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The Use of Blogs as a Knowledge Management Tool

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Abstract

Based on the authors' experience with using class blogs in 22 classes over a three year time frame, this paper discusses three approaches, instructor-focused, learner-focused, and community-focused, as ways to teach both explicit and tacit knowledge. Both benefits and concerns of using blogs in the classroom are addressed.

Introduction

According to Diana Oblinger, Vice President of EDUCAUSE, a major teaching challenge present in today's college classrooms is helping our students acquire both explicit and tacit knowledge. As she notes,

Technology challenges people's assumptions about what it means to be educated...Moreover, technology changes both the ways in which we learn and the ways in which we conceive of the learning process...We have grown increasingly aware that learning facts is not enough. Knowledge management in particular is leading us to question our focus on explicit knowledge, gained from textbooks, and our relative neglect of tacit knowledge, gained from experience. Tacit knowledge consists of knowing how to get things done, wisdom acquired through years of practice. (Morrison & Oblinger, 2002, p. 2).

As faculty, we are experienced in presenting explicit knowledge on a particular subject. However, organizations want employees who are able to integrate both explicit and tacit knowledge in the workplace (Asllani, Etkin, & Somasundar, 2008). By using the Internet as a resource, we have "opportunities for treating teaching and learning as truly social activities where knowledge is built through interaction and dialogue rather than lectures and recitation" (Deitering & Huston, 2004, p. 273). The students can learn from us, each other, and virtual experts online. In addition, technology accommodates diverse styles of learning and allows students to be more active in growing their own new knowledge

(Watkins, 2005). In this paper, we discuss our experiment with one type of technology, weblogs (commonly known as blogs), to help our students gain explicit and tacit knowledge but in ways that are effective and efficient for both students and faculty.

Our Decision to Use Blogs as a Pedagogical Tool

Three years ago we began experimenting with class blogs because we believed these would be an efficient way to communicate class expectations and to engage students in conversation with us as professors, with their fellow classmates, and with outside resources. We saw advantages to blogs in allowing us to insist on, and track, 100 percent participation in course discussions, to provide links to timely articles and podcasts, and to invite experts into the conversation, all to create an environment where students not only experience the subject matter but also learn how to find credible sources for learning in the future. Thus, a familiarity with how blogs can be used would benefit the students beyond the classroom experience.

We came to our decision to try class blogs as part of our course design for a number of reasons. We were encouraged by Deitering and Huston's findings that blogs were "easy to integrate with the traditional classroom" (2004, p.277). We liked Martins and Kellermanns' (2004) claim that "transferring administrative and purely informational aspects of instruction...[outside the classroom] frees up class time for students to work on interpersonal and communication skills" (p. 8). Another reason for our decision to use a class blog was 'time on task.' One of the authors began teaching a weekend class that met only once a month and he was worried about the 'fadeout effect,' knowing that many of his students wouldn't think about the material between classes. We also believed it important for all of our students to participate in class discussions but, despite our best efforts, on many days only a small percentage of the students ever had anything to say. And finally, and most importantly, we wanted to see our students take greater ownership of their own learning, not only for our classes but in their future lives.

Choosing a Focus for the Class Blog

Before introducing a class blog to our students, we had to determine the focus it should take to help in achieving our learning objectives. We determined that this depended upon the course being taught, our teaching philosophies, and the comfort level we each had with giving up some control in our classrooms.

Edbauer writes that the typical response she gets from colleagues when she shows them some of the blogs on the Internet is, "Cool! But, how in the world would I actually use this" in my class? (Edbauer, et al, 2005, p. 3). How blogs are used depends on the professor's teaching style and course subject matter. We determined three possible approaches that varied from instructor-focused, featuring one-way communication from faculty to students; learner-focused, using two-way communication between faculty and students, or an interactive community-focused teaching tool between and among the students and the professor, as well as others identified as experts to create a virtual learning environment.

Instructor-focused Blogs

The simplest way to use a blog is as a one-stop source where the professor posts syllabi, assignments, and links to articles and websites for the students to read. Faculty retain ownership and students are expected to access the blog on a regular basis. The blog allows the professor to be more efficient as he or she doesn't have to make copies of course materials and can point students to the blog for answers to questions on assignments. Sample papers or grading rubrics can be posted to guide students in understanding expectations. The blog is also a good way to hyperlink to visual aids used in class. An instructor-focused blog may be the best approach for classes that don't involve a lot of discussion. As noted by a colleague who teaches finance, "I deal with questions such as, 'what's the present value of \$500 received five years from now if the interest rate is 8%?' The one and only right answer: \$340. Not much discussion needed here."

However, we found that it is easy to move beyond 'the student as passive recipients of content' stage by posting weekly questions or links to relevant articles and requiring the students to comment on these. Quibble (2005) used a blog to post scenarios of a poorly written business letter in his Business Communication courses. The students then respond as to what should be done to correct the letter using techniques they were learning in class. Even our finance colleague mentioned earlier would be able to link to current articles and have the students read and comment, thus allowing her to see if the students understood the concepts being taught.

