

Anne Bartlett-Bragg

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

email: Anne.Bartlett-Bragg@uts.edu.au

Abstract

There are claims of over 500,000 blogs published on the Internet. What is a blog and how could it be integrated into pedagogical practices to enhance learning? This paper will introduce the blogging phenomenon and present some options for educators. Some theoretical principles and guidelines for practice will be presented, along with some further resources for exploring the blog-o-sphere and creating a blog for either personal publishing or to be integrated into pedagogical strategies.

Introduction

There is no doubt that pedagogical practices are being swamped with new technology options. While accessibility to these new technologies and cautious uptake may be slowing integration into teaching strategies, educators in the current market would be wise to consider the following question before embracing the options presented to them: How will this new technology enhance learning in my context?

This paper intends to provide a brief introduction and overview to the phenomenon called blogging – the act of using a web log, or blog – and then to present options for the integration of blogging into pedagogical practices for educators. It will attempt to provide some theoretical underpinning principles and guidelines for practice and will outline a pedagogical strategy I have developed to enhance reflective learning through the use of blogs.

What is a blog?

Conservative estimates indicate the presence of over 500,000 blogs published on the Internet. However, if the claims by software providers are totalled, the count could exceed 2 million. Accordingly, it is necessary to examine the blogging phenomenon to fully depict its expansive reach and opportunities to incorporate the blog into educational strategies.

Paquet (2003) refers to the term, blog, being initiated by Barger in 1997, as a log of the web or weblog. In its simplest form it is a website with dated entries, presented in reverse chronological order and published on the Internet. Descriptions of blogs allude to them as an alternative to a personal web page; however, this connection over simplifies both the content and the process of communicating through blogging.

The word blog is both a noun and a verb. People who maintain a blog are called bloggers. The act of posting to your blog is called blogging and the collective world of blogging is the Blog-o-sphere.

Perhaps the incredible growth of blogs can be attributed to the simplicity of creating and maintaining your blog. No Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML) programming knowledge or skill is required. The blog can be hosted and published through software providers like Pyra at Blogger.com (recently acquired by Google), although the author, who manages the entries and the look and feel – also known as the blogskin - controls the content. Blogger.com claims to host over three hundred and fifty thousand blogs and that a new blog is created every forty seconds!

Paquet (2003) lists five features that a representative blog exhibits: personal editorship; a hyperlinked posting structure; frequent updates; free public access to the content via the Internet; and archived postings.

Typically, the blog has a single author, however there are some group blogs where contributors post and debate short essays and opinion pieces. The comments represent the opinions of the author(s) and their interpretations of an event, content or context.

Conventional use sees a blog containing short entries, frequently updated, that often make reference to another source or website, with hyperlinks to the external source. The software structure provides archiving, through permanent hyperlinks, to older postings. This allows the author to manage the content either in pure chronological form, or by dates and topics.

An examination of the blog-o-sphere reveals the proliferation of blogging across an expansive range of users and industries. These include software developers, web designers, journalists, librarians, lawyers, education and knowledge management specialists, researchers, and individuals with a desire to communicate their view on a topic or issue. The *Sydney Morning Herald* recently featured its top 20 blogs in the Icon supplement (27 September, 2003). Selection was based upon ‘sites that were crisp, clean and pleasing to look at, updated frequently and had original content as well as some kind of universal appeal (that is, not just about America and its politics). Some are sites that have been singled out for excellence before but most of them we found just by surfing the blogs until our eyes went wonky’ (Stonehouse 2003).

Blogs in education

Researchers, academics, teachers, and students are excitedly embracing blogs. Although not exhaustive, I will present some of the current practical applications of blogs in the educational context and briefly examine the possibilities.

It may be presumptuous, however when reviewing the inclusion of blogging strategies reported in education fields, the intention appears to be to enrich the learning experience and provide an opportunity for learners to shift from surface to deeper levels of learning.

