

**Strategies for Educational Blogs**  
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Abstract:

Blogs are online journals that individuals publish on the Internet to reflect on mundane as well as serious issues of heart and mind. Like many email services, blogs are now freely available and form another communication channel for the Internet community. From outpours of individual tantrums to academic discourse of the Harvard Law School, blogs have proliferated far and wide. It is not surprising that blogging is becoming an instructional strategy for education.

This paper presents an overview of blogging, and relates it to practical educational applications. It highlights instructional strategies that enhance blogging as tool for teaching and learning. A case study where these strategies are applied is presented to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses.

Keywords:

Blogging, Instructional Strategies.

## **Introduction**

Blogging began in late 1999 when a group of people with similar interests started compiling a list of web sites that published personal online journals or weblogs, as it was known then. The community of bloggers grew rapidly, attracting commercial interests (such as Blogger, and Pyra) in offering free blogging services. Subsequently, the population of bloggers increased exponentially, thus spawning larger commercial services (e.g. Manila, Radio Userland) and Open Source freeware (e.g. WordPress) applications on the Internet. The availability of these services and freeware applications made blogging within the reach of every Internet user. Students began blogging extensively, as a form of peer communication, and also to record their daily ramblings, thus giving a new meaning to blogging. (See definition of weblog, Walker, 2003).

Blood (2002) suggests that blogging serves individuals in:

- self-expression,
- keeping in touch with peers,
- sharing information, and building a reputation.

The immediate benefits are that bloggers develop essential attributes of becoming:

- better writers,
- focused on self-awareness, and
- critical thinkers.

While the diversity of blogging topics on the Internet is beyond comprehension, the use of blogging for educational purposes is taking roots. Renowned institutions like the Harvard Law School began introducing blogging as an instructional strategy in 2003 (Festa, 2003). There is now a growing list of blogs dedicated to education, such as the Educational Bloggers Network (<http://www.ebn.weblogger.com>) and the Educational Weblogs (<http://educational.blogs.com>). Some sites promote the technologies behind blogging, while others look into the pedagogical issues of blogging.

### Differences between Forums and Blogs

Although the use of online discussions and forums were popular in the past to support e-learning, there were limitations in these technologies. Blogging offers better individual control of how the information is maintained and communicated. It relieves the online facilitator of many mundane administrative tasks that do not contribute to teaching and learning. Table 1 shows some important differences between discussion forums and blogs.

Table 1. Differences between online discussions/forums and blogs.

| Features          | Discussions forums     | Blogs                         |
|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Control           | Administrator          | Individual                    |
| Contributions     | Group                  | Individual                    |
| Moderation        | Facilitator            | Individual                    |
| Inter-links       | Limited (Hyperlinks)   | Unlimited                     |
| Community         | Controlled             | Open                          |
| Availability      | Administrator          | Individual                    |
| Multimedia        | Controlled             | Unlimited                     |
| Feedback/Comments | Facilitator controlled | Individual controlled         |
| Syndications      | Not available          | Free RSS syndication services |

Individual blogs can be a personalized web space for an online publication. Its strength as an educational tool becomes apparent when blogs are semantically linked together to form a learning community. The links can be centrally administered, but each blog owner has the control over how the links are established. Figure 1 illustrates an example of a community of blogs in an educational context. Each blog can stand by itself or be connected to a larger community of blogs, served by syndicating agents.

The concept of syndication came from news centres that offer the latest news feeds to readers. So instead of searching for news, one could set up a news aggregator (e.g. Amphetadesk, <http://www.disobey.com/amphetadesk/>) and subscribe to the latest news feeds from news syndicates (e.g. BBC, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/rss/default.stm>). Also known as Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds; this technology allows Blog owners to announce their web presences to a syndicating service (e.g. <http://www.syndic8.com/>). Every time a new blog entry is published; it automatically sends a message to the syndicating service. The syndicate then sends a news feed to all readers subscribed to this feed.

