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Motivation and participation in learning blogs: Challenging the role of assessment

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Abstract

Learning about, and developing, a professional teacher identity is targeted in university undergraduate teacher education courses. One avenue to implement this is through social media (Web 2.0), such as blogs, wikis and, more recently, Facebook. Research supports the benefits of blogs in learning and teaching. However, it also demonstrates that assessment is the key in the number, length and quality of blogs posted. The qualitative study reported here tracked and tallied 135 students' blog postings and analysed responses on a survey. The paper identifies aspects of the relationship among the blogs posted, reasons for posting and not posting, and student tutorial attendance. Evidence is provided of the academic value of non-assessed and non-compulsory blogs in a core professional development, second year Bachelor of Education subject.

Introduction

Blogs or Weblogs are advocated as learner-centred teaching (e.g., Weimer, 2007). Indeed, there is substantial research on the role and efficacy of blogs in learning and teaching in differing educational contexts and levels (e.g., see Deng & Yuen, 2007; Du & Wagner, 2005; Burgess, 2006; Coutinho, 2007; Gray, Thompson, Sheard & Clerehan, 2010; & Rourke & Coleman, 2009). Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray and Krause (2008) surveyed 2000 plus Australian first year students in 2006, finding that 45 percent kept their own blog or posted and read other people's blogs, although none had used it for study purposes. This stimulated the argument that, because blogs have a role in social engagement in students' lives, blogs are therefore a relevant motivational tool in learning, teaching, and assessment. There was a resultant growth of blogs in high school, college, and university education and a consequential emphasis in "how to" case-based articles concerning the instructional design of blogs and their assessment.

Recent research (e.g., Chen & Bonk, 2008; Gray, Thompson, Sheard, Clerehan, & Hamilton, 2010; Gulati, 2008; & Klisc, McGill, & Hobbs, 2009) demonstrates that it is assessment which is the motivation for blog participation. Divitini, Haugalkken, Morken (2008) called their non-compulsory and non-assessed blog, instigated to support communication among, and reflection by, pre-service teachers who were in widely dispersed locations on their teaching practicum, "a fiasco"! (p.219). Young and Delves (2009) appeared to see assessment as inevitable in the switch from an assessable face-to-face presentation to an assessed blog for quality and interaction. The reasoning was that, without it being assessment driven, the students would not "communicate with each other" (p.1134). Williams and Jacobs (2004) concluded that, although a "killer" application, it was a mistake constructing their "MBA blog as an

optional assessment item” because it was “invariably the weaker students [who] clearly submitted solely” for the marks and thereby “diminished” the overall quality of the blog (p. 244). Luskin’s (2010) research concluded that the quality of tertiary students’ compulsory blog contributions were at the level of “satisficing”, that is, just “good enough” to complete subject requirements. There continues to be an emphasis on “how to” case-based and research-based articles concerning the instructional design of blogs for assessment purposes. For instance, explanation of what are, why use, and how to, create blogs occurs as well as delineating criteria if using blogs for educational assessment (Farmer and Bartlett-Bragg, 2005). Based on a wide sampling of conference and journal articles, it is contended that making the blogs assessable or compulsory in order to get a passing grade are the controlling factors with respect to blog participation. The paper examines this contention by presenting, albeit, one case study, to demonstrate that the participation rates of non-assessed and non-compulsory blogs can be gratifyingly robust.

The literature framed the research questions that sought to identify and compare two major features of the lecturer’s learning design: the non-compulsory, non-assessed weekly blogs with the non-compulsory, non-assessed weekly tutorials. Specific sub research questions were targeted: What were (a) the number of blogs posted per week? (b) What were the consistency rates of the students’ posts over seven weeks? (c) What were the student-identified factors affecting this consistency? (d) What were the tutorial participation rates? and, lastly, (e) Was there a difference and, if so, why?

Methodology

Context: The empirical qualitative study reported here examines the nature of student engagement with the non-assessable and non-compulsory blog activity in a core second-year subject in a four year Bachelor of Education degree in an Australian regional university. The students were enrolled in a B.Ed. Early Childhood, Primary, or Secondary degree program and included core subjects taken by all the students.

