

WEBLOGGING AS A PART OF ACADEMIC PRACTICE: REFLECTIONS ON GRADUATE STUDENTS' EARLY EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Weblogs are being used for a range of purposes in education. To support learning, pedagogical and technological implementation issues need to be informed by user experience. In this paper we present the early experiences of nine graduate students who used weblogs during a three month period to support their academic progress. An analysis of participant reflections regarding their expectations, processes, and outcomes from using the weblogs are presented. Generally, participants indicated that they considered the weblog environment to be journal-like and suitable for reflection, and while they found the public nature of the internet inhibiting, they recognized that there was value in publishing their ideas. The perceived lack of interaction was also a factor that constrained value for the participants. Given time, participants recognized that keeping a weblog might prove worthwhile for individual development through writing. Implications for how to make a weblog environment more conducive to the social and developmental needs of graduate students are suggested.

KEYWORDS

Graduate Education, Innovative Practice, Learning Technologies, Pedagogical Issues, Weblogs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Weblogs are increasingly being used in educational contexts at various levels. While they are typically used as a reflective tool, there are some interesting theoretic and empirical questions inherent in their design and use. One is their potential role as a context in which to develop particular skills of an academic researcher as a legitimate peripheral participant (Lave & Wenger, 1991) within the broader academic community (Freeman, in preparation). Weblogs occupy a unique position as individually authored documents in a public context. As well the potential of weblogs for research has been recognized as "documenting rather than structuring the trail of thought" (Mortensen & Walker, 2002, p.261); as creating a context for "personal publishing" (Downes, 2004); and as an environment that supports the "essential acts of blogging; close reading and interpretation. Blogging, at base, is writing down what you think when you read others. If you keep at it, others will eventually write down what they think when they read you, and you'll enter a new realm of blogging, a new realm of human connection." (Smith, 2004). Smith's quote highlights one of the significant but often implicit elements in academic practice, that of attending to key developments in the research sphere in order to further our collective understanding through subsequent research studies. In

addition, he notes the social response element of blogging, in that people will come to read your work and comment on it as well. As such the blogging environment offers an environment that precedes official publication routes, such as journal articles, but one that can provide a location to try out ideas which may develop into more formal publications.

It is all these possibilities that make weblogs an intriguing educational tool, particularly for emergent academic researchers developing their own voice and point of view with a need to connect with distributed networks of others with similar research interests. However, the technology is recent enough that there is little published research out there beyond individual commentary, case studies (Blanchard, 2004), and anecdotal reports of use. Xie & Sharma (2004) examined student experiences and the results from this study will be compared to those findings.

To be useful, graduate students must learn how to accommodate this tool and its possibilities within their own personal learning context--not everyone immediately gravitates to such a writing intensive and public process, and nor is it clear what blogging's educational affordances really are, particularly when linked with opportunities for distributed connections to other people and their ideas through the easy linking and tagging functionality within social networking tools (Tosh & Wermuller, 2004). The goal of this paper was therefore to begin to document some of the early reactions of novices to such an environment and to thus ground future introductions of this technology in a more informed base of student experience.

2. METHODS

This study is part of a larger online project, named GRAIL that focuses on creating supports for the development of academic identity among graduate students studying primarily online (see <http://grail.oise.utoronto.ca/home/>). The overall methodology is that of design research (Brown, 1992; Collins, 1992; The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003; University of California, 1997) in which a series of iterative intervention and redesign cycles are reported. Such a methodological approach is particularly appropriate for educational contexts in which there is little existing research and where detailed descriptive data is necessary to support cycles of theory-based design and development.

The data reported in this paper derive from an iteration of a larger study and focus on nine graduate students in Education. Four of the participants in this study had experience with weblogs in a previous online course in which they were expected to write weekly reflective entries about their learning. One participant of this group was already an established weblogger. The remaining five participants in this study had no experience with weblogs. All participants were already proficient with web-based technologies. The majority of the participants are working full-time while engaged in graduate studies and have completed their coursework. One participant is working towards a Masters of Education, the others are doctoral students.

The students were not given specific directions regarding what or how much to write in their weblogs. They were each provided with an individual weblog and some brief training on how to use it. Participants volunteered to use the weblogs in the context of this study out of an interest in how the technology might be useful to them.

Five general questions were used to focus participant responses and material addressing these question in the form of weblog posts and entries in a collaborative writing environment (<http://www.writely.com>) comprise the data sources for this paper. The questions included:

1. What is the purpose of a weblog in your mind?
2. Are weblogs more of a public or private tool to you?
3. Do you see them as a primarily individual or collaborative activity?
4. If collaborative, what role might others play?
5. What does the idea of posting your thoughts online feel like to you?

Participant responses were summarized according to the following themes: expectations of weblogs, the process of keeping a weblog, and outcomes of keeping a weblog. Participants were then presented with a draft analysis as a form of member checking. Comments were incorporated into subsequent analyses.

3. RESULTS

The goal of this paper is to document the early reactions of the nine graduate student participants as they kept individual weblogs to reflect on their academic experiences over a period of three months. Results presented in this paper are drawn from participant answers to the questions described in the Methodology section regarding their early experiences as bloggers.

3.1 Expectations of the Weblog Environment

Most of the participants thought of the weblogs as a tool for recording individual reflection akin to a personal journal. This seemed to create a tension between the public nature of the web versus the personal writing space implied by the journal-like characteristics of the weblog. Most participants indicated that the public nature of the weblog environment was cause for concern regarding who might read their entries which affected what and how they wrote. For example, one participant noted:

“Because a blog is a public space, I don't like to post my muddled thinking - I really don't feel comfortable exposing my stream of consciousness as I feel that others will be judging me for my lack of clarity or focus”.

