

Educational Blogging: Much Ado About Something? (Or A Review of Blogging in Education and a Research Agenda)

Ashley Tan
Instructional Systems Technology
Indiana University, Bloomington, USA
E-mail: ashley@indiana.edu

Abstract: This paper first briefly describes the blogging phenomenon and the evolution of blog types. It then highlights some uses of blogs in K-12 and higher education environments. Some perceived advantages of blogs are discussed briefly and this is followed by a description of some research gaps in educational blogging. Finally, a description of my research agenda on educational blogging research is provided. This study is in design stage and data have not been collected yet. However the rationale and methodology for the study are provided for reference, critique, and discussion.

Introduction

A weblog or blog is an online journal comprising of short, informal, and chronological entries. The entries take the form of comments, opinions, reflections, and links to relevant websites, all of which are related to the blogger's life, work or observation of phenomena. Lately, some blogs also incorporate images or sound bites (Kadger & Bull, 2003). In its simplest form, the anatomy of a blog consists of a title, a date and time stamp, the journal entry, and links to other sites or blogs. A typical blog also has links to archived entries and comments by readers.

Current types of blogs

The earliest and still the most common form of blogs is text-based tools that allow bloggers to input and update text entries on a periodic basis. Public providers of such blogs include Live Journal (<http://livejournal.com>) and Blogger (<http://blogger.com>). Individuals may also install software such as Movable Type (<http://sixapart.com/movabletype>) or Word Press (<http://wordpress.org>) in order to host privately owned blogs on their own servers.

Blog technology has evolved quickly over a short period of time. While new types of blogs still contain text, they incorporate other media to enhance the user and reader experiences. Photo blogs include one or more images; video blogs incorporate streaming videos instead of still images; audio blogs incorporate sound. Another variant, mo-blogging allows bloggers to update their blogs with text, sound, images, or videos with handheld mobile devices such as cellular phones or personal digital assistants (PDAs).

While blogs have been a feature of the Internet since 1990, they have only recently become a cultural and educational phenomenon (Downes, 2004; Kadger & Bull, 2003).

The Blogging Phenomenon

Blogs have been used to share news and views after 9/11 and to solicit support and funding during the 2004 U.S. Presidential race (Downes, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Yahoo! News, 2004). Blogs have also been adopted by corporations such as MSNBC and the Wall Street Journal to promote their products or services (Coggins, n.d.; Yahoo! News, 2004). A variant of blogging called knowledge logging, or k-logging, is used internally by a few companies as a form of knowledge management (Donovan, 2003; Roberts, 2003). Some journalists have become bloggers to free themselves from the fetters of editors and to publish their views instantly (Donovan, 2003; Kadger & Bull, 2003; Smolkin, 2004). A growing number of researchers nurture ideas online and share them with students, colleagues, or other likeminded bloggers (Glenn, 2003; Roberts, 2003).

Examples of blog use in K-12 and higher education

A small but growing number of educators in K-12 and higher education have started using mostly text-based blogs for a variety of purposes (e.g. class announcements, course management systems) and activities (e.g. in and out-of-class discussions, summary readings, critical reflections, project collaboration, student portfolios) (Downes, 2004; Lohnes, 2003; Oravec, 2003; Roberts, 2003). Toner (2004) reported how blogs were used to help teachers share their ideas and vent frustrations while Stiler and Philleo (2003) used blogs to facilitate reflection among preservice teachers.

Perceived advantages of blogs over existing tools/media

What advantages do blogs offer in education? Unlike most websites, blogs are easy to create and update (Downes, 2004). The open nature of blogs and the presence of a large and sometimes unknown audience can be strong motivating factors for learners to keep writing and learning on their own time (Downes, 2004; Kadjer & Bull, 2003). Various authors also believe that blogging encourages reflective writing (Downes, 2004; Kadjer & Bull, 2003; Oravec, 2003; Stiler and Philleo, 2003). Unlike most discussion forums, blogs promote ownership of content and place the responsibility of learning on the blogger (Godwin-Jones, 2003). Downes (2004) believes that blogs have the potential for distributed and collaborative learning while Oravec (2003) believes that by linking blogs and critiquing one another's work, bloggers may form knowledge communities. However, the collaborative and community advantages of blogging have yet to be empirically substantiated. Likewise, there is little evidence on whether the strategic use of blogs has a positive impact on learning, e.g. increased scores or levels of reflection.

