

Bloggng for learning: Integrating social networks for staff development

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This paper provides the background and context to a pilot study to investigate the use of blogs (personal reflections) and wikis/clogs (blogs used for collaborative reflections) to support authentic learning, communication and the development of communities of practice within a higher education environment. The study is supported by the ascilite Community Mentoring Program and the results of the investigation will be reported in full at the conference.

Keywords: staff development, blogs, clogs, authentic learning, social networks, communities of practice

Background and context

The value of community network tools to the higher education sector is gaining more and more attention (Farmer & Bartlett-Bragg, 2005). And yet some organisations are concerned at the potential loss of control from such communication environments (Sims, 2006). To better understand the value of blogs, in the context of staff development, this paper introduces an application and investigation into the use of blogging as part of a staff development programme. The blog aspect of this project was conducted as part of the ascilite community mentoring program.

This paper will describe how a blog was established and used to facilitate communication between participants of a professional development programme (<http://eldss.edc.polyu.edu.hk/escholars.html>). The blog was established to encourage continued dialogue between staff, from different departments across the institution, as they worked independently to redesign their own courses for blended learning.

At the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU) the 'e-Scholars Programme' was designed to guide academic staff, as a cohort, to successfully integrate online learning with the face-to-face classroom, and to expand the learning environment. The first cohort of staff began their participation in this programme in June 2006. Participants engaged in a planned course of professional development to learn about and apply the 'T5' approach to course design and delivery (Salter, Richards & Carey, 2004), while they worked on a specific course to 'rethink' their subject and incorporate blended learning approaches. The instructional design goal was to shift staff from a 'teaching paradigm' to a 'learning paradigm' in the redesign of their courses (Reigeluth, 1999).

In our approach, a 'teaching paradigm' is conceived as a learning space (classroom or online) in which an instructor's approach to course design and delivery focuses mainly on how to teach the material (transmitting information). In a 'learning paradigm' the focus shifts to an increased consideration of the students' role. In course design within a 'learning-paradigm' the question shifts from asking 'what will the instructor do to 'teach' this material?' (presentation of information), to the question 'what does a student need to do to 'learn' this material?' (promotion of critical thought). Achievement of this goal can be evaluated by looking at: a) the finished product (the course) and assessing the amount of learning tasks created as opportunities for student interaction with the course material, the instructor and with peers b) assessing the amount of actual engagement in the learning process as measured by completion of task deliverables during the course delivery and c) assessing subsequent changes in the use of class time by the incorporation of online leaning tasks.

Specifically, in the primarily lecture-based, teacher-directed instructional paradigm common in many Asian universities, the goal of the e-Scholars project was to guide teachers as they re-designed their subjects from the usual approach of simply 'putting content online' in the form of PowerPoints and course notes, to creating an interactive learning environment by incorporating online tasks with feedback. In addition, participants considered how the incorporation of the online component could allow changes in the use of classroom time, with a shift from lecture only to discussion and dialogue. The e-Scholars Blog is one component of the e-Scholars staff development project.

The E-Scholars blog pilot project

The primary purpose of the e-Scholars blog pilot project is to investigate the use and value of personal reflections (blogs) and collaborative reflections (wikis/clogs) in teaching and learning by incorporating the use of a blog into the e-Scholars staff development program at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. While blogs are by no means new, they remain for some institutions a form of 'non-mainstream' communications and therefore problematic for inclusion in formal enterprise learning management systems. In addition, many staff involved in the support of teaching and learning in higher education are unfamiliar with the creation and use of blogs. It is anticipated that the outcomes of this study will be valuable to the broad educational technology community as well as provide specific guidance for academic staff wishing to integrate blogs and clogs into their teaching and learning environments.

The e-Scholars project includes four phases: professional development, subject development, implementation and evaluation. The e-Scholars blog was introduced during the subject development phase and continued into the course implementation phase to extend the community of practice created during the e-Scholars professional development phase.

Lave and Wenger describe that a community of practice involves a set of relationships over time, organized around a particular knowledge area or activity that gives members a sense of joint enterprise and identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999). For a community of practice to function and be sustainable, continued opportunities for sharing ideas and practices must be provided. During the e-Scholars professional development workshop, sessions were designed as coaching opportunities for participants to 'learn by doing' and receive feedback to their course ideas in progress; this was the beginning of set of relationships well suited to becoming a sustained community of practice. In the face-to-face coaching sessions, the coach/facilitator ensures that new ideas are fully understood so that they can be incorporated into practice. Upon completion of the face-to-face sessions, and given the beginning of working relationships formed within the group, the potential of blogs was identified as: a) a vehicle to enhance communication between participants by enabling them to continue to develop social networks outside the formal professional development setting and b) to model aspects of interactive online communications.

An e-Scholars blog was created as a vehicle to continue the community of practice within an online setting during the subject development and implementation phases of the project. One of the challenges instructors face in course redesign, is that following professional development opportunities, the expectation is for them to implement these ideas in isolation. An important part of the face-to-face coaching sessions is the dialogue between participants; this allows them to clarify misconceptions about using online technologies, describe preliminary ideas for tasks, receive feedback to help in developing these ideas and discuss best practices. The instructional designer of the e-Scholars program wanted to experiment to see if the use of a blog would provide a venue for continued dialogue. The primary goals of the e-Scholars blog are:

- to provide an easy to use online collaborative space for the e-Scholars
- to provide a venue for discussions around the 'joys', 'frustrations' and 'philosophies' of participants as they struggled to put ideas for course redesign in to practice
- to provide a centralized venue for participants to post their task ideas and course redesign ideas and then receive feedback from other participants (an online way to extend the face to face coaching sessions).

A secondary goal of the e-Scholars blog was to introduce staff to the notion of the use of a blog as a collaborative group tool and to model how this may be adapted for use in their own courses. The majority

of the participants in this program are relatively new users of technology for learning and teaching purposes. Most have not used a blog, or developed their own blog for teaching purposes. By providing the blog as a venue for them to discuss ideas as learners, while participating in the e-Scholars program, they can learn about the tool in an authentic session. Later, during their course planning, participants may wish to incorporate a blog into their own subjects as a vehicle for students to enter reflective comments about course concepts and discuss ideas in progress with peers.

The use of the e-Scholars blog is currently in the early stages of implementation and will be evaluated over a four month period. The fourteen staff, representing six departments who participated in the first e-Scholars Program are the primary invited participants to the e-Scholars blog. During the first four months of the blogging period, eight will teach their re-designed course; six will continue with development phase for course delivery during the next term. In addition, several international guests will be invited to join to continue the dialogue and provide feedback to the staff.

Following completion of the study, and for formal presentation of the outcomes at the ascilite conference, the following factors will be addressed:

- How did participants use blogs and clogs?
- What types of issues were discussed?
- What types of questions were posed?
- Did participants provide feedback to others on their course development or implementation questions?
- Did participants find the blog easy to use?
- Did participants find the blog helpful for both the design and implementation phases of their course redesign project?
- Did participants choose to incorporate a blog as a collaborative tool in their redesigned course?

Summary

The importance of social networking tools to education is that they can be seen as an emergent form of alternative communication. Therefore it is essential that we continue to investigate and understand how new users respond to these tool sets. In addition to the research itself, the presentation will also reflect on the mentoring experience and the value of such programs to act as a catalyst to investigations that would not otherwise have been initiated.

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