The public nature of the weblogs was also considered to be an important strength of the environment as one participant noted their expectation that the weblogs would allow them to gain access to other's experiences as graduate students. As well, while there was a concern that posting ideas regarding their thesis work might lead to a loss of intellectual property, it was suggested that the weblogs could be considered to be a publishing environment where ideas could be documented, thereby preserving those rights.

3.2 The Process of Keeping a Weblog

The weblog was presented to the participants as a tool in which to keep a record of their experiences, readings, resources, and thoughts as emerging researchers. At the time that they recorded their experiences for this paper, the weblogs had been available for three months. At that point, only the experienced weblog user identified a central role for keeping a weblog in academic and professional work. The other participants observed that they did not feel that they had integrated their weblogs into their academic processes. Time was suggested as a barrier for using the weblog, as one participant observed, keeping a weblog is more than simply dashing off an entry now and then.

“What I find difficult about the whole thing is the time factor...I barely am finding time to write ideas down (whether it be for a blog or somewhere else)...let alone sift through the reams of other blogs and search out what I want to read.”

Making time to keep a weblog was described as “stressful” by one participant, and as “a trial” by another. There was a sense that keeping a weblog was not returning the value that justified taking the time required to make it part of their routine. However, participants recognized that they were at the beginning of a process. Indeed, the experienced blogger emphasized that the purpose and uses of a weblog tend to evolve over time.

Part of the challenge faced by participants in discovering value in the process of keeping a weblog came from their shared perception that the weblog environment lacked collaborative interaction. Weblogs have a comment feature that lets outside readers post comments to weblog entries. These comments have the effect of letting a writer know that someone is reading their weblog, but it is not collaborative in that there is not usually a community-wide discussion about each idea, as there would be in a threaded discussion environment. Weblogs, in this sense are principally individual writing environments that are shared publicly. For example one participant stated:

“I have no idea who read my postings, unless they commented on them. I believe that speaks to the individual nature of weblogging. Now, you might ask, does it matter if anyone commented on them? Or does it just matter that my ideas are out there for people to read without commenting? These are good questions, which, again in my mind reinforce the individual nature of weblogging.”

While weblogs are clearly individual sites, collaboration can be achieved through commenting, linking and posting to one's own weblog regarding another's entry. These forms of collaboration are not as direct or apparent as in a threaded discussion.

3.3 Outcomes of Keeping a Weblog

As graduate students with a focus on education and technology, participants voiced support for weblogs conceptually. For example it was noted that "They are a mediating tool that enables one to externalize personal thoughts, have those thoughts potentially socially mediated and then internalize the information". Additionally, another participant suggested that they are:

"A place where you can push the limits of your own personal boundaries – boundaries that represent your own personal take on the world, your own connections, your own constructions. I guess a cognitive scientist might think of it as the opportunity (and place) for spontaneous reorganization to occur."

The participants were able to see the benefits to writing in the individual public environment; however, this did not translate into regular posts in all the weblogs.

4. DISCUSSION

By design, a weblog is a public writing environment that can provide a forum in which to work out or document ideas (Smith, 2004). This suggests that weblogs can be an appropriate technology for graduate students as they make progress in developing their own point of view. The public nature of the weblog environment was considered to be a barrier by novice webloggers in this project. Similarly, Xie & Sharma (2004) noted that the doctoral students in their study who were less experienced with the course content also found it harder to engage in weblogging. Participant expectations of the environment itself as a public environment that is designed to support a private act (i.e., journaling) imposed restrictions on participants' approach to the task of maintaining a weblog. It is possible that with time, the participants in this study may find other purposes for the weblogs that are more supportive of their needs as distance graduate students. Certainly, the participants recognized the potential for the technology.

Opportunities for collaboration with peers and faculty is an important component of graduate study and as graduate students studying primarily at a distance, the participants were hoping that the weblogs would fill this collaborative role. While a weblog is primarily a tool for individual writing, interaction (if not collaboration) can be achieved through the use of linking and comments. In this way, over time, one person's idea can provide the source for many reflections and direct comments and an important aspect of this process is reading other people's weblogs. Smith (2004) observes that writing in the context of weblogs involves "close reading and interpretation (towards the end of the page)". Mortensen and Walker (2002) emphasize the importance of this type of writing for graduate students by suggesting that reading and interpretation are key tasks of researcher. Collaboration of this type takes longer to achieve and is less tangible. It is possible that this form of collaboration will emerge given time.

5. CONCLUSION

Three months in the context of a program of graduate study may not be long enough for the participants in this study to establish the practice of reading and writing in a weblog environment. A weblog, as a form of communication and collaboration through individual writing may not be an easily adoptable technology for some graduate students. In part this is because the nature of how weblogs are perceived are influenced by individual prior educational and online experiences and expectations. As well, a primary focus on writing to record emergent ideas and fragments is not necessarily a part of many graduate students' academic repertoire,

particularly early on in their graduate careers. While participants in this project can see the potential value of the technology for themselves as an emergent, yet dispersed community of researchers, they have yet to put this vision into practice. While weblogs may be useful in courses where the role can be explicit and required, more time and more structure may be required for them to take hold in this setting where use is voluntary and the participants are busy. From a technical perspective, clearer links to social elements within the interface may be helpful in moving participants towards regular weblog use, as well as through links to other social networking software such as Technorati (<http://technorati.com>), for example. At the time of writing, the project is ongoing and the lessons learned thus far may serve to support more active participation in the future.

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