

USING WEB BLOGS AS A TOOL TO ENCOURAGE PRE-CLASS READING, POST-CLASS REFLECTIONS AND COLLABORATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper reports on our students' experiments using blogs to encourage them to do pre-class reading assignment and reflections after class. The sample in the study included 5 EFL (English as Foreign Language) graduate students in a course of teaching methods and 90 Software Engineering students in an undergraduate Information Technology program. Results indicated that there was a positive attitude towards the use of blogs for pre-class preparation and post class reflections. However, for the experience to be successful it is important to consider the class size, students' educational level, and the type of reading assignment.

Introduction

Class discussion is a vital element in higher education. However, for discussion to be effective, students must do pre-class readings. This allows them to have a stand before class and enables them to engage in the discussion. To encourage students to do pre-class readings, we used blogs. Using blogs for courses, as an enhancement to the traditional online class, is becoming more and more popular. A blog is defined as "A website in which the entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order" (Wikipedia, 2006). It is also defined as "Personal web pages written in chronological diary form and maintained through blogging software" (Wagner, 2003). Visitors to the blog can read, comment, and link to the blog postings. From an educational perspective the availability and ease of use of blogging software makes using blogs a practical tool for use in higher education.

Our research set to answer the following questions:

- Does students' use of blogs encourage them to prepare for class and do pre-class readings?
- Does students' use of blogs encourage them to reflect on class activities and post their reflections online?
- Does students' use of blogs to enhance in collaborating with their peers?

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We will first review the literature on educational uses of blogs. Then, we will present our methodology in conducting this study. After that we present the results of our study, and a discussion of the findings. The final section summarizes our work and draws some conclusions and future directions.

Blogs in Education

According to the Australian scholars Williams and Jacobs (2004), blogs are technological tools with a potential for teaching and learning.

One of the important aspects of blogs is that they are readily accessible and easy to use by teachers and students, only a computer and a link to the Internet is required. Blogs can play an essential role in both teaching and learning. Even though there is a shortage of published materials of blogs in education, it is considered as an interesting tool in which the student can document both the learning activities and results (Dempsey, et al., 2003). Blogs have unlimited advantages for helping the educational sector. However, the evaluation of blogs depends mainly on the following:

- the person writing the blog.
- who reads it and
- the goals and objectives of the blog.

For our study, the blog is written by the instructor and commented on by students, read by both students and the instructor, and designed for supporting students in preparing for the class discussion.

The literature (Saeed et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2008) reports on the usefulness of blogs in supporting collaboration among students. By using blogs, teachers can arrange a collaborative learning environment where students can peer edit and comment on other students posting (Dieu, 2004). Students can see their work as well as other students' work and are able to collaborate on the learning activities. Other benefits of blogs in education according to (Campel, 2004):

- Students that have no personal websites may interact with others using blogs or cyberspace community.
- Students can practice their writing skills on the web and will be careful if they know someone will comment on their work.
- Students can converse and discuss with their teachers.
- Instructors can provide course details on the blog.
- Instructors can review and check students' work.
- Students have an opportunity to collaborate and interact with the wider community of students and teachers on the Web.

By the same token, other scholars stated the following advantages:

- When used for warm-up activities, blogs help instructors guide the classroom activities, as teachers can adjust the organization and content in accordance with the students' current knowledge (Juang, 2008).
- Blogs enables the students to learn construction of social and cognitive knowledge according to (Du & Wagner, 2005).
- Blogs supports class interaction and discussions as well as enhance class presentations (Chang et al., 2008).
- Blogs empowers students to become more analytic as well as critical (Oravec, 2002).
- Students have the opportunity to write on the blog and document their work. Documenting saves the work during the course period and reflects their developments (Johnson, 2004).
- Students can discuss with the others on the course topic/s and reflect their views with others on the blog (Wu, 2005).
- Students are able to link their blog to other resources of learning to gain knowledge. They may link their blog to other blogs or any other related media to the subject (Wu, 2005).
- Blogs use an automatic dating system which helps tracks assignment submission. This dating system helps in searching and locating postings on a certain date (Wu, 2005).

Blogs in Language learning

Using blogs helps students in navigating the English websites according to (Campell, 2004), which increases

- their English language knowledge by chatting and interacting with other bloggers/students or even teachers.
- their ability to read more articles online which builds their language capabilities.

