

What's it Worth? The Perceived Benefits of Instructional Blogging

William F. Brescia, Jr.
University of Tennessee Health Center

Michael T. Miller
University of Arkansas

Abstract

Interactive web-access has led to the growth in blogging, a process whereby authors publicly post messages, respond to others, and are allowed to publicly offer their thinking to the public. Some college instructors have been quick to augment instruction with blogs focused on content matter and for peer review of work and commentary. There is, however, no indication that blogs are effective supplements to the teaching-learning process. The current study was conducted to generate some initial consensus about the instructional advantages of blogging in college settings. Findings suggested that the reinforcing of course engagement and the repetition of exposure to coursework are the most valuable aspects of blogging.

The potential elements of effective college teaching have changed dramatically during the past two decades, primarily due to the options afforded the classroom due to technology. Where overhead projectors and filmstrips once were the cutting edge media to be used by faculty in their teaching (Postlethwait, 1972), the range of possibilities has grown dramatically. The growth has been largely fueled not only by the mere presence of technology, but by the expectation on the part of students that technology will be used as a tool to enhance the classroom experience and their learning (Lamson & Barnett, 1994; Tileston, 2004).

Technology as a defining social condition has become substantial issue for colleges and universities to deal with (Lewis, Marginson, & Snyder, 2005). The thought of the institution providing computer access has been trumped by the need for wireless access, paperless systems and processes online, virtual security systems for residence halls, and automated, online integrated student support systems that monitor academic progress, future scheduling needs, and bursar statements (Murry, 2003; Carnevale, 2004).

The primary area that technology has been slower to conquer has been the instructional college classroom (Strauss, 2005). Due in part to accessibility and the cost of technology and in part to faculty resistance, the emergence of meaningful technological mediation in instructional delivery has just now finally taken hold (Darment, 2002; Dollar, 2003; Sulaiman, 2002). Among the technologies that have emerged as common place are web-based course shells, such as Web CT®, Angel®, OnCourse®, and Blackboard®, online courses, wikis, compressed interactive video, smart classrooms with interactive projection screens and a variety of projection-related

hardware, scheduling of assignments through personal data systems, portable multi-media systems such as Nomad©, collaborative work environments, and systems grading and reviewing student work through interactive editorial software. The emerging mindset, eager to participate with this wave of technology, has also begun to embrace web-based logs, commonly referred to as “blogs” (Oravec, 2003; Stiler & Philleo, 2003). In the beginning of 2004, there were an estimated 3.8 to 4.5 million weblog sites in existence, created by both individuals and institutions (Clyde, 2004).

Blogging has emerged among a variety of web-based instructional possibilities as a leader, in part because it allows students the ability to interact in a more public venue, sharing their thoughts, ideas, interpretations, hopes, and fears with anyone willing to spend time looking on the internet (Martindale & Wiley, 2005). Blogging has also become a media-darling, enjoying a prominent place among media outlets during the last presidential election (Martindale & Wiley, 2005; Sausner, 2005). Many within the academy, however, are less eager to embrace blogging as an instructional support mechanism, and demand an accounting of just what blogging adds to the classroom experience. The current study was designed to describe the elements or characteristics of blogging that might make it an effective tool for supporting college level instruction.

ENHANCING INSTRUCTION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

One of the greatest challenges facing college faculty members about effective teaching is how to select the most appropriate instructional strategy. A number of variables must be considered including the intended outcomes of the course, the level of critical reflection required of students, the learning objectives, the density of information to be transferred, the priorities of the institution, the type of students enrolled, and among others, the informal culture of the institution or environment in which classes are being taught (Tileston, 2004). College faculty members, and instructional designers, increasingly have observed and responded to a heightened level of awareness, use, and expectation for technologically enhanced instruction.

The Kaiser Family Foundation (2003) provided an overview of the permeation of technology. The Foundation reported that children under the age of 6 spend almost as much time each day using computers as they do playing outside, and that over a quarter of them (27%) use a computer every day. Similarly, nearly three-quarters of today’s teens (74%) use instant messaging as a major communication vehicle, and over half of students between grades 7-12 know more instant messaging names than home telephone numbers (NetDay, 2003). Rakoff (2001) estimated that 75% of those currently aged 18-29 use the Internet for researching various purchases and recreational activities. This leads to the conclusion that the students who are currently arriving on campus view the Internet and intra-computing technology as an expected form of communication and source of knowledge.

Mills (2002) noted that the conversation within higher education is no longer about whether or not technologically mediated instruction has integrity, but in what combination of forms and what variety of media best responds to learner needs. The selection of the best technology to meet specific learning objectives is referred to as blended learning (Kerres & DeWitt, 2003). On-line supplements to traditional face-to-face course instruction have become common, and one of the most current adaptations of

these support technologies has been web-based logs or journals called “blogs” (Martindale & Wiley, 2005).