The core subject was designed to encourage learner self-efficacy through engaging with what it means to be a competent professional teacher by utilising academic and professional literature, their personal school experiences, and a practicum in the classroom for three quarters of the semester. The subject’s learning outcomes were designed to allow students to gain a professional identity as preservice teachers through: (a) critically engaging with the online content, (b) posting their informed comments to their group blog, including, in Week 5, the draft of a lesson plan, a critique of a lesson plan authored by, for this exercise, a blog colleague, and revamping the lesson plan in light of the critique, and (c) professionally critiquing other students’ posts. The online stimulus content for each blog was designed so that it did not look, nor feel, like a transposed face-to-face lecture. There was a non-compulsory weekly tutorial, each with a cohort of approximately 22 students, and a troubleshooting workshop that could only be instigated by the students on a needs basis. The blogs were the catalyst for bringing these strands together.

The *participants* in the study were 105 female and 30 male second year Bachelor of Education students, with the majority (86%) between 17 and 25 years of age.

Data collection and coding

The students’ blog participation and tutorial attendance were tracked. Instead of a pre-

survey at the beginning of a subject, a questionnaire, with a 75 percent completion rate, was administered in the seventh week in the semester. In comparison with a pre-survey, the timing permitted an understanding of, and judgement on, relevant aspects of the subject. This survey allowed assessment *for* – not just *of* – learning (Willis, 2008). That is, both lecturer and students, the former through creating and analysing, and the latter by completing, this survey, were enabled to reflect critically on current learning strategies and accomplishments as well as determining “where to now” strategies based on their self-reflection.

The students’ blog participation and reasons for participating and not participating were tallied while the comments were coded using Nivo and analysed in terms of the benefits and costs that students associated with engaging in the blog activity.

Results and Discussion

The following table addressed the research question concerning the number of blogs posted versus not posted per week and the rates for the female and male students.

Table 1: Blog Completion Rate: Weeks 1-7.

<i>Week Posted & Blog No.</i>	W1 B.1	W1 B.2	W2 B.1	W3 B.1	W3 B.2	W4 B.1	W4 B.2	W5 B.1	W6 B.1	W6 B.2	W7 B.1	Totals
“yes”	127	124	112	104	106	101	71	98	94	90	89	1116
“no”	8	11	23	31	29	34	64	37	41	45	46	369
Total	135	135	135	135	135	135	135	135	135	135	135	
<i>Gender</i>												
“yes” F	102 76%	100 74%	90 67%	85 63%	88 65%	84 62%	59 44%	78 58%	82 61%	78 58%	77 57%	923
“yes” M	25 18%	24 18%	22 16%	19 14%	18 13%	17 13%	12 9%	20 15%	12 9%	12 9%	12 9%	193
“no” % F	3 2%	5 4%	15 10%	20 15%	17 13%	21 15 %	46 34%	27 20%	23 17%	27 20%	28 21%	232
“no” % M	5 4%	6 4%	8 6%	11 8%	12 9%	13 10%	18 13%	10 7%	18 13%	18 13%	18 13%	128

W 1= Week 1; B.1 = Blog 1; F = Female; M = Male; L = Lesson; C = Critique

Five characteristics are immediately obvious from Table 1. *First* is the difference in the number of blogs per week. There were three weeks, Weeks 2, 5 and 7, when there was just one blog. Weeks 1, 3, 4 and 6 had two blogs each. *Second*, except for Blog 2 Week 4, where the number for those who posted and those who did not was very close (71:64), and the last three weeks in which the ratio was, or was close to, 2:1, the total number of “yes” postings is considerably more than the “no” postings. *Third* is the variability in the number of blogs posted by the students. For example, it ranged from fewer than 12 “no-posts” for two Blogs (Blogs 1 and 2 in Week 1; Table 1). *Fourth*, Week 4 had the lowest number of postings with 37 students not posting. *Fifth*, there is a gender difference in that, for the female cohort, the ratio of posts to non-posts was approximately 4.6:1 while for the males, it was closer to 1.7:1. Because education is a gendered discipline with a very high ratio of female to male students, as exemplified in this subject, the comparisons are merely noted; they are not utilised, nor intended to

be used, as comment on gendered blog participation (see Haase, Balatti, Knight, & Henderson, 2010, this conference).

What is not obvious from Table 1 is that 32 females and 2 males completed all the posts. A further 18 females posted to all but one blog and 14 answered all except three blogs. Another two males answered all but one blog and further three, two blogs. This type of granular identification provides insights into how few completed or nearly completed this learning activity. Even so, Table 1 still implies that the majority of students considered their engagement in the blogs to be beneficial to their learning and to developing a professional identity as a pre-service teacher.

