Edublogs as an online assessment tool

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Blogs used for educational purposes, dubbed edublogs, are rapidly emerging as techno-savvy professors embrace the instructional potential of this online tool. With the mainstreaming of blogs and their growing use by educators, edublogs have potential and applicability as a form of self-assessment and teacher assessment of student learning. Edublogs, for example, are a format that encourage collaborative learning and provoke higher order thinking skills. Students have the opportunity to review other's postings and responses to subject matter, to compare their knowledge and comprehension level, and to benefit from the strategy uses they and their peers employ. Another important aspect of edublogs is the asking of questions by peers, self, and the teacher. The research associated with cognitive information processing has thoroughly demonstrated that asking and answering questions about information to be learned can greatly improve comprehension. Professors are able to assess the student's comments and provide feedback collectively to the group or to individual students as a means of determining the understanding of the material. Therefore, edublogs can be used both as formative and summative assessment tools.

This paper presentation will identify a variety of effective ways to use edublogs as an online assessment tool to enrich student learning. Current research dealing with online assessment will be presented.

Keywords blogs; edublogs; assessment; online assessment

I. Introduction

In 2004, Blog was at the top of the list of Merriam-Webster's list of "Words of the Year." A blog is defined in the dictionary as "a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer" [7]. Wikipedia defines a blog as a website where entries are made in journal style with entries displayed in a reverse chronological order. Blogs are usually conversational in nature and provide reflection, information, and/or commentary on a particular subject. Whereas most blogs are primarily textual, including hyperlinks, some include or may actually focus on photographs (photoblogs), videos (vlogs), or audio (podcasting) and are a part of a wider network of social media [15]. Blogs have also been referred to as easy to create electronic bulletin boards [11].

The concept of 'blogging' can be traced back to the 1990s when individuals kept online diaries, accounting their personal lives and interests. With the arrival of the first blog-hosting tools the usage of blogs spread during 1999 and the years following. By the early 2000s, blogging was established for how-to manuals, news sources, and platforms for politicians and political candidates. "Blogs are proliferating at a exponential rate. Estimates suggest as many as 50 million people are now blogging" [3]. According to Richardson [12] blogs are not a passing fad as a new blog is created every second and there are more than 900,000 blog posts a day. Blogging has become mainstream crossing many genres and applications.

II. Bogs + Education = Edublogs

Within education and academia, web logs are being embraced by both teachers and students. The web is an important and ever-evolving resource for teaching and learning. Martindale and Wiley [9] argue that tools like HTML editors and FTP clients have made web publishing available to many teachers and students.   However, the challenge of learning to use these tools has been a barrier to web publishing for many. They further suggest web logs reduce the technical barriers to effective web publishing significantly.   "Blogs used for education, dubbed edublogs, are rapidly emerging as techno-savvy teachers embrace the instructional potential of this online tool" [11].

With the mainstreaming of blogs and the growing educational applications of blogs among educators, the use of blogs has been identified as having potential and applicability as a form of teacher assessment and learner self-assessment. Edublogs are of a venue and a format that encourage reflection, questioning by self and others, and collaboration and provoke higher order thinking skills. Students have the opportunity to review other's postings and responses to subject matter, to compare their knowledge and comprehension level, and to benefit from the shared strategy uses they and their peers employ. Another important aspect of edublogs is the asking of questions by peers, self, and the teacher. The research associated with cognitive information processing has thoroughly demonstrated that asking and answering questions about information to be learned can greatly improve comprehension [5]; [6]; [13]. One of the fundamental traits of blogging or edublogging is asking questions and reflecting on the responses.

III. Assessment Protocols

As with education in any setting and delivered in any manner, assessment must follow appropriate protocols. Before assessment processes and procedures are identified, the learning objectives and outcomes must be determined. There must be a sound relationship between objectives and assessment. Instructional objectives are statements of expected learning outcomes; they describe knowledge, skills, behaviors, and/or attitudes that learners should be able to demonstrate after engaging in the process of instruction. Assessment is the process by which it is determined whether students have acquired the knowledge/skills/behaviors/attitudes reflected in the objectives. Thus, the development of objectives should precede the decisions about what and how to assess.

Assessment can be described as the systematic, on-going, iterative process of monitoring learning in order to determine what students are doing well and in what ways they need to improve. Assessment includes observing, describing, collecting, recording, scoring, and interpreting data.
Assessment is effective when it
- is learner centered
- is relevant
- is clear as regards purpose
- is based on known objectives and expectations
- is authentic and objective
- is congruent with instructional or learning objectives
- leads to direction and change for the learner
- provides information for the learner as regards progress and future behavior.
- is student centered.

