

Syllabus²⁰⁰⁴

Instructional Models for Using Weblogs In eLearning: A Case Study from a Virtual and Hybrid Course

J. David Betts, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, College of Education University of Arizona
Stuart J. Glogoff, Adjunct Professor, School of Information Resources and Library
Science, University of Arizona

Abstract

During the past academic year, faculty members at the University of Arizona have integrated blogging in their courses. The courses have been offered either totally online or as hybrid instruction where students met in a traditional classroom environment but other coursework and communication occurred virtually. Blogs were used in conjunction with other instructional technology tools such as a learning management system, threaded discussion forums, email, and chat rooms. At the end of the course, students completed surveys to assess their use of blogs for skills acquisition as well as their general acceptance of this technology. This presentation will report on models for using blogs to extend Clark and Mayer's three instructional types and recommendations for faculty who are using or considering using blogs in their courses based on strengths and limitations observed by the presenters.

Introduction

In recent years, the professional literature has been filled with calls to faculty to replace the pedagogical models that have long been entrenched in higher education for models that better engage students in learner-centered applications. Reports on the learning and behavioral tendencies of the *Network Generation*¹ and most recently of the *Millennials*² emphasize that these are students who have grown up in the information age with technology and developed skills, aptitude and attitudes different from many of those active in instruction. For example, they look to the Internet for information and are comfortable interacting online with their peers; they work collaboratively and thrive on interactivity; and they have an expectation of immediacy not just in problem-solving and knowledge acquisition but from their instructors as well.

What approaches might be successful to design pedagogical models that cater to self-directed learners? A first step toward developing models of scholarship aligned to innovative teaching is to explore ways that blend technology with the skill sets being developed in core subject areas. As best practices are identified, they can be incorporated into revised pedagogical models.

¹ Tapscott, Don. *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Network Generation*. New York & London: McGraw-Hill, c. 1998.

² Oblinger, Diana. "Boomers, Gen-Xers, and Millennials: Understanding the 'New Students,'" *Educause Review*(July/August) 2003, p. 37-47

Blogging and Instructional Techniques for E-learning

In their book *eLearning and the Science of Instruction: Proven Guidelines for Consumers and Designers of Multimedia Learning*, Ruth Colvin-Clark and Richard E. Mayer identified three instructional techniques for e-learning.

1. Receptive: information acquisition
2. Directive: response strengthening
3. Guided Discovery: knowledge construction³

The receptive technique emphasizes acquiring information and involves building instructional modules that open avenues to greater amounts of information while limiting application and experimentation. In contrast to this, the directive technique emphasizes frequent responses from learners with immediate feedback from the instructor. Thirdly, guided discovery places the instructor in the role of expert who leads students toward solving real-life challenges and identifying the appropriate conceptual codecs to support student knowledge acquisition. Blogging is a simple technology that can be used to construct learning environments that fulfill these three instructional techniques.

The Hybrid Experience

The Students

Learning, Reading and Culture (LRC551) was taught as a hybrid course through the College of Education. LRC551, Reading Writing and Text, addressed “readers and writers as users of language; reading and writing as language processes; and what makes a text a text.” It drew students from the College of Education, Department of Linguistics and a specialized program called Second Language Acquisition and Teaching (SLAT). SLAT is an interdisciplinary doctoral program designed to provide advanced training for researchers, teachers, and administrators concerned with second language acquisition and teaching.

The Blog

A blog was introduced as a formative experiment to give students a way to experience so-called “New Literacies” and to help to build a classroom community of learners. It was used for class assignments, reflections, and journal entries. In addition, it served to extend discussions between class meetings and helped in collaborations. Many used it very much for the course activities: literacy inventories, such as lists, purposive reading, observation notes, and linguistic analysis. Other students brought in ideas, terminology and methodology from their other courses. Many were coming directly from their own classroom and brought issues from that environment. Students used their blog to chronicle the development of their class projects, which they also regularly presented in class. These students for the most part knew what their classmates were working on

³ Clark, Ruth Colvin, and Mayer, Richard E. (2003) *e-Learning and the Science of Instruction: Proven Guidelines for Consumers and Designers of Multimedia Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, p. 28.

and bringing to the class. The blog was also a topic of discussion during class time so that aspects of the class as a community were present in a more obvious way. We observed ways in which the experience affected the relationships between readers, writers and text.

The Virtual Experience

During the summer of 2003 Decision Making for Information Professionals (IRLS613) was a virtual course offering from the University of Arizona School of Information Resources and Library Science. IRLS613 emphasizes an understanding of the various technologies and systems utilized by information professionals in order to make informed decisions when recommending a system for purchase or use by a client. Approximately thirty students, dispersed from Alaska to Ohio and California to New Mexico, were enrolled. Some students were already working in libraries in a staff or professional capacity; others came from different disciplines, such as education. Ages ranged from early twenties to early fifties. The one common thread was that all were working towards a Master's degree in the same discipline. The characteristics attributed to the Network Generation and Millennials simply did not apply.

