

Building a group blog for learning

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the potential of using group-written blogs (“group blogs”) for learning. Learning points are drawn from the National Interschool Blogging Championship organised in 2005 to raise the awareness of blogging as an emerging technology to both students and teachers in Singapore. We discuss from the students' perspective their motivations to blog and how blogging can benefit them. This paper also highlights the challenges faced and provides some suggestions when building a group blog for learning.

Keywords: group blog, edublog, learning community, blogging, education

Introduction

This paper presents the qualitative analysis of group blogging in which the aim is to understand the benefits of using group blogs for learning. The report is based on a study of students' survey responses after their experience with group blogging over 3 months in a national interschool blogging competition. The analysis is based on their responses to the questions: (1) How is group blogging different from blogging in personal blogging? (2) Does having themes helped in group blogging? We analysed students' perspective of group blog, the benefits, the motivations, the challenges faced, and the effects of themes on group blogs. The discussion focuses on the benefits of group blog for learning and practical considerations for implementations.

Related Works

Weller, Pegler and Mason (2005) identified three primary uses of blogs in education, namely group blog, academics keeping blogs and students using blogs. He explained that in group blog, “an online community can be established, where members post articles of interest [around specific subject areas] and discussion arises around these” (p.63). This is “one example of a community of practice, as many of the participants are the recognised experts in the field, and students get to partake in a legitimate peripheral form of participation in that community.” Academics blogs allow the immediate publication of academic writings on the web for dialogue and debate with other academics; students can employ blogs for pedagogical benefits when they use blogs as a personal journal or portfolio to demonstrate their thoughts, to engage in reflections or discussions on a subject area. In the later section, we examine students' perspective of group blog and suggest how blogging within subject areas can be beneficial for learning.

Nardi, Schinao and Gumbrecht (2004) mentioned “small-group blogs with multiple authors collaborating on content” (p.9) and suggested “educational and work project blogs” could “benefit from features allowing one to identify and sort posts by contributor and topic”.

Our study elaborates on the benefits of collaboration and the importance of organisation of posts within a group blog.

In their study on the use of blogs as learning spaces, Williams and Jacobs (2004) found that “blog increased the level of meaningful intellectual exchange between students” (p.8) in, other words, blog increased student interactivity. At the same time, blogs appears to have the potential to “provide students with a high level of autonomy while simultaneously providing opportunity for greater interaction with peers” (p.12). Our study looks into how the increased number of audience in a group blog can benefit the interaction and motivation within the blog.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to address the central research question: What are the benefits of using group blog for learning? To explore the potential of blogging for learning in a group blog, we obtain the learning points from a national interschool blogging competition.

National Interschool Blogging Championship (NIBC)

The NIBC competition was jointly-organised by the Ministry of Education (Singapore) and local communications company the SingTel Group. The main objective of the competition was to raise the awareness of blogging as an emerging technology to both students and teachers. Schools are invited to join the competition, and student leaders were chosen by the schools to lead their peers in the blogging process.

To set a focus for the competition, the students were blogging on the themes “Pet peeves and inspirations” and “Technology and me” that were pre-defined. A blogging platform¹ was made available to each participating school, and students in the schools were encouraged to sign up for free accounts to join in the blogging. Student leaders act as administrators for the blog and they are allowed to customise their blog titles and colour schemes.

Throughout the 3-months duration of the competition, student leaders in respective schools led other students to blog on topics which they can freely define based on the themes set for the competition. Students’ participation can either be blogging new posts or posting comments to posts blogged by their peers.

The schools competed in two categories, namely the secondary schools category and the junior colleges category. Towards the end of the competition, students are allowed to cast votes to select the “Most popular blog” for each category. Judging by a panel was carried out on all the participating blogs to choose the very good blogs. The blogs were judged based on criteria which included perspectives and depth of thinking in posts, organisation, use of multimedia to enhance meaning etc. These judging criteria were made known to students at the start of the competition. Top prizes were awarded to schools that had maintained content-rich blogs.

At the end of the competition, a survey was conducted where 115 students responded (N=115). There are 28 questions in the survey; classified into 2 main categories, the questions sought to find out more about (1) the organisation of the competition (2) what the students think about the blogging experience based on the competition.