Surface learning is characterised by the approach of the learner to complete only the minimum content necessary to meet assessment requirements, whether that is learning only what may be presented in a test or simply attending and completing activities (Rosie

2000). Conversely, deep learning is how learners stand back from an experience, seek out connections between concepts, and contextualise meaning (Rosie 2000). Outlined below are a range of uses for blogs that have been located as educational practices. Links to specific blogs and examples are listed in Appendix 1.

Group blogs

The use of group blogs has been widely reported and is particularly popular where the educational institution may not have the facilities or technical infrastructure within their virtual learning environments (VLE) or learner management systems (LMS) to provide discussion forums or bulletin boards.

The group blog will allow multiple users to contribute and with a little HTML knowledge, postings can also be grouped under topic headings.

An alternative approach to group blogs could see a cohort of academics or subject matter experts sharing short essays and providing the opportunity to comment from different perspectives about the published work.

Publishing writings

Another emerging genre has been to use the blog to publish student writings. Reports range from journalism to science. Kennedy (2003;11) reports on the integration of blogs into English classes in secondary schools and states that 'web publication gives students a real audience to write to and, when optimized, a collaborative environment where they can give and receive feedback, mirroring the way professional writers use a workshop environment to hone their craft'.

This type of pedagogical practice has also seen an uptake within the language disciplines, both at group and individual levels, where the students are encouraged to use their blog for practising writing skills.

Field notes and journals of professional practice

Colleagues from a number of universities in the United Kingdom have recently contacted me to share their success with blogs in the education of health and nursing students. Students now maintain a blog (or electronic journal) to record and report on their experiences during their practical or field subjects. Critical reflection from reviews of their blogs then leads to deeper levels of learning where the students draw on their experiences to inform future professional practice.

Personal opinion publishing

A number of blogs currently maintained by academics and high-profile e-Learning practitioners are based on personal opinion publishing. Short essays or comments are posted about current trends and issues, with the intention that another author will weigh

into the debate on their own blog – thus the creation of an informal network of debate. Recently, university students have been noted to join these debates which is being welcomed by the academics for adding levels of diversity to the comments and feedback that have not previously been accessible.

Examples of this can be seen in most of the blogs listed in Appendix 1.

Academic blogs

Glenn (2003) discusses at length some of the uses of blogs by academics and scholars. He comments that some of the arguments in favour of blogging, cited by academics, are the freedom of tone, opportunity to interact with diverse audiences, and the speed of feedback. Glenn's (2003) article provides numerous examples from academic blogs – the URL is cited in the References.

Research journal

If we view the blog as a collection of brief essays or chunks of thought that focus on connections, we can start to see how the genre of a research journal starts to wield impact. Links to other blogs or sites of value add the dimension of interconnectivity between sharing ideas and highlighting issues as the researchers develops their theses.

Mortensen and Walker (2002) believe that the informality of the blog provided them with the opportunity to write about unformulated ideas and share them with others for comment, before proceeding with the formal publication of academic papers.

Mortensen and Walker (2002:250) describe their blog as 'a hybrid between journal, academic publishing, storage space for links and site for academic discourse.' Both writers believe that the blog altered their online communication and influenced the writing of their doctoral dissertations.

Learning journals

Individual ownership of the content differentiates this form of knowledge publishing from other electronic forums like discussion boards and mailing lists. The content becomes the sole responsibility of the author. Their objective regarding what to write and how to engage their readers is entirely in their control.

It was this interaction and personal opinion or knowledge publishing that produced the initial attraction for the inclusion of blogging into the e-Learning subjects that I teach, with the intention to provide the potential for alternative expression and a pathway for reflection leading to deep learning.

Reflection has been defined as 'a process of turning experience into learning' (Boud, 2001: 10) and reflective learning as 'an intentional process, where social context and experience are acknowledged, in which learners are active individuals, wholly present, engaging with others, and open to challenge' (Brockbank et al. 2002: 6).

Reflective learning can therefore be inferred as a process to achieve deep learning in which learners stand back from an experience, seek out connections between concepts, and contextualise meaning (Rosie 2000).