Wu (2005) of Taiwan's ChungHua University, department of Foreign Languages and Literature, highlighted the effectiveness of using blogs in English writing as EFL (English as foreign language). In his report, he stated that students are posting more than eight articles online during one semester. The majority of the students are happy with that method of teaching the English language. Similarly Bernstein (2004) described in his blog posted online titled: Do blogs improve writing? that writing frequently online improves the students skills of writing. The scholar suggested that EFL student/s should use blogs as well a dictionary or an Internet to see their vocabularies and express their thoughts and feelings obviously. As an EFL learner, students writing frequently online and expressing their thoughts improves the writing style in English language. As per the above survey, (91%) of the students interviewed told that, they look the dictionary or the Internet and sometimes ask friends when they aren't aware of how to express their thoughts in English language writing. In this study, there are two advantages that can be pinpointed for the purpose of active participation in blogs between students and their peers:

First: Posting articles, assignment works or even general knowledge topics and inquiries, frequent visits, commenting on these posted data on the blog, receiving comments from other colleagues. All these will increase the rate of collaboration between the learners using EFL writing class.

Second: Students will get involved to write good English due to its importance in cyberspace community as an international language where the student will work hard to write an understandable and correct English language to post on his/her website.

The study presented in this paper builds upon previous studies in the literature. It reports on the students' experience using blogs for pre-class readings and post-class reflections.

Methodology

Our sample study included five ESL graduate students in a one semester course of teaching methods, and 90 Software Engineering students in an undergraduate Information Technology program. We used the blogging tool wordpress (Wordpress, 2009). We created two blogs, one for the ESL course [1], and one for the Software Engineering (SW Eng) course [2].

Students were asked to read an assignment posted on the blog by the instructor. The assignment was a pre-class reading on a selected topic. Students were asked to post any questions or comments they have with regards to the reading assignment on the blog. The students then had a discussion in class on the topic of the reading assignment. Afterwards, they were asked to post their reflections on the blog about their class experience.

To evaluate students' experience on using the blogs, a survey was conducted to measure students' attitudes towards using the blog and its effectiveness as a tool for encouraging pre-class readings and post class reflections (one minute paper).

Results

All students in the ESL program and 35 students from the Software Engineering course responded to the survey. We asked them if they have used blogs before, and if so how did they use them. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Statistics for Students' Blog Experience

| Have you used blogs prior to this class? | Percentage | |
|--|------------|-----|
| | SW Eng. | ESL |
| No | 34% | 20% |
| Yes, for commenting on someone else's blog | 20% | 80% |
| Yes, for writing on my personal blog | 46% | 0% |

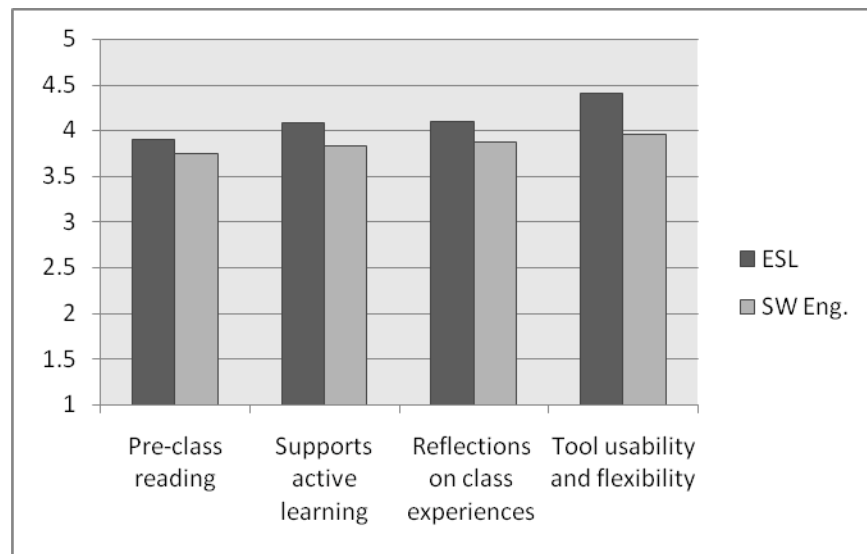
We presented a series of statements, and asked students to rate their agreement level on these statements (5–1, where 5 indicates strongly agree, and 1 indicates strongly disagree).

The survey included 19 statements grouped into four main categories:

- How helpful was the blog for supporting pre-class reading assignments.
- How helpful was the blog in supporting active learning (discussions and peer interactions).
- How helpful was the blog in supporting reflection on class experiences.
- The usability and flexibility of the tool.

The average of the responses for each group of questions is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Students' Perceptions on Blog Experience



In an open question, students were asked if they had any comments, or suggestions for improving the blog experience. The responses for the Software Engineering students and the ESL students are shown in Table 2 and Table 3, respectively.

