Blending by Blogging: weblogs in blended learning initiatives

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ABSTRACT Weblogs (‘blogs’) are emerging in many educational contexts as vehicles for personal expression and the dissemination and critique of Internet materials. The study of the weblog phenomenon in itself can convey important insights about social construction; hundreds of thousands of blogs emerged worldwide within a fairly short time span without considerable direction from corporations or other institutions. Strategic approaches toward blended learning environments are often instructor-centered, with control of the mix of educational approaches in the instructor’s hands. In contrast, weblogs are a flexible medium that can be used in approaches that provide educational participants with a ‘middle space’ of options as to how to integrate face-to-face and online modes. Weblog construction encourages the development of individual, critical voices within the broader context of classroom interactions.

Introduction

Blended learning approaches combine various online instructional modes with zones for face-to-face interaction. This article proposes that weblogs can be used as a ‘middle space’ between face-to-face contexts and forms of structured online instructional delivery. The weblog is a malleable and fluid medium through which individuals can develop an individualized voice that can reflect facets of their personal style and idiosyncratic intellectual approaches. Fostering such a voice may offset pressures to plagiarize materials or to withdraw in academic or personal discussions. This article describes the weblog genre and relates how it can enhance blended learning initiatives – especially in contexts in which students are novices in terms of online learning or where the online components of the instructional mix are highly structured or particularly demanding.

Weblogs (often called ‘blogs’) are emerging in many Internet contexts in education, providing uncomplicated but powerful organizational forms for online expression (Carver, 2003; Oravec, 2002). Constructing weblogs can be of aid in motivating students to write and do research over an extended period of time (as well as share their efforts), giving them a platform from which to analyze the various Internet materials they obtain both independently and in the course of their
classroom studies. Blended learning initiatives can incorporate weblog development as a methodology (along with other tools such as computer conferencing) to afford individuals means to establish and develop their individual perspectives within an often-overwhelming mix of educational activity. Such professions as journalism are already exploring blended approaches, with many journalists maintaining a weblog, participating in public presentations, as well as producing stories for online and print journals. The popular blogs of US journalists Andrew Sullivan (http://www.andrewsullivan.com) and Eric Alterman (http://www.msnbc.com/news/752664.asp) provide examples here, as well as the large number of ‘warblogs’ produced internationally as the 2003 war in Iraq developed (a number of which are compiled on: http://www.warblogs.cc).

Vocabulary for characterizing the weblog genre evolved quite quickly in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Those who develop weblogs are generally called ‘bloggers’ and their cumulative endeavors are labeled as the ‘blogosphere’. Creation of weblogs involves the chronological aggregation of time-stamped records called ‘posts’. Posts largely consist of hyperlinks to various Internet sources along with the bloggers’ own critical or supplementary material (as well as narratives that reflect autobiographical insights). Although many bloggers produce content that is primarily read in classroom contexts or by a limited circle of acquaintances, others obtain celebrity status in their chosen realms by producing blogs that are followed by large numbers of readers across the globe (Levy, 2002).

**Weblogs and the growing value of simplicity**

Through the past centuries, genres took form over long periods of time, with biographies, poems, and travelogues evolving from the efforts of countless writers, readers, and patrons (Oravec, 1996). For example, the novel has assumed a variety of sizes and stylistic approaches and has been examined from a wide assortment of angles by scholars and critics. Weblogs emerged very quickly through volunteer grassroots efforts and have only recently begun to get treatment in academic circles. They differ in nuance from the discussion areas and related vehicles in such distance education environments as WebCT and Lotus Notes’ LearningSpace because of the creative leeway students are afforded as individuals. Students are responsible for maintaining their own blogs (setting their styles and standards), possibly increasing the likelihood that the skills they obtain will transfer to environments in which an instructor and evaluation system are not present.

The rapid evolution of blogging can be used in educational contexts to explore social construction notions, demonstrating the growth of various communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1990; McLellan, 1995). The weblog genre can be traced to the early 1990s and the efforts of National Center for Supercomputing Applications personnel to maintain chronological lists of useful hyperlinks along with descriptions and commentary. However, it was not until much later in the 1990s that weblogs took off as a popular genre, with free hosting as a major incentive. The ‘rules’ for blogging are developing tacitly through debate and consensus with very little in terms of pressure from external authority (such as the opinions of ‘experts’
or the activities of standards groups or professional associations). Thus, bloggers have wide leeway for experimentation and discovery both in content and form. Novice bloggers can often find that their relative lack of presumptions about blogging is of value as they stumble into innovative nuances and contrivances. The following is a segment of one of many posts relating to blogging itself (and which has several links to other blogs that discuss blogging):

**Anders Jacobsen’s blog May 06, 2003**

**WHY BLOGGERS WRITE SO MUCH ABOUT BLOGGING …**

What’s the most used opening phrase when using the in-flight phones available in some planes? ‘Hi it’s me – Guess where I am? I’m in the air!’