Blogging as a process is different from other forms of search-retrieve-comment on discussion boards, as the blog is open to the wider public to view. This ability to be read by a wide variety of people requires the writer, or ‘blogger,’ to present their thoughts in a way that perhaps more accurately reflects personal views or arguments (Martindale & Wiley, 2004). Because of this personal nature, students are afforded the opportunity to reflect on what they are learning and share personal views and opinions. As students are conducting research into content areas that they are studying, they can add hyperlinks to articles, URLs, or other research into their blog to aid visitors in understanding the development of their conceptualizations (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004). Ferdig and Trammel noted four distinct learning advantages for blogging: the use of blogs helps students become subject-matter experts, increases student interest and ownership in learning, gives students legitimate chances to participate, and provides opportunities for diverse perspectives both inside and out of the classroom.

Although blogging has become much more commonplace throughout the Internet, as an estimated 27% of online users read blogs (Clyde, 2004; Rainie, 2005), there remains some question whether a blog adds to the integrity of a course. The current study was specifically designed to look at and describe the perceived added instructional benefits of blogging. Specifically, rather than relying on individual personal reports, the study attempted to develop consensus among individuals who have published academic articles about blogging (e.g., “experts”) about the elements that make blogging distinctive and effective in supporting instruction.

RESEARCH METHODS

As a descriptive, exploratory study, the Delphi-survey method was used to collect data from a panel of experts (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975). The three-round survey procedure began with the prompt “What elements or characteristics make blogging an effective tool for supporting college level instruction?” This question was field-tested with five university faculty members who used blogging as a web-based supplement to their teaching. Modifications were made to arrive at the final question stem, and the survey was administered electronically as an email attachment during the spring 2005 semester.

In an attempt to develop consensus among leading educators who study technology and specifically blogging, a snowballing sampling procedure was used (Cochran, 1982). Several electronic indexing services were used to examine the major research literature in instructional technology, and an initial listing of 12 authors were identified. These individuals had at least one national, refereed article published within the past two years that included references to blogging. These 12 authors were contacted via electronic mail and asked first to participate in the study and second to identify additional experts who are studying and writing about blogging. The process was repeated with those who were identified, and a final panel of 27 experts was ultimately identified.

This panel of blogging experts was sent an electronic survey with the question prompt previously indicated. They were specifically asked to identify up to five elements or characteristics that make blogging a uniquely effective tool for supporting or enhancing college level instruction.

The Delphi-survey technique was determined to be particularly appropriate for a study of this nature. First, the technique allows for consensus development among geographically separated individuals, as such was the case with this expert panel who came from 18 different states and 22 different universities. Second, the process allows for critical reflection and contemplation without dominance by any individual or group of individuals. Third, the survey allows for respondents to view group responses and to formulate their own response taking into consideration how others viewed the statements generated.

Although 27 experts were identified and initially agreed to participate in the study, only 24 completed all three rounds of the survey. In Round 1, study participants were asked to respond to the statement “As a leader and expert on the use of blogging, you are asked to generate up to five responses to the following question: What elements or characteristics make blogging an effective tool for supporting college level instruction?” The respondents averaged the identification of two elements or characteristics per person, and after editing for duplication, 16 items remained to be rated in the second and third round of the survey.

FINDINGS

The 16 elements or characteristics that make blogging an effective and unique tool for supporting college level instruction were rated on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, where the expert panel was asked to rate their agreement that the element was truly a benefit to instruction. The response of “5” indicated strong agreement on the part of the respondent, “1” indicated strong disagreement, and “3” indicated neither agreement nor disagreement. In the second round of the survey, where the panel was asked to rate each element, there was an overall mean rating of 3.77. The individual ratings were returned to each member of the panel with an indication of the group mean and standard deviation for each item, and during the third round, the overall mean rating increased to 3.90. There were a total of 17 rating changes between round two and round three. There were no significant differences computed for the round two mean ratings of the characteristics and the round three mean ratings (ANOVA $F=2.450$).

As shown in Table 1, in the third round responding experts agreed to strongly agree with seven characteristics of the practice that uniquely enhanced college level instruction. These characteristics included *weblogging has its greatest instructional potential for those who maintain a weblog throughout their college careers, using it as a knowledge log and personal content management system* (mean 4.51), *It provides opportunities to take what is learned in the classroom and express it to those in the public eye – just as they will have to do in the real world* (mean 4.38), *outside of the ‘safe’ environment of the classroom* (mean 4.25), *Leverages teaching to outside class hours* (mean 4.22), *Students can “blow off steam,”* (mean 4.10), *Students’ free writing allows a clearing the mind to do more formal writing* (mean 4.07), and *Interactivity: students can comment, ask questions* (mean 4.01).