Table 2: Students Comments on the Blog Activity (SW Eng.)

| Software Engineering Students |
|---|
| If you really want the students to use the blog, you have to give a part of the grade. It's not the best option, but it's the only way to get the interaction started. |
| We didn't have enough time to actually enjoy working on the blog. |
| The pre-class blog discussion didn't work for me at all. I think you should figure out another way of discussion because the class discussion at the first time was much helpful. Maybe it should be like a chat that all experts contribute in.. or anything else |
| The idea of a bog is great, it allows one to say his/her opinion whenever the feel like it. However, I think class discussion is much more interesting than blog discussion |
| In my opinion, the blog discussion was less useful than the class discussion. Also I think more instructor presence is required on the blog. |
| The part that we were required to read was extremely difficult; therefore most students were only asking questions on the blog. The discussion was not apparent. |
| the blog is nice & good idea but still no yet. . . because the discussions face-to-face is more interactive ... |

We also analyzed the number of comments on the blogs. The average number of posts per student was 2 comments/student for the ESL blog and 1 comment per a student for the Software Engineering blog.

Table 3: Students Comments on the Blog Activity (ESL)

| ESL Students |
|---|
| Some students, like me, do not like face to face confrontation. They prefer to express points of view on line. |
| I like reading others points of view and having flexibility in time when doing my home work. |
| In terms of explaining an idea to a friend , I like to meet her face to face to make sure she got it |
| Blogs does not encourage shay students, bur help when teacher discuss with students their comments on line. |
| I have more time to think and re think, write and rewrite my ideas and organize them. |
| I think blogs increase the sense of community in the class, because it helps students and teachers to know more about each other's through communication and feedback sessions. |
| This experience inspired me. I love to create my own blog for my ESL students in the future. Thank you |

Discussion

The results show that a majority of students have prior experience with blogs, and therefore the technology was familiar. An interesting finding from this study shows that the ESL students and the Software Engineering students had similar perceptions towards the blog activity as can be seen in Figure 1. The higher average rating by the ESL students might be due to the small sample size.

Looking at the agreement level shown in Figure 1, we can see that students generally agree that the blog activity helped in encouraging students to do pre-class reading assignments. It was also helpful supporting discussions and peer interactions. They also agreed that the blog supported reflection on class experiences. With regards to the flexibility and usability of the tool, it was the most agreed upon from both classes.

Although student perceptions seem positive, the comments the Software Engineering students provided in the survey, shown in Table 2, indicate that they are not completely satisfied with the experience.

They indicated that there was a considerable lack of interaction and communication between students on the blog. This is confirmed by our

observations on the blog, most of the student contributions were questions. There are very rare occasions where one finds a student answering or engaging in discussion. This might be due to several factors: the timing of the activity, and the difficulty level of the reading assignment. The blog activity was introduced later in the course where students had exams, reports, and projects to hand in. With regards to the reading assignment, students complained during the lecture, and in their comments that the assignment was difficult to understand, and therefore they only asked questions waiting for someone to answer them.

Another issue which was raised by the students was that they did not feel the instructor presence on the blog. This is a very important and critical factor to engage students in the discussion. However, with large classes, this is not always possible.

Comparing blog observations for the ESL course with the Software Engineering course, we can see some differences. Students in the ESL class have shown reflective interaction and peer support in the discussion on the blog. This may be due to the following reasons: the class size, the maturity level of the students, the nature of the reading assignment, and the discipline. The ESL class was very small compared to the Software Engineering class. This may describe why the discussions were apparent. In small classes it is easier for the instructor and peers to engage in discussion. The ESL students were graduate students in an English Language learning course, while the Software Engineering students were undergraduates in Information Technology. The reading assignment given to the Software Engineering students was a new topic, which has not been introduced to the students before and included a number of complex concepts.

The reading assignment for the ESL students was part of their reading materials in the course. The reading materials itself consists of several articles on the use of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) in education and some other topics on ESL. Most of the articles were downloaded to the blog for students to read and discuss. It is important to mention that the ESL graduate students were in their third semester of the program. They are more familiar with large assignments of reading long articles, and complicated research studies. Another factor, and due to the small number of students, the instructor was mostly available to handle the discussion and comment to students postings.

In general, the results indicate that the blog activity was successful in encouraging students to do readings before class and helped them prepare for the discussion in class. However, for the experience to be successful it is important to consider the class size, the level of students, the reading assignment, and the timing of the assignment.

Conclusion

This paper described using blogs to encourage pre-class reading assignments and enhance learning and discussion during class.

It shows that blogs are an effective tool that can be used to encourage students to do pre-class readings and post-class reflections. The research was also valuable in evaluating students' general attitudes towards the use of blogs in higher education. However, for blogs to be effective, the following must be considered:

- The instructor presence should be more apparent.
- The timing of the activity should be suitable.
- The difficulty level of the reading assignment should be suitable for students to enable them to read and understand on their own.
- The suitability of the reading assignment for discussion.
- Class size, for large classes it is important that there is sufficient moderation so that the experience would be valuable.

This study provides a basis for our future research. We plan to introduce blog activities in future courses, taking into account the lessons we learned in this experience.

Endnotes

[1] ESL Blog at [http:// http://esldeploma.wordpress.com](http://esldeploma.wordpress.com)

[2] Software Engineering Activities Blog at <http://sweng.wordpress.com>

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