¹ The blogging platform is available at <http://campusmoblog.com.sg>

To answer the research question, a qualitative analysis of the students' feedback to two of the survey questions was carried out:

- (1) How is group blogging different from blogging in personal blog?
- (2) Does having themes helped in group blogging?

Results

In this section, we organise the discussion according to the survey questions. First, let's begin by looking at the first question: "How is group blogging different from blogging in personal blog?"

How is group blogging different from blogging in personal blog?

We examined the main themes that arose from the students' responses to the first survey question.

1. Students' perspective of group blog

The students perceive a group blog as a space which "allows different people to post on the same site". As they read through the postings, the experience is "like a book being written by many people" and the ideas "just flow". Some students view it as "more like a forum than a blog" or "sort of like a chat room with the posts" as there are many members communicating with each other in the same space. At the same time, it gives them a feeling of "community, almost like fellowship". They understand that in a group blog, there is "an objective to achieve" and their discussion would surround the topic of interest or subject area (e.g. theme).

2. Blogging in a community

Group blog helps to create in students "a sense of belonging" like in "a class blog". They felt that they belonged to a community within the environment where they "can share views together", learn and support each other. As one student puts it, "We share our opinion in group blogging and learn from each other compared to my personal blogging, which I did not learn anything since there was only my postings. I enjoyed learning in group blogging, it tells me many other opinions not just one-sided view." The members can support each other, for example they believe that the members will "cover each other's backs in times of need".

If a blog belongs to a group, all the members can help to maintain it. As such, it does not depend on "just one person to keep it 'alive'" and it can be "very frequently updated". The students understand that a blog has to be updated regularly to keep its momentum and to sustain it for people to visit and read. They know that it is about "GRP [group] work, not some individual work!"

In contrast to a personal blog, in a group blog, the students focus less on themselves and more on others. The discussions in the entries are usually "addressed to people in the group" i.e. they "blog more about issues that pertain to the group at large" and "less [on] personal issues". They think of it as "a place where [they] congregate among 'ourselves' and where it 'enables [them] to know how others feel'. They can "catch up with one another, keep in constant contact and are able to be a form of a listening ear or just being there for a friend in need."

The notion of mutual understanding among the group members can also be observed. One student mentioned “you can convey a message that would concern this particular group only and they [the group at large] wouldn't be annoyed about receiving it”. They feel that their group members would understand them even if they are not polite with their messages. They can “share with each other what's been going on in [their] lives” and “how [they] feel or the problems [they] might have and the rest in the group [would] respond.” This helps to build up and “enhance [their] relationship as [they] work together”, they are also comfortable talking about issues (personal or otherwise) together.

3. *A ready audience*

There is always a pool of readers in a group blog, which are the members of the group. Hence, students are motivated to write because they know there is an audience to read their postings. They “enjoy posting for an audience” knowing “there will sure be a lot of people” to read their postings. They realised the benefit of “more participants” means that it comes with “more opinions” and the members “can have different views”. At the same time, they can read “the entries of fellow group-mates”.

The audience in the group blog often comes from varied background and possess very different learning behaviours. Some members may have had similar views while others may differ in their opinion on the issues discussed. Members with similar views respond to these postings with agreement, encouragement and support which can motivate the authors of the posts. Students enjoy “reading the entries of fellow group-mates with similar interest” and they appreciate members who “share ... something in common that put [them] together”.

Members in the group can also contribute different or alternative views in their entries. As a result, there is a collection of “different views” on the same topics. The students find it “enjoyable to read the different styles and content” of the postings to the topic and are amazed that they are “able to see different views of different people in a single blog!” Some students find it “fun” reading “about many different happenings on the same page, sometimes it can be like a conversation of sorts when different bloggers blog about the same issue”. One student mentioned that postings with different views are “more complicated” to read.

4. *Interacting with audience*

Group blogs provide opportunities for students to “interact with others, and know more friends”. In fact, students feel that there are “more interaction” and “more views” present in group blog than in personal blog. The students are able to read a variety of opinions which can help them “widen [their] perceptions of things”. For the novice members, this can be a motivation for them to blog as it “gives [them] ideas on what to blog”.

