

A WEBLOG IN PRACTICE

Examination of a Global Telecollaborative Project Blog

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Keywords: Online learning, telecollaboration, weblog.

Abstract: Students in three elementary schools in the Northeastern area of the US and their partners in a primary school from a small coastal town of Papua New Guinea have used technology to initiate dialogue with one another through collaborative classroom activities—a web-based learning community that spans across the globe. Within an established model of teaching and learning online through online networking, application of the weblog component is examined. Preliminary findings suggest the use of weblog to be an effective component in regards to maintaining student motivation. And, the ease of implementation was manageable to participating teachers.

1 INTRODUCTION

As the Internet becomes an increasingly pervasive and persistent influence in people's lives, teachers have picked up on the creative use of this Internet technology and put the weblog to work in the classroom. A weblog (also referred to as a blog) is a web publishing tool that allows authors to quickly and easily self-publish text, artwork, links to other blogs or websites, and a whole array of other content. Blogs are set-up like conventional websites, with navigation links, and other standard website features. Blogs have one standard characteristic, however, the posting. Blog postings are text entries, similar to a diary or journal, which include a posting date and may include comments by people other than the author, photos, links, or other digital media. Postings are often short and frequently updated. They appear in reverse chronological order and can include archived entries.

Being situated within the Internet allows bloggers to access their weblogs anywhere and anytime an Internet connection is available, an opportunity for learning to continue beyond the classroom. Its "underdetermined" design, where a system is engaging, yet intuitive and easy to learn (Cassell, 2002), makes it equitable for many age groups and both genders, and simple for teachers to implement. Weblogs are used as collaborative spaces where students, teachers, and sometimes guests can build

content together. Thus, weblogs are a popular venue to fuse educational technology across disciplines to encourage multidisciplinary lessons.

Telecollaboration among students from three elementary schools in the Northeastern area of the US and their partner from a primary school in a small coastal town of Papua New Guinea is shared. In this study, the Project blog is examined through the framework of a five-stage model of teaching and learning online through online networking (Salmon, 2000) to (a) examine motivation for online learning and (b) explore the role of the moderator.

2 GLOBAL COLLABORATION

The participating students are from three US elementary schools (1 public and 2 parochial) and a primary school in Papua New Guinea. Students from the US are 4th graders, while their Papua New Guinea (PNG) are in 7th grade. In total, 78 students and four classroom teachers have participated in this project. Telecollaborative project model (Harris, 1998a, 1998b) was chosen to provide students from around the world a chance to belong to the same study group.

The initial telecollaborative activities, "an online project that blends curriculum, instruction, and technology," (Craig, 1997) that combines the communication forms of speech, written language,

and graphics, provided a way for students to communicate using Internet tools and online resources. Telecollaborative activities involve people in different locations learning together by means of using Internet tools and resources (Harris, 1999). Students shared ideas and critique each others work.

To initiate the partnership, exchange of daily events was made possible through a creation of a multimedia presentation which opened several opportunities for culturally based dialogue. Through collaboration in creation and exchange of cultural myths, study of local heroes and analysis of climate and seasonal festivities, the participating students became a web-based learning community that spans the globe.

The participating schools and teachers represented different stages of development on the technology integration continuum. The American students, for instance, had the hardware in place and had easy access to computer technology, versed in fundamental, age appropriate use, such as word processing, basic multimedia presentations, and Internet research. The PNG school, on the other hand, was in their initial stage of being equipped with a modest (5 desktop) computer systems. Needless to say, these students and teacher from PNG had minimal exposure to computer technology. In fact, for all but one PNG student, computer technology was seen for the first time in their lives. The participating PNG teacher had minimal introduction to personal computing through her college training.

While much of the sharing was meaningful, allowing direct access to students became a challenge, thus, creation of a project weblog was added to offer a tele-collaborative opportunity.

3 WEBLOGS IN SCHOOLS

The early adopters of weblogs in the classroom have already created a wide variety of ways to use them. Even at this still-early stage of development, blogs are being used as class portals, online filing cabinets for student work, e-portfolios, collaborative pace, knowledge management, and even school websites (Richardson, 2006). Through the unique process of blogging, students are learning to read more critically, think about that reading more analytically, and write more clearly. And, they are building relationships with peers, teachers, mentors, and professional within the weblog environment West, Wright, Gabbitas, & Graham, 2006).

Locating sample blogs is possible with a few keystrokes. If you were to search for

education/learning related blogs, you will face millions of weblogs. Under the Google search, you can search for blogs exclusively. And, knowing some categories of classroom applications may guided the organization of exploring the best practices of weblogs.

Curriculum Gone Digital - One strong trend in education is the movement for curriculum to a digital, online environment. By building a "class portal" to communicate information about the class and archive course materials is a powerful course management tool and a great entry point for weblog use to get comfortable with the transparency that weblogs provide. In class portal weblog, having a place to publish the course curriculum and presentations makes communicating with peers easy and meaningful.