The Blogs

Blogs were used in IRLS613 to share learning experiences, provide feedback to the instructor and fellow students, and to demonstrate an understanding of particular learning principles developed during the course.

Sharing information about new technology was at the heart of the Technology News blog. In Technology News, students made direct observations of uses of technology, provided summaries with links to complete articles and added entries relevant to their discipline or personal interests. The IRLS613 blog was initially intended for postings that could be helpful to students regarding use of the course's different instructional resources. It evolved into a blog where students posted entries about topics of interest and serves as an example of a virtual community in practice because these changes were derived totally by student actions addressing a perceived need.

Survey Results

LRC551

The survey used was an informal instrument to see how the blog was viewed as a part of this course. Thirteen students (of 17 present) responded to a survey that was distributed on the last night of class with the University Student Evaluation Forms for the course.

Most of these folks had not had their own experience in web publishing. Only one person indicated that she had participated in "something like a blog" before. Six individuals indicated that they wanted to continue using blog551. (The blog was monitored for one semester. No one posted any messages. I used my blog three or four

times.)

Responding to a question about whether they would use a blog in a future class (either teaching or taking), five said yes, and there were three maybes.

Students in LRC551 were asked what they liked most about using the LRC551 blogs. Comments included: "It was an opportunity to participate," it was "easily accessible" and "user friendly." The blog "extended class discussions ...without taking classtime." It was a "'safe' way to participate." One student noted that she liked being able to "participate in writing, not necessarily verbally." Asked how they might use a blog themselves, their responses included: "as a journal," "for notes," and "to post examples." One student wrote that she saw it as a way to introduce "new technology as a way to study new literacies." Another suggested using blogs as "a way for scholars to discuss articles." Several mentioned that it could be a "place for students" that could promote "interactivity."

A small number of students were negative on the value of blogging as a good way to learn or to participate in class. One voiced an opinion that it was intrusive to her privacy.

IRLS613

An end-of-course survey revealed that although the vast majority (95%) of students responding were novice blog users 90% agreed that the "Technology News Web log was a good way for me to learn more about technology." Twenty-nine percent reported that they joined another blog since the course began. A question intended to gauge student attitudes toward using blogs revealed that 70 percent (70%) of the students planned to join at least one blog in the coming six months and 76% "would like to continue using the Technology News Web log."

In the student assessment data collected at the end of IRLS613, one student commented that the best thing about using a blog was its "casual sharing of information." She wrote: "I almost got the feeling I was sitting in a coffee shop somewhere and the person next to me pouring over the newspaper casually said, 'Hey, did you hear about this new thing that just came out...?'" This is the sort of *sense of place* that we do not realize fully with threaded discussion forums, emails and chatrooms.

Observations

Betts

I found the blogs to have a great deal of potential for making more of an integrated experience of the weekly graduate course. The examples noted of students who admitted in the course of lengthy blog entries that they generally do not talk in class were particularly interesting. The ways that students made their blogs work for them was also very enlightening. Some submitted almost all of their assignments on their blog. Others included attached files and some used the blogs as an extended entry gate

(this was the only editing I had to do – when students posted a blog entry that was more than four or five paragraphs long I would edit it in to the continued entry). We started the blog as an experiment related to the subject of the class, New Literacies, and we got to actively participate in them.

Most of my students are teachers and I am very interested in supporting them in putting these new affordances to work in their classroom practice. A student in my seminar the following semester undertook, as an action research project, to establish a blog for her eighth grade English classes. From scratch, dealing with her school and district and limited on-site support, she wasn't completely successful, but she reports that she was able to establish a web-based presence for one class by using NiceNet (www.nicenet.org). She created an author study research assignment and provided the threaded discussion tool for students to publish and read their work. The students who used the web tool “had a higher level of assignment completions.” Like me, she plans to try it again next year.

I plan to have the blog set up when I teach LRC 551 again. I will organize it a little differently. By assigning weekly blog reading and response at the beginning of the semester I hope to get people used to using it as they work on their collaborative projects and share resources. Desirable outcomes would be to introduce it in such a way that students are able to put it to work as authentic literacy experience for their students, and for classroom community-building.

Glogoff

Blogging is well-suited as a tool that furthers learning for this discipline because it can be constructed to emphasize declarative or procedural forms of knowledge, where learners either come to know the basic knowledge schemas of the discipline or describe how to apply their knowledge. Because the students taking the course came from different disciplines and professional backgrounds, there is potential in attracting interest from a wider audience of teaching faculty in whose disciplines information acquisition, response strengthening and knowledge construction are important.

Faculty considering using blogs should weigh whether or not individual student blogs should be assigned or if “community” blogs will serve the purpose. My observation from the Summer 2003 course was that far too many students lurked rather than participated, even though participation was required and points towards the final grade were assigned based upon the quality of ones participation. During Summer 2004, each student in the course has been assigned a blog and is required to post on assigned topics each week. It will be interesting to learn if this technique strengthens participation and draws the more reluctant bloggers into stronger information gathering practices.