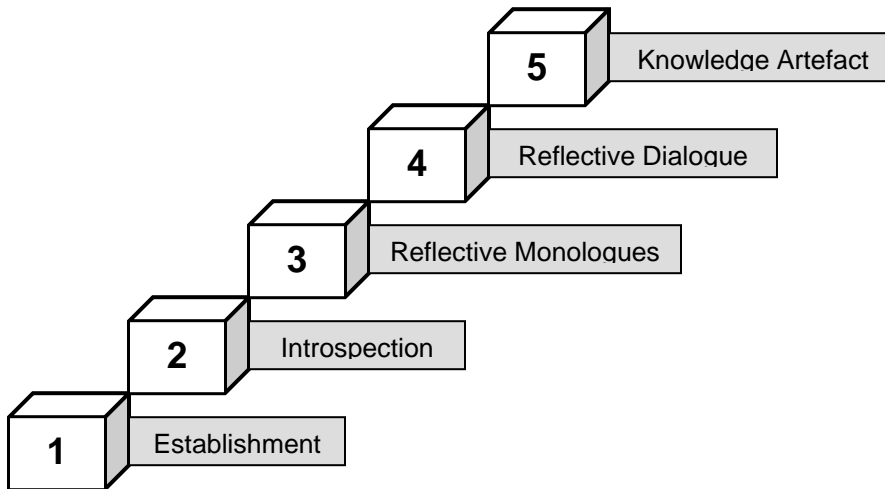
Boud (2001: 9) comments that journal writing for learning can be used to ‘capture an experience, record an event, explore our feelings, or make sense of what we know’’. Primarily intended for our own use, but sometimes for others to read, the journal is a tool for creating meaning and context from events and experiences - leading the learner towards creating new meanings and further enhancing their ability to contextualise and progress towards self-directed and deep learning.

For the past eighteen months, incorporated into four e-Learning subjects, across nearly eighty students, blogging has been a component of my basic pedagogical approach. The structure that has evolved from the introduction of blogging can be most effectively represented as a five-stage process: stage one – establishment; stage two – introspection; stage three – reflective monologues; stage four – reflective dialogue; and stage five – knowledge artefacts.

The process has been informed and developed from practice and not theory. Although not anticipated to follow Salmon’s (2000) Computer Mediated Conferencing (CMC) model, closer examination has revealed an initial similarity and will be the focus of closer investigation in my future research.

Salmon’s (2000) CMC model addresses structured learning events – e-Tivities – using predominantly asynchronous communication technologies, such as discussion boards, with the intention that published comments will be read and responded to by other members of the group within which the learning is occurring. The similarity occurs with the users’ responses or interaction to the technology, and the influence this has on the types of entries or responses made by the individual.

The 5-stage Blogging Process



Stage 1 – Establishment

Students set-up a blog and initiate the practice of recalling and recording learning events, paying attention to and expressing their feelings.

To encourage participation through the early phases of blogging, structured questions are provided, first and foremost as a guide for contributions based on recollection after an event, but secondly to permit the learners to become familiar with the technology and the process of writing in this new genre.

All students are encouraged to share their blog URL with their colleagues by posting it on their home page in UTSONline – the learner management system used by UTS and powered by Blackboard. This is not a compulsory activity and there is no obligation to read other students' blogs.

It is also made clear that I do not intend to read their blogs on a regular basis, however, I may 'drop by' occasionally, and no assessment of entries, either quality or quantity would be made.

Generally, however, the entries to the blogs are quite clearly intended for me to read! The assumption by most students is that I will read all blog entries between classes. The comments can direct anger and frustration with the process that are rarely expressed in a classroom environment. This can provide the opportunity or permission to address the emotional aspects of learning of which I would previously have been unaware.

Stage 2 – Introspection

Students are encouraged to continue recording learning events, while starting to pay attention to their emotions and to start evaluating the experience.

Fifteen minutes at the start of classroom sessions is allocated to blogging and structured questions are available as a guide to contributions and to focus on introspection.

Some software challenges can still dominate the experience and often detract from the reflective process.

Most of the writing is brief comments based on the reporting of facts, although some writers can be keen to express their negative emotions.

A shift away from consciously writing for me, the lecturer, starts to become apparent as students write for an anonymous reader in cyberspace.