Learner-focused Blogs

In this approach, the professor would expect the students to be more active participants in the blog. Learning can occur peer-to-peer in addition to teacher-to-student. Students could write their own posts or comment on what they had been learning in class, relating the course topics to work and personal experiences. Students could create their own portfolios of their writing and get feedback from their fellow classmates. They could also create learning journals, a technique strongly advocated by Ramsey (2002) except in this case these would be online and easy to access offsite. Faculty can have students create their own individual blogs on topics either chosen by the instructor or by the students themselves. In this instance, the student creates the blog, and the professor (and potentially classmates) is the commenter, thus giving the student more control over his or her own learning experience.

Sparacio and Witonsky (2006) advocate using learner-focused blogs as they believe that "teaching can be significantly enhanced by the integration of blogging" (p. 2). They have their students in a course in Logic & Reasoning develop their own blogs on a topic of their choice that they then write about during the course of the semester. According to them, the students tend to put more effort and care in their work as they get to choose their subject matter and they know that their peers in the class are reading their work.

Liz Kleinfeld (2008) at Metropolitan State University at Denver also has students develop their own blogs in her English composition classes. She gives them ten minutes in class to blog on a topic developed from activities or discussions that day or from the previous class. She sometimes does this at the beginning of class and other days at the end and

doesn't allow the students to make up the assignment, thus also modeling her value of on-time attendance.

Community-focused blogs

A third approach to using blogs is to involve participants from outside the class itself. Students could be required to find, read, and evaluate blogs from "experts" outside class on assigned topics and then to share this information with their classmates. Tryon (2006) incorporated the requirement that his students read blogs in his first-year English composition classes in order to encourage students to make a connection between the classroom and the 'real world.'

Students can also develop questions related to course topics and contact others outside of class who participate as "guest teachers." One of the authors of this paper was asked questions in class on how to manage people with disabilities. She went on the Internet and found a man who was blind and another whose legs were paralyzed who both agreed to help. She then had the students post their own questions on the blog. As noted by Gould (2002), "research evidence and common sense tell us that students learn more about a subject when they are emotionally involved with the intellectual context being taught" (p. 23). Thus, designing the course to provoke curiosity and emotional reactions can bring about insights and learning.

In some of our other classes, we contacted authors of books that the students were reading and asked them to contribute comments and feedback on the class blog. The students were very excited to have meaningful interaction with the person whose book they were discussing. As one student noted, "It gave a whole new meaning to my reading of his book." Opening up the learning process to include personal connections with book and journal authors, subject matter experts with their own blogs, and others including potential employers created a virtual learning community unlike anything we had ever done or even envisioned in the physical classroom.

What Have We Learned From Our Use Of Weblogs In Our Classes?

We have experimented with using blogs as a pedagogical tool in undergraduate courses in Principles of Management, Organizational Behavior, Managing Diversity, and Human Resource Management as well as in graduate courses in Leadership, Creativity, Project Management, and Corporate Politics. Course management systems such as Blackboard and WebCT have blog capabilities and there are also other free or inexpensive sites such as *Typepad*, *Blogger*, or *Edublogs*. We found that we only needed to be tech comfy, not tech savvy, as all blog writing is done in a Word document and does not require any programming skills. For the most part, students are comfortable with using the Internet so the format was easy for them to use. The most recent information posted is listed at the top of the blogpage and the students can even have updates forwarded to their email accounts.

We found blogs to be much more useful than just discussion boards in terms of ownership and ability to hyperlink to journal or newspaper articles and other blogs. A blog is controlled by the person who created it; others can comment but cannot create

blogpost content unless given administrative access. As noted by Trammell and Ferdig, “On a discussion board anyone can start a thread of conversation and all contributors have the same editorial authority” (2004, p. 61). We agree with Asllani, Ettkin, and Somasundar (2008) that blogs appear more successful than discussion boards in communicating tacit knowledge.

We asked our students for feedback about their experience of the class blogs at the end of each semester. The students’ responses were overwhelmingly positive as noted in the following major themes:

Blogging invites more students into the conversation

Students who were unwilling to speak up in class indicated they felt more comfortable writing their thoughts and responding to the thoughts of others in a blog/comment format. In addition, using a blog allowed students with different learning styles (for example, those students who would rather reflect before answering) to interact with the class.

I found the blog to be very effective as a learning tool, mainly because I am one of those more quiet people in class. Things don’t always come to my mind right away, but once I give them time to sink in and realize how I really feel, this is when I find the blog to be quite useful...

Blogging extends the conversation

Allowing students to participate in mini-conversations via blogs keeps the classroom conversation alive even when the students are not physically present. As universities create flexible class times and schedules such as night and weekend courses to meet the needs of the students, using blogs may be even more useful in preventing the fade-out effect.