Group blogs not only allow one to read other people's postings but it also gives the members “an opportunity to comment” on the posting. The comments can be an agreement or disagreement to the authors' posts. One student mentioned, “If we do not agree to his/her stand on certain topic, we're able to post our point of view onto the similar blog.” They can “reply to one another in their postings” too.

5. *Responsibilities*

The students find that they “tend to have a more united spirit”. Unlike in a personal blog, they feel that they “owe it to the people you're blogging with to take care to stay either on topic or, at least, [be] civil. Hence, you can't just go nuts and post what you like, as you like”. The blog belongs to the community and the members have a shared responsibility. One student mentioned “this blog does not belong to me only. So I have to discuss and ask for opinions before every change I made”.

There appears to be an element of peer pressure and responsibility when students blog in group blogs. Students understand the importance of being sensitive to others and respecting others, thus they would be more conservative in their blogs. In addition, knowing that others are viewing their post, students would want to present a good image of themselves as they blog. This requires them to think before they blog. Most students find this pressure a “sort of motivation to post because you don't want to disappoint the people in [their] group”. At the same time, they try to be careful in their expressions. One student expressed it as “I have to take care of my languages” in group blog. In comparison with personal blog, the student expressed the constrain as “In my personal blog I run wild with my views jutting all over the place but with a group blog, I'll take a bit more time to organise my thoughts, write in a more acceptable manner and try very hard to write about topics that would not only interest fellow members of the blog but motivate them to air their own views on their own blog entries.”

6. Challenges

Some of the challenges faced by members of the group blog are (1) time factor (2) stagnation due to existence of themes (3) constraint of ideas. Time is required if one wishes to read all the postings. As one student puts it, “One [disadvantage] about group blogging is that if there are too many posts at the same time, it's hard to find time to read them well”. This is generally noted when technologies are introduced to students, “they were enjoyable but time consuming” (Weller, Pegler & Mason, 2005).

In group blogs, there is usually a theme or specific areas for discussion. However, sometimes the students may run out of ideas for discussion. This is noted in, “Group blogging usually stagnates after a while, as interest is usually lost”. The topics defined by leaders of the group may also restrict the freedom of some other students to write what they want, “Group blogging is a lot more restrained in my opinion”. (This concern is addressed further in the later section on “Themes”). While some students find the theme restricting their thoughts to blog, others find that there are many open possibilities / opportunities like “In group blogging, they have more topics to chat about”.

Does having themes helped in group blogging?

The students' responses to the question, “Does having themes help in group blogging?” are analysed. From the responds of 114 students, 58% (N=66) of the students found that defining themes for blogging is helpful, 19% (N=22) found that the themes restricted their blogging thoughts, and 23% (N=26) of the students found that the themes are both helpful as well as restrictive. We shall elaborate on these opinions in the following sections.

1. Themes are helpful to blogging

The students found the competition themes helped them to:

suggest topics to blog.

generate ideas to post.
have a head start on what to blog.
write in depth details about the topic.
research on the topics.
post ideas to the different topics.
categorise and organise the entries.
read and follow the ideas through the posts.
search for the topics.
have a purpose to work towards.

The themes help the students to suggest topics to blog and guide them to generate ideas for blogging. At the same time it provides opportunities for students to have a “head start” on what to blog, this also prevents students to get lost in the blogging process. With a topic to focus on, the students can describe the ideas in more depth after they research on it.

The “topics” feature in the blogging platform helps the students to organise their entries into the different categories. This enables the students to read and follow the ideas of the different posts continuously under each topic. At the same time, the search for any topics and ideas was made easier. Most important of all, the students know the purpose of posting to the blog as there is a theme to focus on.

2. *Themes are restrictive to blogging*

The students found the competition themes restrict them because:

they want to blog on topics of personal interest.
they need to think whether an idea was relevant before posting.
it limits creativity when one had to write within the theme.
there were not enough topics to allow exploration of ideas.
it controls their thoughts and comments.

When the students find the themes restricting their thoughts, it was because they can blog on any topics in their personal blog without feeling restricted. As one student puts it, “they still see blogs as a form of online diary where [they] can ramble randomly” and “distress themselves”. These students are unable to distinguish the difference between group blogs and personal blogs.