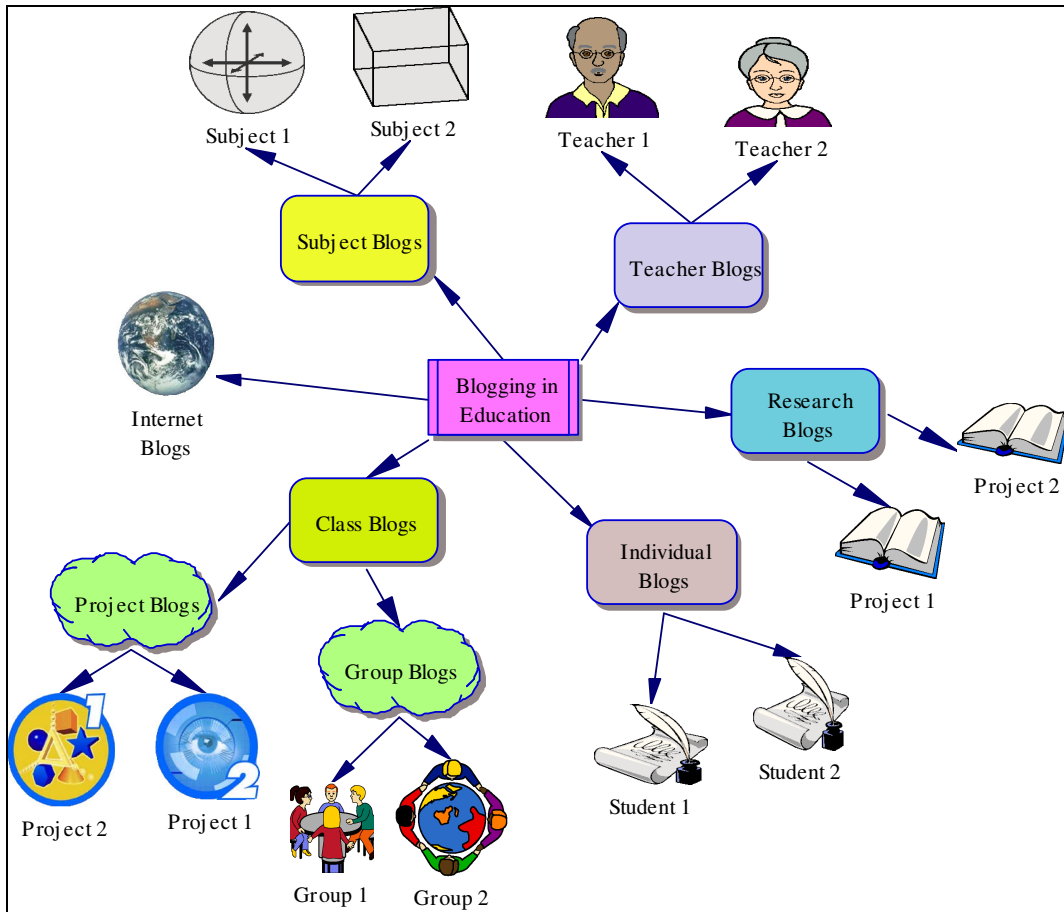


Figure 1. A community of educational blogs.

The potential of blogs and RSS feeds for education is promising, considering that they support an open constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Students have the ability to take responsibility and make sense of their own learning, and teachers are better able to monitor their progress using the RSS feeds. A community of learners is easily established. Technology becomes secondary to the teaching and learning.

## Components of a Blog

There are many applications for blogging. Some blogs are simply text-based journals, while others resemble sophisticated web sites. Most of them share the basic services for posting of articles, receiving comments, and syndication. Figure 2 shows some of these components taken from WordPress, an Open Source program. On its own, a blog is an interactive web site that the owner has control over its look and feel, access rights to its articles, comments, and syndication.

