers need to overcome the technical challenges. Second, students need to be supported to start developing a personal mission for oneself using blogging. Third, students need to view numerous examples of other edu-blogs and follow the themes and conversation threads of interest to them. Fourth, students need to develop their own mode and style of expression, to cultivate a unique, integrated private/public voice (O’Donnell, 2005).

1. edublogging for self

a) Private: This type of blogging requires learners to engage in self reflection, in self-dialogue, in self-creation. This personal writing space is meant for the expression of ideas which is shared with an educator who acts as learning companion and mentor. None of these posts are available to the general public, but perhaps a few are sent off as email to trusted sources.

b) Public: This type of blogging involves the rational, professional self, networked individualism, raising and maintaining social capital among peers, and interacting effectively within learning communities and Networks of Practice (NoPs) (Anderson, 2009, blog post)

Most learning communities do not have the characteristics of the personal learning spaces, sharing circles, or sharing communities. They are recognized as a formal way of exchanging ideas. This is the open arena where ideas are debated, reputations are built, and credibility and academic stature at the national, even global, level is cultivated and defended.

2. edublogging for transformation

Private/Public: This type of blogging bridges between the private and public spheres of participation, and acts as the transitional stage between edu-blogging within a protected environment, self-oriented blogging and community-oriented blogging. This is the space in which learners engage in transformation, through participation within sharing spaces and sharing circles.

3. edublogging for community

a) Private: effective participation in sharing, caring, hermeneutical circles

Such sharing circles act as a personal writing space, yet also act as a drafting space and sharing space. There are a limited number of other trusted individuals who comment on the blogger's posts, as well as the instructor, offering encouragement and insights. It is this developing synergy that develops reciprocity. There is some posting on others' blogs within the sharing circle, as well as on blogs that are publicly accessible.

b) Public: effective participation in Communities of Practice

Within these sharing communities, there is an ever widening group of confidantes, of kindred spirits, of well-wishers who make suggestions on new directions for exploration. The edu-bloggers invite others into the fold to participate, and encourages still others to come and visit. At some point, starting perhaps with the sharing circle, but definitely more apparent in the sharing community, the edu-blogger's motivations shift, and intensify. Such learners now explore others' blogs and comment on others' ideas, thus encouraging greater participation and attracting more individuals (experts, mentors) to take part in the discussions.

All these frameworks need to be considered in designing any program of instruction using edu-blogging.

Each learning environment requires different aims and different learning paths, and need to be assessed differently. Each framework has a different timeframe, as well as expectations for both learners and their learning companions and mentors. Offering learners’ choices over the aims and the process, but especially over their own edu-blogging environment, encourages learners to become far more engaged and involved in their own individualized transformative learning journey.

**Conclusion**

For edu-blogging to be considered a tool for learner transformation, it requires educators to use instructional strategies that address self-reflection, critical thinking, creativity, dialogue, connection, detachment (which involves discourse, but which also involves empathy for others and bracketing to see ideas from multiple perspectives), and self-directed, autonomous, strategic goal-setting. Educators need to integrate these aspects into learners’ journeys, while celebrating learner authenticity, and not keep these aspects separate, and deny students opportunities for potential learning.

Criticisms of edu-blogging as an educational tool is due to a lack of understanding of how edu-blogs can play multiple roles for learners. Instructors will be disappointed in the results if they are seeking to manage and evaluate learners’ performance, but then use open, unstructured posting guidelines. Educators will be ineffective if they fail to model appropriate blogging activities such as posting using multimedia, linking to others’ posts within the group and to other external blogs, and generally demonstrating the attitudes of an experienced edu-blogger. Support needs to be provided not only for technical challenges, but for placing students in the appropriate edu-blogging learning environment(s) that meet the learners’ learning goals and expectations. Edu-blogging invariably fails as a learning tool when educators fail to account for individual learners’ expectations and preferences.

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