What was the first thing people talked about when car phones came out? ‘Hey, guess where I am? I’m in the car!’ When the phones became draggable, then later portable and now certainly handheld and even smaller, people’s attitude towards the devices matures, they became less of a novelty and people were more focusing on the utility, the social implications and so on: which leads me to this theory:

What’s the first thing new bloggers write about? ‘Hey guess what – blogging is cool.’ (http://www.jacobsen.no/anders/blog/)

Personal reflections are a vital part of weblogs, providing a human-scale perspective on the problem of information acquisition and analysis. Much like written travelogues, blogs chronicle their writers’ voyages through Internet resources in a straightforward, easy-to-access format. Thus, along with ‘electronic zines’ (online newsletters) and personal homepages, weblogs are providing individuals with distinct platforms for self-expression and discussion of ideas. Weblog construction is generally considered as simpler than many other forms of on-line written expression with its text-based format and uncomplicated organization. As standards for state-of-the-art websites increase, many individuals are creating weblogs rather than risk producing an unattractive or out-of-date site. Simplicity is often a major theme in blogging as individuals seek to provide clarity and organization to complex arrays of hyperlinks. The free or low-cost hosting facilities provided online (http://www.blogger.com and http://radio.userland.com) give any Internet user the means to produce and publish a weblog. Sophisticated weblog tools are also emerging as technologically-savvy bloggers include extensive discussion facilities and other features with their blogs (Fichter, 2003).

The following are two examples of posts from http://www.schoolblogs.com, produced by educator Peter Ford. Ford has extensive experience with weblogs in classroom contexts, and has taught parents as well as students how to produce them. The posts are part of a long stream of similar posts that are archived for later retrieval:

*and Johnny still can’t read …*

Greg Ritter: Look, people, the idea that technology is a panacea is so 1997. I don’t know anybody in education (or educational technology providers) who still really believes that. Everybody knows that the technology doesn’t solve education’s problems and, in fact, presents some entirely new ones.
Everybody except the media, that is. (http://gritter.home.mindspring.com/tenreasonswhy/2002_08_25_archive.html#80732185) (Posted by Peter Ford, 26 August 2002, 6:23:45 p.m.)

Life Beyond Microsoft:

We are exposing students to a variety of opportunities in ICT then they will be gaining generic skills that could serve them well in later life. However, the reality is that in the majority of schools, variety means Microsoft and generic ICT skills means the application of Microsoft skills. (http://www.schoolblogs.com/stories/storyReader$471)

I’ve recently been evaluating the role of Microsoft in our school (posted by Peter Ford, 9 July 2002, 4:29:56 p.m.)

Exemplars of posts cannot deliver the sense of an ongoing weblog. However, many individuals regularly produce or receive e-mailed messages comparable to these from colleagues. Having an organized way to access the hyperlinks and related commentary over time can increase the effectiveness of these efforts. The posts of talented and dedicated bloggers can be especially useful (and somewhat addictive); the endeavor of producing widely-read weblogs can be enormous, since these bloggers often receive and respond to hundreds of comments daily.

Blogging in blended education

Many blended learning methodologies (such as online or face-to-face simulation gaming) require the assimilation of large numbers of regulations and rules. Such structured approaches are very useful for conveying information and encouraging students to learn particular techniques. However, the semi-structured, creative ‘middle space’ that blogging provides can also be of benefit here, fostering an assortment of experimental approaches. A considerable portion of the ‘blending’ involved is student-directed, with students determining how much to incorporate insights from face-to-face discussions, Internet materials, and other sources. Students can reveal a great deal about themselves and utilize their blogs in facilitating subsequent face-to-face interaction; in contrast, they can focus more directly on critiques of Internet materials.

Educators can work to integrate weblogs into blended education initiatives through some specific strategies:

1. Posting student work: Johnston (2002) describes how he uses the weblog format and blogger.com to post student work online, thus maintaining some loose structure in classroom activity while allowing the emergence of new modes of interaction. Students receive commentary from others in the classroom and even from ‘outside’ reviewers such as parents and potential employers. Students are enabled to view the progress of their own writing efforts over time and also get a sense of the progress of their class as a whole.
2. Exchanging hyperlinks: Educators can assign students the task of creating weblogs
as part of everyday classroom activities, supplementing computer conferencing and/or face-to-face discussions. Through their blogs, students can swap interesting new URLs with their peers along with commentary (and are empowered to follow-up on this commentary as well). Weblogs can allow students to provide personal context for their posts (much like an online diary), increasing their interest in blogging through providing a personal angle. Students should be aware of the privacy considerations involved when blogs are not password protected and are thus accessible by anyone with a browser. Making personal information available on the Internet (such as family vacation plans) can entail a variety of risks.