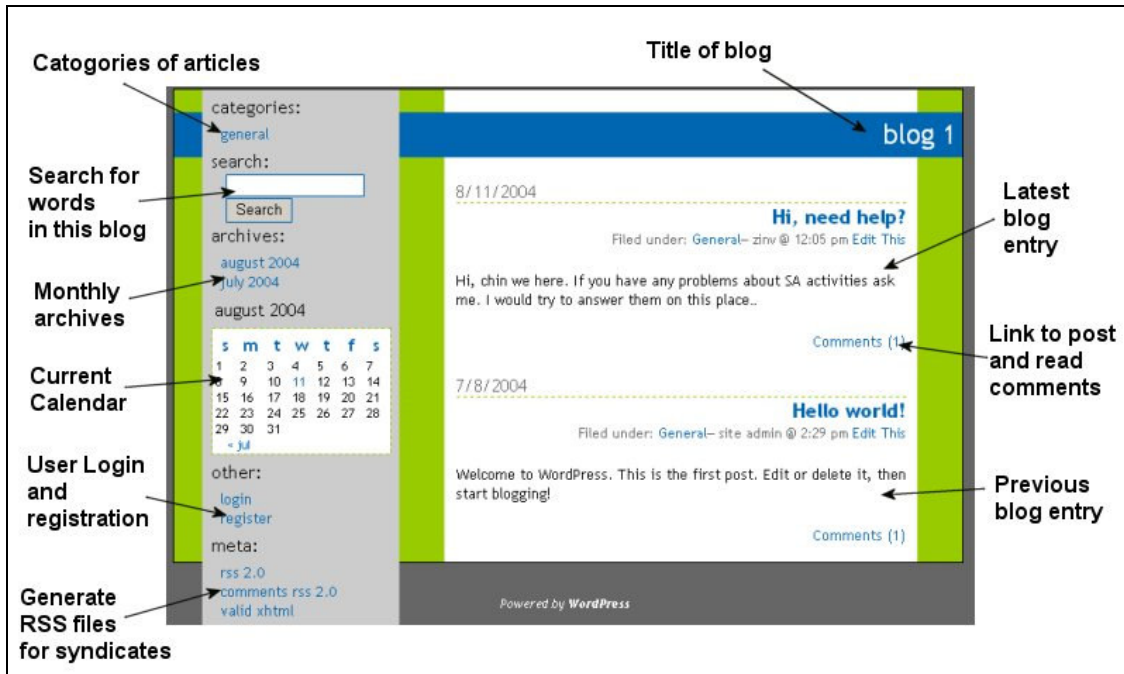


Figure 2. Basic components of a blog.

Besides publishing content, a blog owner can also set it up to receive RSS feeds from other blogs. One way is to set up an online RSS aggregator (e.g. Zfeeder from <http://zvonews.sourceforge.net/>). Zfeeder is customizable to automatically receive the latest RSS feeds from other blogs. It can display the headlines and links to the originating blogs. Figure 3 shows Zfeeder in operation in a blog front page.