Online Portfolio - Creating a weblog for each student can also function as a "digital filing cabinet" to archive their work. Beyond the benefits of organizing and managing student papers, weblogs provides an easy transition to electronic/digital portfolio. As students collect their work they may critically reflect to highlight and select work that best represent their learning progress, which is published for others to see.

Learning collaboratively from an Expert - In addition, the Read/Write web opens up all sorts of new possibilities for students to learn from each other or from experts in the field. Even though they may be far away from authors or scientists or other professional one another physically, they can now work side by side in digital space. Collaborative learning has been a buzzword in American education for some time now and with the use of blogs, this is made even more accessible.

Of course each implementation of blogs take on a different nuance to meet the goal of each blog. And, in this study, use of blogs primarily as a collaborative space of a global collaboration is highlighted.

4 SCAFFOLDING THE PROJECT BLOG

As a such collaborative space, Faces of the World blog was created using the Blogger, web publishing tool and host server. While new to all participating teachers and students, the informal feedback were positive. But, to extend the examination of the effectiveness of the project blog beyond the anecdotal reflections, a systemic analysis of blog implementation from setting up of the blog to the

development of a constructivist learning environment, the five-stage framework (Salomon, 2000) is proposed.

4.1 Stage One: Access and Motivation

For this first stage, ensuring that the learner can easily and quickly access the designated online learning space must be the utmost priority. Usually this will be to ensure there are no technical problems, for example, with logins and passwords. Technical support is critical at this stage as the learner can easily become frustrated. Simultaneously the teacher/facilitator needs to ensure that the learners understand the need to put time and effort into the online activity. For this Project blog, Blogger (www.blogger.com) which is owned by Google was selected. Hosting of the Weblog is free, therefore, there was no need to worry about setting up or maintaining software. With ease of setup and access, Blogger offers some privacy options that makes more ideal for class blog. One the Project moderator crested the blog, each class was assigned a group log-in.

4.2 Stage Two: Online Socialization

During this stage, learners need to become comfortable in the online environment and to socialize with each other.

Some of the preliminary efforts to establish a mutually respected learning partnership was accomplished through exchange of multimedia presentations from each participating class, which included photos and narratives that described a day in a life of a student at their school. To begin online socialization, *Virtual Handshake* became the first blog topic. Select students posted their reflection on what a handshake symbolized, which prompted into a rich discussion of cultural values.

There are a number of barriers to consider for a successful interaction:

- overcoming the embarrassment of making a mistake in front of other participants;
- daunting task of the text-based nature of CMC;
- the newness the environment;
- lack of non-verbal and visual cues.

It is essential to create an environment where learners feel respected and show respect to each other.

4.3 Stage 3: Information Exchange

Usually this stage of the conference is characterized by the fast and furious exchange of messages. Demonstrated by another exciting topic entitled “Lost World,” this current events interactions neutralized learning environment.

For example, one of the US classroom read about a scientific expedition sponsored by the National Geographic Society of New Guinea’s Foja Mountain. This mountain region was given the name of “The Lost World,” as people had not thoroughly explored until very recently. Through this blog, all participating students learned about access to information. It was not until this blog interaction the PNG students learned about this scientific discoveries in their native land. As a topic that bridged science, culture, and literacy, teachers’ perceptions of their first content-based weblog facilitation exceeded their anticipated student motivation and learning outcomes.

Potential of information overload resulted in a need for a greater structure in the flow of interaction. The need for teacher/moderator intervention to focus and direct the interaction because essential.

4.4 Stage 4: Knowledge Construction

As the main focus is building such online community is student learning, each of the participating teachers related these scientific and cultural finding to their respective curriculum.

4.5 Stage 5: Development

The richness of the interaction among participating students was evident demonstration of high-level learning. The students willingly embraced the role of content producer, which was encouraged by the “published” nature of their work. They were taking responsibility for their own learning and become more confident and critical thinkers.

5 CLOSING THOUGHTS

The blogging technology is reported to be quite user friendly, even for novice users and required minimum technical knowledge to maintain. Weblog provided an excellent opportunity for project participants to express their experiences and feelings for the duration of the project. It was reported that students felt more engaged in the project as the progression of the project was chronicled on the blog for everyone to

follow.

A structured learning scaffold offered the essential support and development to participants at each phase of their online interaction, as they build up expertise in learning online. The user-friendliness and anytime-anywhere access proved to be an instrumental component in fostering peer learning relationships. All teachers reported that weblog component was highly motivating to students and offered excellent opportunities for reading and writing skills building. With the ease and flexibility of the weblog technology, online communication and collaboration was quickly established among participating students in a simple form of blogging.

In this type of environment students become a “community of learners” (Burgstahler & Swift, 1996). Working with their peers, they become problem solvers. They began to view their own thoughts and ideas as significant contribution to the whole community. Through such tele-collaborative learning, where both teachers and learners are active participants in the learning process, knowledge emerged from active dialogue among those who seek to understand and apply concepts and techniques.

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