

Conversations beyond the classroom: Blogging in a professional development course

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Abstract

This paper considers the reasons for utilising a blog as an integral component of a professional development program for natural resource managers wishing to improve their engagement with Indigenous communities. It reports on a preliminary analysis from the trial of the course, and reflects on the role of blogs in educational contexts beyond the classroom.

Keywords

weblog, blog, professional development course, non-formal education

Introduction

'New forms of social software' are continually emerging (Chen et al., 2005), offering new levels of interactivity and varying modes of connectivity. Educators have been keen to deploy these technologies in the belief that reflective learning and knowledge generation are enhanced through online group communications. Weblogs or blogs are one of the emerging technologies offering flexible and accessible opportunities for implementing student-centred pedagogical practices.

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of deploying a multi-participant blog as a component of a blended staff development program aimed at improving cross cultural engagement for professional natural and cultural resource managers (NCRM) working with Indigenous communities around Australia. It comprises an online, guided reading component delivered via CDROM and a week long workshop in Darwin. The professional development program is not assessed, but participants are encouraged to keep a reflective journal and participate in online discussion before attending the face-to-face workshop co-hosted by university and Indigenous facilitators. The blog was designed to be an integral part of the web-based reading component. To encourage reflective engagement with the readings the study guide posed questions as well as discussion topics that linked directly to the blog.

A trial of the program was organised spanning May to July 2005 and involving 11 participants (two of whom dropped out) and three facilitators. A course evaluation session was held at the end of the workshop, and further feedback was garnered through phone interviews three weeks later with six of the nine participants who completed the program. This paper focuses on responses to the blog discussion component and does not report on the evaluation of the course as a whole.

Blogs in education

In education blogs have mostly been used as a reflective learning tool in areas familiar with using journals such as education and librarianship (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). The challenge for the professional development course was to see if the blog could engage busy professionals from mostly science backgrounds. For the trial we opted for a multi-participant blog powered by *Wordpress* software and linked from the CDROM course materials. As this was our (and the students') first experience with blogging we kept things as simple as possible, choosing not to utilise RSS feeds and other features.

While academic research on blogs is scarce, a number of commentators argue that blogs encourage reflective learning (Chen et al., 2005), decrease feelings of isolation for distance students (Dickey, 2004), and promote the shift from surface to deep learning (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003; Oravec, n.d., in Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Ferdig and Trammel (in Williams & Jacobs, 2004) argue that the immediacy and commentary based systems of blogging lead to reflection and analysis and contextualisation of learning via hyperlinks. They further contend that blogs are more successful in promoting interactivity that is conversational as opposed to other online discussion. Research also suggests that blogs allow a more creative response from students (Oravec, 2003) and that the open and interlinked nature of blogs connects learners to contexts beyond the classroom (Baim, 2004; Halavais, 2004). Although some of these features are common to other online communication technologies, some proponents suggest that blogs are better than asynchronous threaded discussion forums as

they allow a freer flowing, creative and contextualised discussion that is more like a conversation (Richardson, n.d., in Downes, 2004). Blogs do not require a response to a question and give the participant freedom to comment. Ferdig and Trammel sum up the case for blogging, saying that it is 'a mode of interaction more conducive to improved student and teacher relationships, active learning, higher order thinking, and greater flexibility in teaching and learning' (in Williams & Jacobs, 2005, pp. 4–5).

Why choose a blog?

Most of the educational research on blogs relates to formal settings, but can blogs be a useful pedagogical device for professionals improving their skills and knowledge? Unlike formal students these learners are often well connected to wider contexts, have minimal experience of blogging, and are mostly unfamiliar with online discussion technologies and practices in learning.

Three features of blogging led to the decision to experiment with a blog in the professional development course. These were:

- i. Flexibility and the ability to recontextualise information (Williams & Jacobs, 2004).
- ii. Public face of blogs and connectedness across time and between groups.
- iii. Conversation as learning.

Flexibility and the ability to recontextualise information

Online discussion has become a fairly common feature of flexible and online learning. Asynchronous discussion helps alleviate the constraints of live or synchronous discussion, but most often discussions are time-constrained with students expected to move through the material in an ordered manner. In a professional development program we could not guarantee that all participants would be doing a particular topic at the same time. Some might choose to complete a topic a week, but many would study in concentrated bursts of learning/reading in between field trips and other work constraints.

Blogs are flexible and fluid and provide the ability to view posts in a variety of ways. They have an accessible interface, allowing a direct and immediate engagement between the reader and the posts. Because the blog is an uncomplicated but powerful organisational form (Oravec, 2003) it allows the reader/viewer to recontextualise posts according to categories, as well as allowing the user to use key words to search for posts on any topic. In this way the learners did not have to be working on the same topic at the same time. They could simply gather together the posts relating to the topic they were interested in, view these, and make their own posts and comments. The fact that emails alert the original writer when a comment is made means that interactions can happen in a non-linear mode. In this way the blog allowed for a highly flexible program without losing the benefits of online discussion and communication. It permitted the individual to tailor the course to the rhythms and pressures of their professional work, that often required fieldwork, and where unexpected events can intervene. Thus the blog facilitated a form of 'time-shifting' whereby participants could be part of conversations without being tied down to a predetermined study plan.

Forming a community of practice

Oravec maintains that one of the key motivations for using blogs in educational settings is for 'forming and maintaining knowledge communities' (2003, p. 229). This aligns well with the goals of the 'Improving cross cultural engagement' program, which is aimed at changing practices in the natural and cultural resource management field. The topics cover confronting and challenging material and it was hoped that the blog would be a focus for ongoing support and engender the development of a community of practice that could sustain practitioners during and after the course.