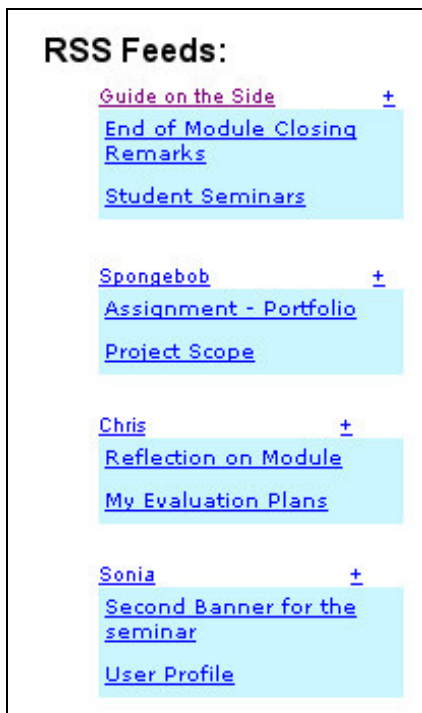
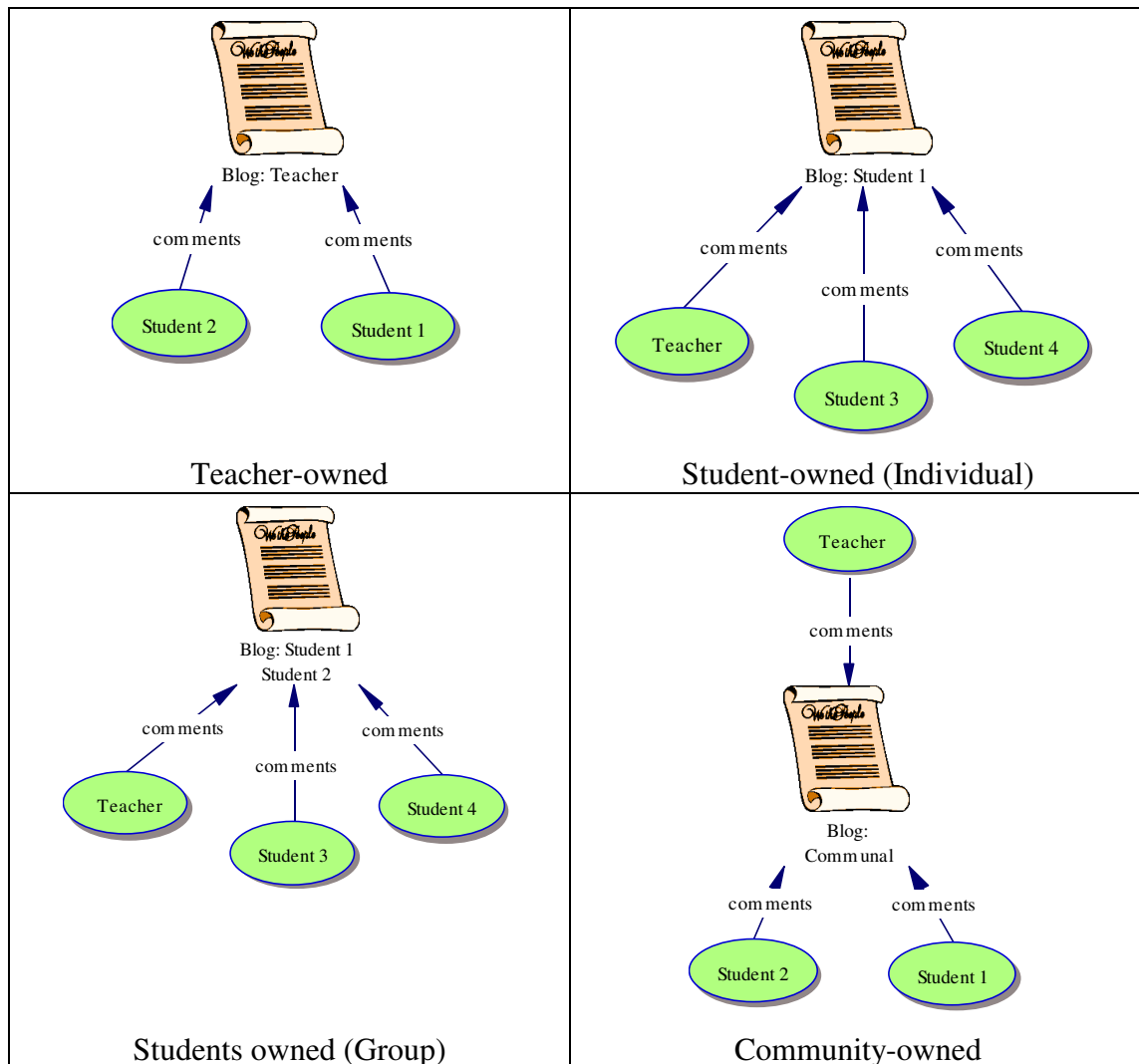


Figure 3. Example of RSS Feeds.

## Applying Instructional Strategies for Blogging

As shown in Figure 1, a community could consist of many of teaching and learning arrangements. It is possible to configure different settings and apply appropriate instructional strategies to suit the settings. A larger community could be divided into smaller clusters based on ownerships. According to Bradley (2004), there are four possible ownerships of blogs – teacher, individual student, groups of students, and communal. Figure 4 illustrates these configurations.



**Figure 4. Ownerships of Educational Blogs**

The configurations provide a definitive locus of control for users. It also simplifies the management of the blogs for establishing clear roles and responsibilities. On the Internet, it is common for an individual blog to position itself as the centre of the universe. However, this may not be suitable in some teaching and learning arrangements. For example, in a group-based learning setting, ownership may be placed on a group of students (e.g. a project group), where each member has defined roles and tasks to fulfill. Thus, it is necessary to apply instructional strategies to match the activities of the teacher

and student. Table 2 summarizes some possibilities in matching instructional strategies and learning activities.