The students were randomly divided into seven groups of approximately 22 students per group. They remained in the same group for the blog and the tutorial. The first blog required students to critique a positive and negative experience in their own schooling and, based on a reading for that week, suggest how a teacher did and could have handled the respective experiences. This personal story through an academic lens appears to have acted as a broker with respect to collegiality. Students reported that they knew more students than was the case when they just had tutorials (Survey).

The tabulation in Table 2 delineates the average attendance per group over seven weeks. The comparative rates of physical attendance at the tutorial and electronic attendance, as shown by their blog postings, were relatively close but favoured the tutorials.

Table 2: Comparative Attendance Rates: Non-compulsory, Non-assessed Weekly Blog and Tutorial.

Total (135 students)	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Total Average
% Average Blog Postings per group (7 weeks)	71%	78%	72%	75%	81%	74%	75%
% Average Tutorial Attendance per group (7 weeks)	75%	81%	81%	81%	83%	84%	80%

It is immediately obvious that there was some variability among the Groups in terms of participation rates in the blog and tutorial. Group 5 had the lowest and virtually the same amount of involvement in both the blogs and tutorial while Group 6 had a 10% difference in favour of tutorial attendance. Group 2 and 5 students were the most consistent in their close attendance rates. Over the seven weeks, participation in the tutorial was slightly higher than in the blog. Hidden are individual participation rates. One ratio was 5% blog posting versus 77% tutorial attendance! This suggests four student motivations that could hold for the relative attendances. The face-to-face tutorials (a) entailed less cognitive work for them because of the distributed discussion, (b) afforded real time verbal and non-verbal interaction that (c) allowed instant elucidation by, and feedback from, the tutor or other students for (d) a time commitment of 50 minutes.

Contrary to research outlined in the literature review section, the majority of this

cohort of students voluntarily engaged in the online blogs knowing they were not assessed and not compulsory. This begs the question, “Why?” The following table provides some understanding through the tabulation of the reasons given by students for posting and not posting (Survey). Students could give more than one answer to these questions.

Table 3: Reasons for Posting, Not Posting, Reading and Not Reading Others’ Blogs

Reasons for Posting own blog		Reasons for Not posting own blog	
Importance for learning	34	Time required	6
Expectation	31	Personal circumstances	5
Keeping on top of things	18	Not assessable	4
Important to share	13	Nature of task	4
Sense of duty	11	Not learning anything	3
Important to improve	10	Lack of motivation	3
		Disconnected	3
		Technology related	3
<i>Total</i>	<i>117</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>31</i>
Reasons for Reading others’ blogs		Reasons for Not readings others’ blogs	
Check understanding of task	41	Time required	19
Learn from others	35	Disconnected from subject	4
Interested in others’ learning	19	Not learning anything	1
Keeping on top of things	6	Not assessed	1
Importance to own learning	4	Too much to read	1
Expectation to read blogs	1		
<i>Total</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>26</i>

The reasons for posting and reading highlighted the “buying-in” to certain norms in the teacher-learner relationship in education. The students’ realisation of, and willingness to participate, was seen by some in terms of “expectation” and “duty” (Table 3). These are valued norms; teachers have a duty to carry out what is expected of them as teachers. Table 3 also indicates that the learning design of the subject was translated by these pre-service teachers who used their own words to highlight their acknowledgement of what is involved in effective teaching and learning. For instance, “keeping on top of things”; “sharing”; “checking [my] understanding of tasks” against that of other students as well as “learning from” and “sharing” with, others (Table 3). The low number of reasons that were given by the students for not posting, that is, for not participating in the non-assessable blogs, further acknowledges the lecturer’s learning design that acknowledged students as capable of making appropriate learning decisions.

Conclusion

The learning design of this subject targeted ways to engage students professionally in the blog, tutorial and assessment as well as in-situ in a school classroom. The blog tasks valued what students brought with them and utilized this as a basis for commencing to engage with the various facets entailed in the B.Ed. second year pre-service teacher education subject. In this way, the learning design demonstrated valuing the students’ prior, current, and future understandings and abilities. This paper

provides insights into the behaviour of tertiary students in non-compulsory and non-assessed blogs.

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