The public nature of blogs allows course participants to continue using the blog after the formal conclusion of the course, thereby encouraging an ongoing process of discussion and development. Some claim that blogging is 'socially-transformative' (Herring et al., 2004) but it is unclear whether it can usefully support the types of transformations that the course is designed to engender. As there has only been a single iteration of the course, it remains to be seen if such a goal is realistic.

Conversation as learning

Adult learning theory suggests that learners are resources with much to offer each other. In such a learning community conversation can be a powerful tool for learning and transformation. The unconstrained format of the blog allows learners to make links between topics and to relate topics to work settings and personal views.

The fluid and open nature of blogging is considered to be more attuned to dialogue than monologue. Downes argues that blogs ‘evolve to resemble conversations’ and that this informal aspect can bring learning to life (Downes, 2004). The blog provided an open space where participants could direct the discussion to issues of interest to them. We were curious as to the sorts of conversations and discursive constructions the blog would engender or inhibit, and whether it acted as an aid to learning. Could it help participants become reflective practitioners?

Results

Participants started the program in two groups, one six weeks prior to the workshop and some stragglers a few weeks later. Participants approached the blog with a mix of anxiety and anticipation, but it proved to be an accessible and easy-to-use technology.

Models for online engagement stress a staged approach moving from engaging the technology, building social connections, through to higher-level cognition. As a starting point the facilitators invited participants (via an initial post to the blog and emails) to post an introduction about themselves and why they were doing the course. By the end of week one the first posts were made and over the next two weeks six of the eight who started in the first group had posted their introductions. Rather than simply social ‘getting-to-know’ interactions, these were mostly rich and reflective pieces engendering a range of comments and discussion. For example, the first person to post their introduction started thus:

I am pretty nervous about writing this introductory ‘blog’. It is hard to write about yourself to an unknown audience. So much about who we are is to do with how we convey information, the force of personality, and the assumptions of the watching listeners based on what they can ‘know about you’ by looking at you. Class, race, gender assumptions are all assigned in that initial ‘looking’. In fact, in contemporary times, it is probable that so many of the assumptions associated with ‘looking’ are going to be just part of the story of who I am—and who you define yourself to be in listening and looking and summarising me. ... On the other hand, this leaves the focus on the words and it is hard to know how they will be perceived.

The leap into reflective text may be explained in part by the educational level and work experience of the participants — two-thirds either had PhDs or were doctoral students near completion and were employed in professional or research positions. They were responding after the first reading topic, which tackled issues of race, culture and identity, and although the blog wasn’t used extensively the issues raised and biographical information shared was thoughtful and constructive. However, by the time the stragglers had posted their introductions interaction had dropped and no comments (except by the facilitators) were made. The majority of participants only made one post, most introductions posted in the first few weeks received on average two comments other than from the facilitators, but only one of the later posts received a comment. Only two participants utilised the blog to directly address course content, but these posts engendered only one comment. Despite a promising start the blog was largely underutilised.

When asked why they didn’t use the blog to a great extent, respondents to the telephone interviews raised a range of issues mostly related to a lack of time, demand for high quality posts, professional work and travel demands, lack of structure, and the forthcoming face-to-face workshop.

Time pressure was the predominant reason given for not using the blog. While most started the program with enthusiasm, the amount of reading combined with work and travel pressures meant that participants struggled just to complete the required reading in the limited time before the workshop. Blogging was seen as an optional and time-consuming alternative. Added to this, a number of participants placed emphasis on the need for high quality interactions, saying they had little interest in reading chatty or partly formed ideas. In explaining why s/he hadn’t used the blog more, one participant said that it would have taken too long to compose something professional enough to put online: ‘Why bother’ s/he commented ‘when the quality of the set reading in the course was so high’.

Structure/flexibility tradeoffs are never easy. The blog was chosen to maximise the flexibility of the program but in the phone interviews some participants said they wanted more structure, more facilitation, more prompting, more encouragement and specific questions to respond to. But as a non-formal course there is no ability to require participation and it is uncertain whether added structure would increase use. Finally, some commented that the anticipation of the face-to-face workshop meant they had less impetus to put effort into online communication.

Another interesting issue arose from the public nature of blogging. Paradoxically, the ‘risky space’ of blogs that align them to social transformation seemed to work against the development of online conversations on topics related to personal development. The public nature of the blog clashed with participants’ desire for a ‘safe space’ in which to reveal information. The content of the course took participants out of their comfort

zone, requiring learners to examine their own values and prejudices, as well as challenging some widely held practices within NCRM. From a professional as well as personal point of view, some were uncomfortable with revealing personal material in a potentially public forum. As one participant noted: 'I have a creepy feeling about it staying online ... the public-ness is a problem ... I don't want to be so exposed'.

Despite the lack of success of the blog, the respondents to the phone interviews mostly thought it should stay as part of the course but with increased structure, clearer purpose, and more privacy. They appreciated knowing something about the other participants before the workshop, and felt the blog had 'potential'. They also suggested doubling the time available for the reading component of the course to allow sufficient time to complete the reading, have time to digest challenging material and time to participate in online communication.

Conclusion

The failure of the blog to deliver the expected benefits was due to a number of factors both intrinsic and extrinsic to the blog as a form of social software. Given the desire for structure and privacy other forms of social software may better match the requirements of course participants. From a learning perspective, the blog played only an incidental role in shaping the pedagogical outcomes of the program. In the end, the blog was perhaps most useful as a sort of 'middle space' in a blended learning environment (Oravec, 2003) mediating the structured online materials and the face-to-face workshop. It provided a transitional space during the distance reading component and allowed the participants to gain a sense of each other before meeting in person, and may have assisted in the success of the workshop.

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