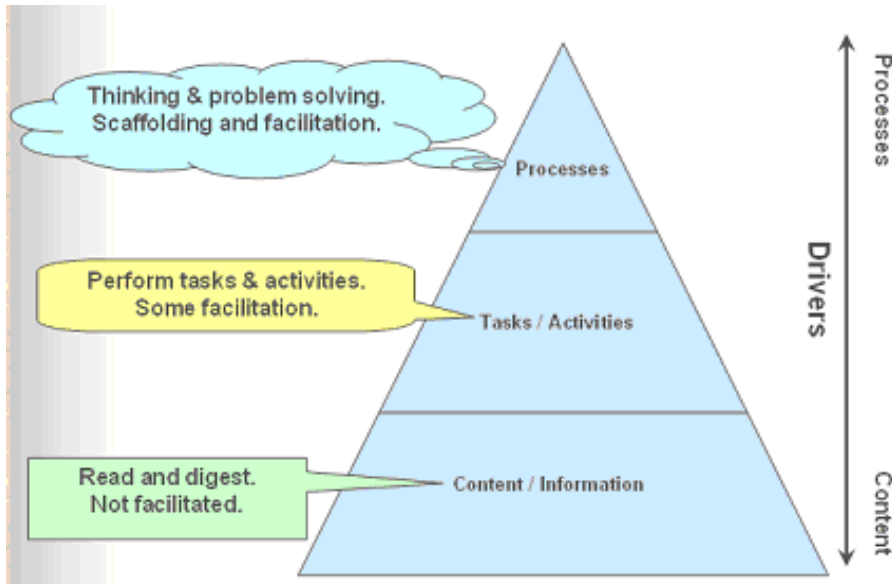
**Table 2. Matching instructional activities and learning activities**

| Teacher's instructional strategies   | Student's learning activities   |
|--|---|
| 1. Teacher-owned Blog  |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post information (articles, Internet-linked, resources, and instructional materials).</li> <li>• Direct activities, challenges, and assignments.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read information, post comments or questions and feedback.</li> <li>• Responses to teacher's activities, challenges, assignments.</li> </ul> |
| 2. Student-owned Blog  |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor students' contributions.</li> <li>• Moderate students' comments.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post information (assignments, learning journals, new discoveries).</li> <li>• Reflects on learning.</li> </ul>                              |
| 3. Group-owned Blog  |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post information (group projects, resources, new discoveries).</li> <li>• Moderate feedback and comments.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read information, post comments or questions and feedback.</li> <li>• Learn for domains of knowledge and experiences.</li> </ul>             |
| 4. Community-owned Blog  |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common understand of issues and challenges.</li> <li>• Democratic approach to problem solving.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gather ideas for own construction of meaning and understanding.</li> <li>• Understand different communal worldviews.</li> </ul>              |

The suggested instructional strategies are guidelines that are easy to implement. However, successful instructional blogging also requires that the instructor adopt good facilitation skills, and understand when and how to facilitate.

Figure 5 shows a pyramid of instructional drivers (i.e. content learning, task and activities, and thinking processes) for sustaining an instructional blog. The level of engagement by the facilitator intensifies as the instructional driver move up the pyramid. For content learning, the instructor uploads facts and information and the student reads and digests. Little or no instructor facilitation is needed. When assigning the tasks and activities to students, the instructor needs to monitor if the task were done accordingly, hence some facilitation is required. At the top of the pyramid, where students are engaged in thinking processes and problem solving, the instructor needs to spend more effort in engaging students and helping them scaffold thinking skills and applying problem solving processes.

Understanding and applying the appropriate instructional drivers and level of facilitation engagement will create a sense of purpose for instructional blogging. Table 3 summarizes the guidelines for instructors for mentoring and assisting in electronic forums Bonk and Kim (1998).