Table 1.Final (Round 3) Mean Ratings of Blogging Advantages

Identified Instructional Advantaged	Mean	SD	Range
Weblogging has its greatest instructional potential for those who maintain a weblog throughout their college careers, using it as a knowledge log and personal content management system	4.51	.9993	3
It provides opportunities to take what is learned in the classroom and express it to those in the public eye – just as they will have to do in the real world	4.38	.9918	3
Overcoming the fear of expressing yourself outside of the ‘safe’ environment of the classroom	4.25	1.006	4
Leverages teaching to outside class hours	4.22	.9918	4
Students can “blow off steam”	4.10	.8643	4
Students’ free writing allows a clearing the mind to do more formal writing	4.07	1.003	4
Interactivity: students can comment, ask questions	4.01	.9198	4
Joint, de-centered, authorship: students can be tasked to provide content	3.96	.7812	4
Ease of use	3.88	1.110	3
Weblogging is perhaps the easiest way to get students writing online in an electronic space that is outside of courseware	3.87	1.210	3
Bloggging has the potential to support a number of goals for writing classes as well as content classes	3.84	1.110	3
They have reasonable potential to support “extra curricular composition”	3.75	.7897	3
Ability to link to other documents	3.70	.8456	3

(table continues)

Table 1, continued.

Identified Instructional Advantaged	Mean	SD	Range
Web logs can be used to demonstrate the complexity inherent on the Internet/website	3.50	.8739	3
Web-logs can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of a site – how long people spend on each page, what proportion complete their “transaction,” etc.	3.30	1.0087	4
Weblogs can be used to track individual behaviors to learn about how people use a site	3.19	1.2030	4

Note: The instrument made use of a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale where 1=Strongly disagree with the statement, 2=Disagree with the statement, 3=No opinion about the statement, 4=Agree with the statement, and 5=Strongly agree with the statement.

In addition to the ratings of agreement, two characteristics of weblogging were noted to be of marginal impact on instructional quality as evidenced by the near-neutral rating of 3.0. These two characteristics were *web-logs can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of a site – how long people spend on each page, what proportion complete their “transaction,” etc.* (mean 3.30), and *weblogs can be used to track individual behaviors to learn about how people use a site* (mean 3.19).

These findings suggest that faculty who use weblogs find the greatest benefit of weblogging to be the opportunity for self-expression and perhaps the *self-reflection that accompanies considerations*. The observation that students can “blow off steam,” for instance, is a form of expression that allows students to take in new material, ideas, and thoughts, process them, and then provide some form of feedback or synthesis on this new thinking. The process of reflection is important to effective instruction, and weblogging has a dual benefit in this regard as it allows for a greater level of application than might be afforded to other more traditional forms of instruction that are relegated to specified chronological times for meeting.

DISCUSSION

The results of the data collection suggest that there is a real interest in how blogging is and can be used to support instruction. The level of participation throughout the entire study and the willingness for participants to nominate others also suggests that those who use technology in their classrooms want to know how to use it more creatively and better to support student learning. This is a positive sign for higher education, as it suggests that college faculty are indeed interested in the intentionality of their teaching strategies and that they are committed to student learning, and not simply just trying out the latest technological fad.

Findings from the data collection also provided clear examples of how various faculty believed that blogging supported student learning. Those instructional benefits that had the highest levels of agreement tended to focus on the concepts of reflection, application, and engagement, all of which are key elements to successful college teaching. Specifically, the blogging opportunity is seen as an element of a class that brings students back to the subject matter and engages them to the extent that they want to be involved in a manner that does not embarrass them. They want to respond to class assignments or discussions or in a peer evaluation in a way that demonstrates their competence and ability. Research has also consistently demonstrated that engagement and contact with faculty and other students about academic matters supports student learning and achievement (Su, Bonk, Liu, & Lee, 2005).

While the same kinds of interactions can be fostered in small group settings, whether over coffee in the residence hall or in a required discussion section of a class, the blog is unique in providing opportunities for reflection before responding. Unlike the face-to-face small group discussion where students have to respond immediately, the blog allows for time to synthesize information and develop personal approaches or responses to material (RSF, 2005; Ngeow & Kong, 2003).

Perhaps the biggest challenge to blogging is when instructors take away the voluntary nature of participation and begin requiring postings and responses to other postings. Although the contact can still promote intellectual development, the temptation for students is to respond simply for the sake of responding and to finish the requirement rather than processing information and learning (Brescia, Swartz, Pearman, Williams, & Balkin, 2004).

This study has focused on early adapters of blogging technology, and future research should examine other related areas. One area of research is the student point-of-view about using blogs in instructional settings. Do students experience other benefits? Does the interaction help build blogg-based learning communities? Another area of attention for research is identifying methods that might convince less adventurous faculty to use blogs in instruction. And, in what specific contexts (or disciplines) does blogging make the most sense and where is it most effective?

Contributors

William Brescia is the Director of Instructional Technology at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center, Memphis. He has authored or co-authored numerous publications in instructional technology, and distance learning, and made in excess of 60 presentations at international, national, and regional conferences. His research interests include developing strategies for improving interaction in online learning, Web-based mentoring, distance learning, and computer self-efficacy.

Michael T. Miller is Professor and Program Coordinator of the Higher Education Leadership Program at the University of Arkansas. He previously was the Associate Dean of the College of Education at San Jose State University and works extensively in studying the incorporation of technology into higher education instruction and management.

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