Stage 3 – Reflective Monologues

Students start to become consciously aware of the full range of reflective process, from simply answering structured questions to considering the experience and extracting some meaning for further evaluation.

Fifteen minutes classroom time is still dedicated to blogging. However, rather than structured questions, suggested topics for consideration are used with the intention of allowing the students to take more responsibility for their entries. Students are also encouraged to anticipate future learning based on their past experiences.

Many students at this point are now making more frequent entries to their blog during the week and summarising these during the allocated class time.

Students that have been used to surface learning display some resistance towards reflection and deep learning and these issues are often noted in their blogs.

The expression of emotions can alter considerably. The emotions now relate to the learning events and are not directed to the intended reader.

Some students will start to write short paragraphs, with considerable thought evident in the entries. Some start to develop a questioning technique, but are not necessarily prepared to apply their learning to future events.

The writing appears to be for themselves, thus the naming of this stage as reflective monologue.

Stage 4 – Reflective Dialogue

Further encouragement towards a deeper reflective process requires the students to consider their style of expression, intended audience and publication of their thoughts.

No classroom time is allocated for blogging; however, each class discusses topics and issues that could be incorporated into its blogs. An intentional push towards self-directed blogging is made and responsibility for the contents is moved to the student.

At this stage, some students may stop contributing to their blogs. The trend towards self-direction and responsibility is not a comfortable paradigm shift and can be met with total abstinence. Further encouragement and time spent at Stage 3 may resolve this issue.

Students that reach this stage acquire a 'voice' or style of writing in the new genre that moves away from surface level reporting to personal knowledge publishing that exhibits a more considered writing style. Some students develop journalistic qualities in the reporting and opinions on their learning events and experiences. Some students may now use quotes from their blogs in written assessment tasks and report enthusiastically about seeing their own name in the References – as a published work with an official URL. The students' blogs construct a type of learning conversation or dialogue.

Stage 5 – Knowledge Artefacts

Students move from personal knowledge publishing to reflecting on the knowledge learned and providing guidance to readers, who may use the knowledge to enhance their own experience and learning, as knowledge artefacts.

At this stage the students may start to read each others' blogs and make comments in contrast or agreement - intentionally providing their experience and opinions as an opportunity for others to learn , so creating knowledge artefacts.

The students are now totally aware of the broad reach of blogs, not only as authors but also as readers. Their writing can be strongly opinionated, however, it may also display critical thinking and deep reflective qualities of learning.

Issues for further consideration

The inclusion of the blogging process in my pedagogical strategies has raised many questions and provided opportunities to enhance reflection in e-Learning subjects. It has also opened a pathway for further research into the blogging phenomenon as a learning journal. Some of the questions and issues that deserve further investigation in the future are outlined below.

In response to informal discussions about the blogging experience, students have reported greater freedom to comment, no pressure to stay in line with the focus questions or issues, the ability to publish small, unconnected pieces of knowledge that may have suddenly had some meaning for them, and somewhere to record their experiences related to their learnings that could be revisited at a later point. All the attributes required for deep learning to occur.

Is the blog a new genre of learning journal? Is there a difference between writing for personal knowledge publishing and learning journals? If the process of writing is viewed as a means of reflecting upon issues and content that is being delivered in a learning context and attempting to create meaning, then does the style of writing also influence the depth of this process?

Boud (2001) advises that the use of learning journals can have many purposes and promote reflection in many ways through varying strategies and devices. In addition, the conditions under which the writing occurs can have a powerful influence on the outcomes for reflection.

What is different about the blog experience? Walker (1985: 65) believes that 'creative interaction with one's own development helps to ensure that new knowledge is incorporated in, and integrated with existing knowledge'. Does the blog provide the learner with a creative interaction?

If knowledge artefacts are the reformulation of ideas that clearly state a position or argument then does blogging have the potential to encourage reflection and deep learning at both levels of reflection – in action and upon future action?