**Figure 5. Discussion drivers: Content vs. Processes**

**Table 3. Condensed from “Twelve forms of electronic learning mentoring and assistance”, Bonk & Kim, 1998).**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Social (and cognitive) Acknowledgement:       | "Hello...," "I agree with everything said so far...," "Wow, what a case,"   |
| 2. Questioning:                                  | "What is the name of this concept...?," "Another reason for this might be...?," "In contrast to this might be...,"                                |
| 3. Direct Instruction:                           | "I think in class we mentioned that...," "Remember back to the first week of the semester when we went over "X" which indicated that..."          |
| 4. Modeling/Examples:                            | "I think I solved this sort of problem once when I...," "Remember that video we saw on "X" wherein "Y" decided to...,"                            |
| 5. Feedback/Praise:                              | "Wow, I'm impressed...," "That shows real insight into...," "Are you sure you have considered...,"  |
| 6. Cognitive Task Structuring:                   | "You know, the task asks you to do...," "Ok, now summarize the peer responses you have received...,"  |
| 7. Cognitive Elaborations/Explanations:          | "Provide more information here that explains your rationale," "Please clarify what you mean by..." "I'm just not sure what you mean by...,"       |
| 8. Push to Explore:                              | "You might want to write to Dr. "XYZ" for...," "You might want to do an ERIC search on this topic...,"  |
| 9. Fostering Reflection/Self Awareness:          | "Restate again what the teacher did here...," "How have you seen this before...," "Describe how your teaching philosophy will vary from this...," |
| 10. Encouraging Articulation/Dialogue Prompting: | "What was the problem solving process the teacher faced here...," "Does anyone have a counterpoint or alternative to this situation...,"          |
| 11. General Advice/Scaffolding/Suggestions:      | "If I were in her shoes, I would...," "Perhaps I would think twice about putting these kids...," "I know that I would first...,"                  |

## Creating Qualitative Assessment Rubrics for Blogs

One difficult task faced by online facilitators is in assessing the quality of learning in blogs. Being text narratives, blogs are qualitative in nature. It is not possible to apply objective tests (e.g. multiple choice questions) or standard model answers. An alternative approach is to draw up an assessment rubric that assesses salient categories and award points on ability levels. Table 4 shows an example of such an assessment rubric. This was created by using the “General Rubric Generator” available online at Teach-nology, [http://teach-nology.com/web\\_tools/rubrics/](http://teach-nology.com/web_tools/rubrics/). Using a rubric, clarity and consistency in assessment is better established.

**Table 4. Assessment rubric for blogging.**

Adopted from Teachnology ([http://teach-nology.com/web\\_tools/rubrics/](http://teach-nology.com/web_tools/rubrics/)).

| Name:                                    |  | Teacher:  |   |   |        |
|--|--|---|---|---|--------|
| Date:                                    |  | Title of Work:                                    |   |   |        |
| Criteria                                 | Levels of Performance                      |   |   |   | Points |
|  | 1  | 2   | 3   | 4   |        |
| <b>Managing a blog.</b>                  | Ability to blog consistently.              | Ability to identify learning points.              | Ability to reflect on learning issues.              | Ability to connect personal issues to broader issues. | —      |
| <b>Contributing to other blogs.</b>      | Ability to post comments to blogs.         | Ability to add value in comments to blogs.        | Ability to counter-propose ideas in blogs.          | Ability to direct comments to own blog.               | —      |
| <b>Originality of blog</b>               | Ability to generate many ideas.            | Ability to narrow ideas.                          | Ability to elaborate on ideas.                      | Ability to create new and fresh ideas.                | —      |
| <b>Blogging to self-direct learning.</b> | Ability to draw up personal blogging path. | Ability to link relevant information to own blog. | Ability to discerning information from other blogs. | Ability to cope with day-to-day blogging.             | —      |
|  |  |   |   | <b>Total----&gt;</b>                                  | —      |
| <b>Teacher Comments:</b>                 |  |   |   |   |        |

The rubric should be modified and revised with subsequent assessments. This will help to fine tune the rubric to suit assessment requirements.



## A Case Study

Six students attending a Masters in Education program at a private university in Singapore were tasked to maintain a blog pertaining to their coursework and classroom meetings. Each student was assigned a personal blog to reflect on their learning and to report on the progress of their coursework. 32 hours of classroom meetings were held over two weeks. Following which students continue blogging for another three weeks, working towards a final project report. Table 5 summarizes the tasks of the instructor and students.