Research gaps in educational blogging

Much of the literature on educational blogging is descriptive. For example, Kadjer and Bull (2003) recommended ten K-12 literary, grammar, and revision activities for blogs. As the use of blogs in education is still relatively new, it might be worth collecting data on how different teachers or schools are using blogs. A possible research question might read: What are the different sociotechnical uses of blogs in K-12 (or higher) education? It is important to ask and answer this question from a sociotechnical perspective because educational blog use is not only limited or promoted by the technical affordances of blogs. The variety of blogging activities will often be socially defined, i.e. determined by what teachers, students, parents, administrators, or others need them to do.

The next research gap is related to the last research question. Teachers and students have to be accountable for their academic efforts. Do blogs enhance learning, e.g. in writing? If so, what is the evidence for this? How and why is learning enhanced?

It might also be interesting to explore what motivates bloggers to blog in the first place. Current research has revealed that the desire to blog may stem from intrinsic factors (e.g. preferred learning styles) or the presence of a known or unknown audience (Downes, 2004; Kadjer & Bull, 2003). However, many classroom activities tend to be structured by the teacher. Can educational blogging be structured? If so, how and to what extent? Gilbert and Dabbagh (2005) found that some forms of structure could positively impact online discourse in discussion forums. Could the similar forms of structure apply to educational blogging? Furthermore, most blogs are owned by the blogger. Does externally imposed structure make educational blogging less authentic or less valuable?

My research agenda

The research directions and questions described earlier are all worthy of investigation. They add to the pool of knowledge about the possibilities, accountability, psychology, and pedagogy of educational blogging. However, it is not my intention to pursue these questions.

Various authors have claimed that blogs promote reflective writing (Downes, 2004; Kadjer & Bull, 2003; Oravec, 2003; Stiler and Philleo, 2003) but this has not been empirically tested. While Stiler and Philleo came to the conclusion that online blogging increased preservice teacher reflection, they did not provide definitive measures of reflection.

Research questions

My guiding research question is: Do blogs promote reflection among preservice teachers? My aim is to compare levels of reflection in blogs with those in discussion forums. Specifically, my research questions are:

1. What are the quantitative and qualitative differences between preservice teacher reflection in blogs and threaded discussion forums in [name of preservice teacher course]?
2. Why do these differences exist? Or why are there no differences?

Contribution to research

The use of blogs in K-12 and higher education has been documented only recently. Already available are examples of activities and efforts by various individuals and institutions. However, such papers rarely discuss the pros and cons of blogging or compare it with other viable alternatives such as threaded online discussion forums. This study will compare the reflection levels in blogs with discussion forums. In doing so, this study aims to not only provide empirical evidence on the benefits (or lack thereof) of educational blogging, but also suggest a framework of evaluation for educational blogging in general.

Proposed methodology and methods

This investigation will be designed as a quasi-experimental study. Two intact classes of preservice teachers will serve as independent groups. One group will use blogs while another group will use a discussion forum to reflect on the same content matter and class assignments.

Blog entries and discussion postings will be collected and analyzed according to the reflection rubric used by Hawkes and Romiszowski (2001). The specific analytical methods will include discourse analysis of blog entries and discussion forum postings at the participation, speech acts, and functional moves levels (Herring, in press). Preservice teachers and the course instructor will also be interviewed during the initial, middle, and terminal phases of reflection. These phases may correspond to the beginning, middle, and end of a full academic semester.

Possible outcomes

Given equivalent reflection activities with both tools, one possible outcome is that there will be no significant differences between the level of reflection in blogs and discussion forums. If this is the case, the investigator would probe for reasons why during interviews. Another outcome is that blogs are significantly better at promoting reflection than discussion forums or vice versa. Again the investigator would probe for reasons why this is the case.

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