Summary

This paper has presented the inclusion of blogs as a pedagogical strategy for educators. Although reporting on practice, connections to existing theories have been attempted and questions for further consideration made. I hope this paper has ignited your interest in the blogging phenomena and will lead you to consider embracing blogs within your pedagogical practices.

A final comment from an unknown source effectively presents my position in pursuing the blogging phenomenon:

The only real path is the one you see after walking across the desert when you look back and see your own footsteps.

Happy Blogging!
ABB

References

- Brockbank, A. McGill, I. & Beech, N. (eds) 2002, *Reflective Learning in Practice*, Gower, UK.
- Boud, D. (2001), 'Using journal writing to enhance reflective practice' in English, L.M. and Gillen, M. A. (eds) *Promoting Journal Writing in Adult Education*, New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education. No. 90. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco pp. 9-18.
- Glenn, D. (2003), 'Scholars Who Blog', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 6, Retrieved 30 September from <http://www.chronicle.com>
- Kennedy, K. 2003, 'Writing with Web Logs', *Technology and Learning*, February, Retrieved 30 April, 2003 from <http://www.techlearning.com>
- Moon, J. 1999, *Reflection in Learning and Professional Development*, Kogan Page, UK.
- Mortensen, T. & Walker, J. 2002, *Researching ICTs in Context*, in ed. Andrew Morrison, InterMedia Report, 3/2002, Oslo 2002
- Paquet, S. 2003, 'Personal knowledge publishing and its uses in research', *Knowledge Board*, 10 January, Retrieved 29 May, 2003 from <http://www.knowledgeboard.com/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=96934&d=744&h=746&f=745>
- Rosie, A. 2000, 'Online pedagogies and the promotion of "deep learning"', *Information Services & Use 2000*, vol. 20, no. 2/3, pp.109-116.
- Salmon, G. 2000, *e-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online*, Kogan Page, London.
- Stonehouse, D. (2003) 'Icon Supplement' in *Sydney Morning Herald*, Retrieved 27 September, 2003 from <http://www.smh.com.au>.
- Walker, D. 1985, 'Writing and Reflection', in *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*, eds D. Boud, R. Keogh & D. Walker, Kogan Page, UK.

Appendix 1 Blogs in Education

It would be almost impossible to include a full list of blogs in education! So, what I have included are some of the key blogs that will provide you with opportunities to get a feel for the genre and to link to other blogs of note in the blog-o-sphere!

Using Weblogs in Education – maintained by Will Richardson, Supervisor of Instructional Technology at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, NJ.
<http://www.weblogg-ed.com>

This site is just laden with blogs by educators and articles on how to use them!

Learning Circuits Blog

A group blog where invited e-Learning experts comment on current trends and issues and debate positions.

<http://www.learningcircuits.com>

eLearningPost – edited by Maish R Nichani, this blog is a daily list and comments on news articles and links in the e-Learning field. It's like your own news clipping service.

<http://www.elearningpost.com>

elearnspace – maintained by Greg Siemens, an instructor at Red River College in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

<http://www.elearnspace.org/blog>

Blogging Across the Curriculum - Pattie Bell Hastings, Assistant Professor in Computer Science & Interactive Digital Design Department, Quinnipiac University.
<http://mywebspaces.quinnipiac.edu/PHastings/bac.html>

Educational Bloggers Network – a network of educational bloggers!
<http://www.ebn.weblogger.com>

Appendix 2 – Start your own Blog

There are a number of software companies offering blog authoring tools – some are downloads, some are totally hosted by the software company.

Blogger.com

This is one of the most popular software hosting companies for blogs – recently purchased by Goggle.

It offers a free software and hosting service– a great site for beginners with no HTML!

<http://www.blogger.com>

Movable Type

Another popular software tool – it's a download and it's not free – however, it's ease of use and functionality make it one of the most popular choices.

It also has a language pack that will allow posts in languages other than English – a great choice for teachers of languages!

<http://www.movabletype.org>

eBN (Educational Bloggers Network) offers blog hosting for US\$19.95.

<http://www.ebn.weblogger.com>

In all cases the focus is on simplicity! Join up, create a user name and password, select a URL address and start blogging!