Assessment that is not based on a well developed foundation of goals, objectives and expected learning outcomes may have a negative impact. Black and William [2] found that most classroom testing encourages rote and superficial learning which often emphasizes quantity of work over high quality. If

the goal is to facilitate learning, the role of assessment must be an integral part of the entire instructional plan.

If the teacher concludes that edublogs can play a role in the assessment process, the student should be informed in very specific language how the assessment will carried out. Just using edublogs in the class because they are one of the latest fads is not sufficient. Only after a systematic approach to understanding blogs and blogging, determining the adequate fit between blogs and the specific objectives and expected learning outcomes should blogs be included in the required activities of an online course.

IV. Edublogs as Learner Self-Assessment

To really succeed students must learn to self-assess so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to do to achieve [1]. Blogs enable learning from self-reflection, from others, and provokes complex thinking skills and strategies. Students have the opportunity to put into writing their own thoughts and beliefs, review other postings and responses to a subject matter, and are then able to compare their level or knowledge or approach to their peers. The blog can be a student's platform for testing their understanding or mastery of a skill or subject matter.

 Poling [10] states that students begin to learn from each other as they make connections, ask questions, and draw conclusions while blogging. In a study conducted by Wang and Tang [14], where students enrolled in a Rhetoric and Writing class were asked to participate in blogging, survey responses indicated that three-fourths of the respondents indicated that they assessed themselves and gave feedback. The students reported that these dialogues benefited them by being able to see where improvement was needed. In addition, students agreed that they obtained support and encouragement in completing the assignments.

Assessments can come in the form of peer-to-peer or instructor-to- student, by offering each other alternate views, assistance, or confirmation. Poling [10] infers that as students communicate in the blog, they question and challenge each other's thinking, leading to deeper and more meaningful interaction previously afforded during individual journaling. Instructors are able to assess the group collectively to measure the group's understanding of the material. Feedback can then be given collectively or to individual student's blog.

V. Edublogs as Teacher Assessment Tools - Formative and Summative

Edublogs have potential in both formative and summative assessment procedures. Assessment, based on the current wave of "accountability," is a major educational issue. Most of the attention to assessment has been focused on summative assessment. Summative assessment is the attempt to summarize student learning at some point in time, say the end of a course. By contrast, formative assessment occurs when teachers feed information back to students in ways that enable the student to learn better, or when students can engage in a similar, self- reflective process. If the primary purpose of assessment is to support high-quality learning, then formative assessment ought to be understood as the most important assessment practice. In a review of the related literature, Black and William [2] came to the conclusions that while improved formative assessment impacts low achievers more than other students, it plays a significant role in raising overall achievement. Black and William [2] further state that to be truly helpful to students, formative information should be focused on the task, not the student; and the student must understand the feedback so as to make use of it.

Not only does the individual student benefit from the assessment given through the blog, but can be used by others in their learning. Assessment through blogging can also give insight to the instructor if instruc-

tion methods or material need to be tailored. Blogs open the assessment process to an infinite number of people who may express interest in the subject thus expanding the learning process. Blogs also allow for assessment and correspondence on a continual real-time basis, which is nto often a feature of traditional instruction methods. Blogs are not bound to time, class structures, or the physical limits of a classroom. Research conducted by Wang and Fang [14] found that blogs could be an effective tool for educational use particularly when students are separated by time and place between classes. The learning and assessment process can be supported outside of the classroom. The accessibility of blogs allow for self-managed learning, assessment and subsequent action. According to the research conducted by Wang and Fang [14], the participants also believed that the online communication promoted autonomous learning among students. Students learned to manage their own time, process the information, and evaluate their own learning. Results from a research study conducted by Ferdig and Trammel [4], it [blogs] makes material accessible for subsequent reflection and analysis, allowing students to revisit and revise their artifacts; thus, enriching the learning experience.

VI. Conclusion

As blogging has grown, so has the flexibility in its usage and its benefits. Being extremely accessible, this web-based communication tool has the capacity to aide students and educators to collaborate, share knowledge, reflect, debate and monitor progress twenty-hours a day, seven days a week. Having such a unstructured, sporadic delivery, its convenience definitely plays a very important role into becoming a trend. Of course, with the proper supervision of blogs, the ability for students to receive feedback and critiques to guide and monitor their academic achievement can surely be an effective assessment tool.

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