3. **Fostering reflective approaches to educational genres**: Blended learning approaches can expose individuals to an assortment of educational genres. Following ‘edublogs’ can encourage critical reflection on these genres as individuals share classroom and other educational experiences. Popular edublogs include [http://www.weblogg-ed.com](http://www.weblogg-ed.com) (with a teacher as blogger) and Serious Instructional Technology ([http://instructionaltechnology.editthispage.com/](http://instructionaltechnology.editthispage.com/)), which showcases distance education technology advances and issues. Both students and instructors can follow these and comparable blogs over time and thus be alerted to new curricular trends as they emerge. Discussion forums associated with many blogs can produce useful insights as well as link colleagues worldwide. Blogs are becoming popular in many professional and business contexts as well, providing up-to-date economic and social information related to particular industries or professional groupings, so the genre-sensitive skills learned by students in working with weblogs may transfer to some future employment contexts.

4. **Forming and maintaining knowledge communities**: Weblog development underscores important insights concerning the social construction of knowledge, demonstrating how knowledge communities coalesce and underscoring the value of intellectual property. Weblogs can provide useful insights about the recent history of a field or profession as individuals trace through chronological posts. Weblog-based knowledge communities can also form as bloggers link to blogs with similar themes and provide critical commentary. By following various blogs over time, students can become ‘cognitive apprentices’ (Brown et al., 1989), gaining from various models some insights as to how to deal with information overload and synthesize Internet materials. The weblog as a genre has evolved quite quickly since bloggers often exchange insights about what would make blogging easier to engage in and more useful for readers.

These instructional strategies have some drawbacks. One of the major problems with weblogs in educational contexts is that they generally showcase hyperlinks to new Internet resources, thus placing high value on what is current and ‘hot’ rather than what is most useful. Instructors can model in their own blogs an assortment of kinds of links, not just links to current resources; they can also provide appropriately detailed commentary so that students learn how to place Internet resources into critical academic context. Weblog construction encourages the use of secondary
sources rather than primary ones (such as students’ own interviews, observations, and experiments), which may not be appropriate in certain educational contexts; students are placed in ‘reactive’ mode rather than being encouraged to develop new ideas. Producing a weblog on a regular basis can also be time consuming and occasionally boring (if creative juices run dry); a number of weblogs have been orphaned over time as initial enthusiasm for the project waned. Despite these drawbacks, weblogs can often find a useful niche among other instructional methodologies in blended educational contexts, especially in providing a counterbalance to more structured approaches. The rapid evolution of the genre can provide important insights to students about educational innovation and diffusion.

Using weblogs to counter plagiarism and empower individual voice

Plagiarism is a growing problem for educators worldwide (Ardito, 2002); some commentators have called it an ‘epidemic’ (Fialkoff & St Lifer, 2002). It is increasingly facilitated by the Internet since students can easily buy or otherwise obtain complete papers or specific academic writings online. Students who have pirated music or software often apply the same strategies to other forms of intellectual property; they are often not aware of the benefits of building strong and trusting knowledge communities. Unfortunately, many faculty members have resorted to technological applications to expose plagiarism (such as those found on http://www.plagiarism.org and http://www.turnitin.com) rather than attempt to deal with the issue by experimenting with new instructional strategies and interpersonal approaches.

In contrast with many term-paper generation efforts in which papers can be exchanged across campuses over periods of years, weblogs as a genre are rooted in the personally-tailored critical evaluation of relevant Internet material. In order to produce a post, students read various web resources, possibly extract a sentence or two along with a URL, and then add a description and their own critical commentary for their teachers and peers to view. Often, the blogs are available on the Web for all to view, so the audience for the students’ efforts can be quite larger. Hence, the very notion of ‘plagiarism’ is hard to formulate in this environment. Posting students’ work in weblog format (as described by Johnston, 2002; Oravec, 2002) also has the potential to reduce plagiarism through peer pressure since students have ready access to each other’s productions. Students with specific issues to discuss or causes to promote can use weblogs to advance them, as in the following post about spam:

Monday, June 30, 2003
The Mystery of Spam
I just don’t get it. Why do spammers think I’ll buy from them when they use misleading headers to get me to open their messages? Don’t they understand I’ll be irritated? Or more likely, that their attempt to cloak the message is so transparent that I’ll delete it unread? … (posted by Jon Lebkowsky, 30 June 2003, 09:19:47 p.m. | ~ permalink ~ )
The incorporation of new technological approaches is often taken as a panacea for educational ills (Cuban, 1986). Certainly, introducing weblogs into classrooms will not mitigate all of the basic problems involved in plagiarism. Plagiarism is often related to deep issues involving lack of trust and understanding between teachers and students (Howard, 2002). However, weblogs may indeed provide educators with innovative new approaches to foster students’ senses of intellectual integrity and respect for others’ work. Discussions about social construction that are facilitated by the weblog format can themselves inspire new respect for the efforts of others.