In group blogs, students had to put in effort to think on the relevance of ideas before they would post it, this appears to limit their creativity to write. Some found that the topics defined by their peers were limiting. This did not allow them to explore their ideas fully and their thoughts on what they could blog and comments were controlled by it.

3. *Suggestions on implementation of themes*

Some students feel that there is a need to have a theme but the theme also causes restriction on what they can blog on. These students suggested some ideas for improving the theme:

provide a theme with a wider scope.
avoid theme which is too specific.
have a theme which can enable discussion to sustain.
have more than one theme at a time.
allow students to blog on topics of their choice.

Themes are like “a double-edged sword, posing both an area of focus, yet limiting creativity”. The students prefer to have a theme which allows a wider scope for discussion, in other words, a theme which enables them to generate topics and ideas. Such themes are usually not too specific or the students already must have some basic knowledge to help them to have initial triggers for thinking and researching.

Discussions

Based on the above analysis of students’ response, it may indicate trends that may be observed in group blogs in general. The students perceive group blogs as a learning space where members communicate within the same space to discuss topics of interest. The members discuss like in a forum and at the same time, they are able to read it like a book written by different authors. From the above learning points, we can now address our research question on “What are the benefits of using group blog for learning?”

Benefits of using group blog for learning

1. A platform for formation of learning community

Group blogs can be an effective platform for discussion and exchanging of ideas. The present findings suggest the students are able to share their views, opinions and learn from each other as they discuss and comment within the same space. They form a community within the environment that supports each other. At the same time, the members collaborate with each other to maintain the blog with the knowledge that group effort is required. Their discussions would be more focused because of the presence of a theme,

2. A platform with a ready audience for collaborative learning

A ready audience in group blog is a motivation for students to write because other members exist to read their postings. At the same time, the members contribute their views and opinions; these can be supporting views or alternative views. The variety of opinions can provide the students with a wide range of perspective for their considerations. Another motivation in group blogs is the interactivity with the audience. It provides opportunities for members not only to contribute their own ideas but to read and comment on the ideas of others.

3. A platform that encourage sensitivity to others

There is an element of responsibility or peer pressure present in group blogging. The members understand the importance of being sensitive to the feelings of others. They need to think before they post their comments, e.g. they would take care of their language.

Practical considerations for implementation

1. More time is needed for reading and interacting

Students enjoy reading posts and interacting in the group blogs. However, time is needed to read through the posts by different contributors. Even more time is needed if the student intends to blog a post or to leave a comment in reply. In a classroom context, where students are divided into multiple groups, inter-group blogs interaction can be very rich and reflective, but the amount of time to transverse all the posts will increase significantly.

2. *Allow negotiation and interpretation of main theme(s)*

In a classroom context, a teacher needs to focus learners on different themes and/or topics inline with the teaching objectives. Although students would like minimum control from the teacher, there still exists a need to focus them on the learning task. Teachers can exercise control and give freedom to students by defining the broad themes where necessary, and allow students to define their own sub-topics for their posts. In doing so, a teacher encourages creativity in students as they negotiate, interpret and make meanings among themselves. A group blog would thus become a learning-cum-social space.

3. *Monitoring of interest level*

As students interact and make meaning in their group social spaces, a teacher should monitor the activities in the group blogs as a whole. If the teacher notices a drop in the interest level in terms of the number of posts and comments generated, it is timely to 'intervene' by introducing a new theme or to suggest a new topic to rekindle the flame. As a student suggested, it is good to introduce "a different one every 2 weeks or so, blog entries would be more varied that way".

Conclusion

In this study, we explored the potentials of employing group blogs in teaching and learning context based on feedback from students who participated in a competition. Through the qualitative analysis of the students' survey responses; we gathered that group blogs have potentials to serve as platforms for formation of learning community. The ready audience within (and without) each group blog is present for collaborative learning to take place. Not only can a teacher encourage the flourishing of creativity and diversity in the students' meaning making process, students can possibly learn the importance of being sensitive to others' feelings. Such learning is for students to experience and make meaning of it. As with any other technology, practical considerations do exist for the introduction of group blogs into the classrooms. However, these can be overcome when the teachers are aware of them. In summary, group blog has the potential to become a 21st century tool (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003) that moves both teachers and students into learning for the 21st century.

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