Often after class ended, I would think of good points that I could have added to the discussion. However, after the week’s gap, those ideas are long forgotten. Also, some students are not as outspoken as others and often their opinions do not get heard. Having the ability to share these unspoken thoughts would benefit the class as a whole.

Classroom blogging provides a “safe” mechanism for introducing students to social media

Even with the proliferation of blogging, Facebook, and Twitter, there are many students who are only vaguely aware of social media’s business possibilities. Once students see how blogs can be used, they begin to realize the professional benefits of extending “conversations” to the online world. While some students resisted the classroom blog at first, they quickly embraced the medium and started seeing ways to use these in both their professional and social lives.

The blog is great! I know I’m still being dragged in but rest assured that I’m coming around. ... The “peer pressure” actually did wonders for me. I will be

entering the blog world soon. I definitely have seen the social aspect work and it does make me very curious about the professional benefits.

Blogging makes the students into subject matter experts

The process of creating a blogpost or answering a well-crafted question requires students to search for, filter, and then share information found on the Internet. The process exposes students to vast amounts of information and in the process makes them become more knowledgeable on a topic. Doing this on a regular basis “creates a repetitive process where the blogger student can build on what he learned last week and find more advanced information for the current week,” thus increasing both explicit and tacit knowledge (Trammell & Ferdig, 2004, p. 62).

Blogging helps students take ownership of their own learning

We have been pleasantly surprised by the depth and breadth of our students’ blog comments and posts. They tended to spend more time and effort than required by the assignments. When given a choice of using a blog or a more traditional paper method of journaling, those with blogs appeared to be more creative as they were leveraging online resources, linking to other blogs, and finding meaningful graphics. The students who wrote in more traditional ways tended to stay strictly within the stated expectations of the assignment.

The Downside to Using Blogs

Although we found many advantages to using blogs, there are disadvantages as well. Finding the time to post on the blog and read comments made by students can feel overwhelming. It’s important for faculty to budget time to provide adequate feedback. Spending more time reading and responding earlier in the semester seemed to help prevent problems later. Setting a deadline by which students must comment was very important to allow time to read and respond. We have considered setting a word limit to make reading the students’ comments more manageable and to aid the students in learning to be more succinct in their writing.

Another issue can be the comfort level of the professor with technology and new teaching methodologies. While writing a blogpost is essentially as easy as sending an email, the prospect of using it as a classroom tool can be daunting. We found that using an instructor-focused approach the first time helped with the learning curve of having a class blog.

Some students and faculty may perceive communicating online as a loss of a personal connection. It does negate the ability to observe body language and vocal tone, both of which contribute heavily to the communication process. However, we found the 100 percent participation rate far offset this perception that effective communication needs to be in person. In addition, we find that students today are quite comfortable with communicating online, either by cell phone, text messaging, or through social networking sites.

Allowing students to comment on each others' blogs may have some potential drawbacks. Students may not be as open to sharing their thoughts and opinions if they know someone other than the professor is reading it. Hurlburt (2008) notes that these feelings of insecurity are usually temporary and vanish as the students get more comfortable with the class and their peers.

One last issue: as students link out to other sites, their posts and comments may become visible to the public on social search engines such as Google and Technorati. Thus, it might make sense to password protect the class blog. However, on the other hand, if you think of blog readers as "participants in conversation," this can be beneficial. It has provided our students a way to begin conversations with book authors who blog, with subject matter experts in their fields of study, and with other interested students outside the classroom.

Conclusion

While blogs can be useful, it is important to note that they are just tools and not the objective itself. They are not for everyone or for all classes and need to be made an integral part of the course design. However, as noted by Trammell and Ferdig (2004), the use of blogs as a learning tool seems to be low-cost with high-returns. While more research needs to be done as to how blogs can more effectively be used, it is a given that technology will continue to influence learning. According to Diana Oblinger, "Already, our focus has shifted from teaching to learning...Much of what we have done in the past has been constrained by the prevailing conception of the classroom, but the lecture and the lab are only two ways to learn...The next step may be the integration of knowledge management and e-learning systems to augment current practices" (Morrison & Oblinger, 2002, p. 3).

Our experiences in using classroom blogs have been overwhelmingly positive. While student acceptance of technology in the classroom requires its perceived usefulness and ease of use (Martins & Kellermanns, 2004), students do tend to learn best when they need information that they can put to use immediately. Blogs are an effective and efficient method of allowing students to access information as it is needed and to make connections between explicit knowledge from textbooks and tacit knowledge gained as students see how others can and are using the knowledge being shared. Blogs also introduce students to online learning communities so they can access and evaluate information, and construct new learning paradigms for themselves. Finally, effectively modeling ways to use blogs as a teaching and learning tool is a useful skill for our students to have as they embark on their journey of life-long learning.

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