**Countering information overload with weblogs**

Blended education contexts introduce new complexities into already intricate arenas. Students and instructors are faced with assimilating many kinds of educational input conveyed through an assortment of channels. Information overload is becoming a complex societal problem in many venues as individuals seek to utilize the power of the Internet while not becoming overwhelmed by its vast resources (Farhoomand & Drury, 2002). Most Internet users employ search engines to locate specific Internet materials. However, even simple searches can result in thousands of hits, thus diminishing their usefulness (especially for novices in a particular subject area). Weblogs help to make the Internet more human scale, providing access to a ‘human portal’ who carefully selects web resources for consideration, especially those that relate to particular themes such as distance education and online learning. By reading an assortment of blogs, one can obtain a set of snapshots of Internet sources that is balanced politically or socially in the way one chooses.

As previously discussed, some minor forms of Internet-based celebrity can be established through blogging. Having an assortment of celebrity blogs that many people read and comment on can focus political and social discourse, and in some senses also offset information overload. Some bloggers are extremely conscious of audience considerations, selecting and responding to Internet materials deemed interesting and useful to their readers. Occasionally, Internet-based celebrity can even extend beyond the net: for example, bloggers including Rebecca Blood (http://www.rebeccablood.net) and Dave Winer (http://davenet.userland.com/), have received tens of thousands of ‘hits’ on their websites weekly and have been featured in broadcast and print media (Levy, 2002; Roth *et al.*, 2002). The book *We’ve Got Blog* (Blood, 2002) compiles both the practical tips and theoretical discussions of an assortment of bloggers. Blogs are generally rendered by individuals but some group blogs have proliferated, especially in educational contexts (such as Middlebury College’s collaboration: http://manila.cet.middlebury.edu/collaboration). Organizations have sponsored blogs as ways of conveying web resources, such as the *Guardian Unlimited* (http://www.guardian.co.uk/weblog). ‘Metablogs’ (such as http://www.globeofblogs.com) can help readers find blogs of interest or keep track of developments on a number of blogs.

The creativity involved in blogging can help maintain the motivation needed by
some students to sustain self-directed learning. A growing number of artists, musicians, and television stars maintain weblogs, including Alicia Keys, Elvis Costello, and Star Trek’s William Shatner, stimulating special interest for some students. In turn, producing weblogs can introduce students first hand to strategies for establishing their own network-based celebrity and personal style (albeit a minor form) and developing a relationship with readers over time. Blogging efforts often involve items of social concern besides education, providing additional motivation to read and respond to current events. The notion that a good share of journalism, social activism, and even scholarly output will eventually take on many of the characteristics of blogging has been seriously debated (as outlined in Levy, 2002). Opponents to this prospect often declare that a focus on blogging can remove individuals from ‘real world’ investigations and steer them toward locating interesting hyperlinks. Blogging has provided substantial modes for communicating a wide variety of perspectives on important environmental and governmental issues as well as countering the increasingly commercial bent of the Internet. Few bloggers are paid for their efforts, and the burgeoning popularity of blogging is bolstering the volunteer spirit of the Web.

Some conclusions and reflections

Distance education and online learning are spawning a number of innovative approaches that are permeating education (Oravec, 2003), having many ‘spillover effects’ even into non-technological contexts. Weblogs can serve as catalysts in stimulating critical thinking and inspiring students to be lifelong learners. Many blended learning initiatives already place a high priority on the objective of using technological resources in critical and reflective ways in the classroom. Educators have also developed various criteria for evaluating online resources, integrating these criteria into classroom exercises to underscore the wide variations in quality of Internet material (Mechitov et al., 2001). The weblog genre extends these efforts by facilitating the development of individuals’ unique evaluative talents and creative expression. Blogs can be a ready outlet for dissemination of ideas that run counter to academic dogma or the stereotypical themes provided by popular broadcast media.

Blogging has the potential to change the way many individuals get and disseminate information, insights, and opinions everyday. In the rapidly growing field of distance education and online learning, weblogs can serve special purposes in highlighting useful resources that might otherwise be overlooked as well as alerting readers to current events that are relevant to professional endeavors. Thus, weblogs can assist students and instructors in taking a critical and reflective stance toward various instructional modalities, both online and face-to-face. Producing a weblog on a daily basis can inspire students to develop articulate critical voices and relate to reader feedback. Plagiarism and apathy may thus become less attractive as prospects as students learn the value of strong knowledge communities that are built on trust and mutual interests.
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