Table 5. Blogging Tasks

| Instructor's Tasks  | Student's Tasks   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up student's personal blogs.</li> <li>• Set up RSS feeds.</li> <li>• Set up blogging categories.</li> <li>• Facilitate blogging discussions.</li> <li>• Assess final project.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain personal blog entries.</li> <li>• Follow-up with RSS feeds.</li> <li>• Blog in designated categories.</li> <li>• Comment on fellow students' blogs.</li> <li>• Compile blog entries as final project report.</li> </ul> |

The instructor created 12 categories and assigned students to blog in those categories. The strategy was to focus students on pertinent issues of reflection and discussion relating to the coursework. It also formed the rubric for assessing learning at the end of the course. Table 6 shows the categories and blogging tasks.

Table 6. Categories and Blogging Tasks

| Category                  | Students to enter:                          |
|---------------------------|---|
| General                   | General comments and ideas.                 |
| Project Title             | Outline of the project.                     |
| Timeline                  | A timeline and schedules of the project.    |
| Project Scope             | Description of the project scope.           |
| Storyboards               | Examples of project storyboards             |
| Objectives/Outcomes       | Learning objectives and intended outcomes.  |
| ID Team                   | An overview of the ID team members.         |
| Evaluation Plan           | Description of an evaluation plan.          |
| User Profile              | Description of the intended users.          |
| Summative Evaluation Plan | Description of a summative evaluation plan. |
| Prototype                 | A working prototype of the project.         |
| Activities Log            | A detailed log of all project activities.   |

Students were instructed to update their blog entries regularly after classroom meetings, and also progressively as their projects took shape. RSS feeds containing the headings of the latest two entries of each blog were automatically sent to everyone. In this manner, everyone could see a summary of each other's developments. Students were encouraged to comment on each other's blogs, and to follow up with the comments posted on their blogs. Figures 6 and 7 shows examples of blog entries from the instructor and a student.

Figure 6. Example of the instructor's blog entry.

readings  
id models  
id, theory, & research

categories:  
general  
session 1: 17 jul  
session 2: 18 jul  
session 3: 19 jul  
session 4: 21 jul  
session 5: 23 jul  
session 6: 27 jul

search:

archives:  
july 2004  
november 2004

| S     | M  | T  | W  | T  | F  | S  |
|-------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
|       | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  |
| 7     | 8  | 9  | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
| 14    | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 |
| 21    | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 |
| 28    | 29 | 30 |    |    |    |    |
| < jul |    |    |    |    |    |    |

other:  
login  
register

meta:  
rss 2.0

**Overview:** The subject outline was presented, touching on important tasks in the readings. To supplement the readings, and also to source for more recent literature, a brief overview of how and where to obtain documents and journal articles was presented. It was highlighted that students need to manage and direct their study time outside of classroom meetings.

**Assessments:** A thorough briefing on the assessment criteria was presented. Some students raised the issue of time constraints for the project portfolio and essay. After some deliberation, the deadlines were set as **9 Aug** for the final project portfolio, and **31 Aug** for the essay. However, progressive updates were expected, and a draft should be ready by the last class meeting on **29 Jul**. The student seminar dates are to be decided at the next class meeting.

The mind map is centered on 'ED5821 Session 1 (7/17/2004 - v11)'. It branches into five main areas:
 

- Overview:** Includes Subject Outline, Readings (Text book, Module readings), Resources (NLB, Internet), Study Time (Tasks in Readings, Critical analysis, Reflections).
- Assessment:** Includes Student Seminar (30% - L:20% P:10%), Project (Portfolio (50%), Essay (20%)), and Deadlines.
- Quick Survey of IT Skills:** Includes Tools, Competency Levels, and Preferences.
- Discussions:** Includes Module readings, Setting seminar dates, Deciding on project, Deciding on tools, and Meeting the deadlines.
- Lecture:** Includes 'What is ID?', 'What does an ID Designer do?', 'What are the processes of ID?', and 'Doing your project'.
- Overview of Tools for Projects:** Includes MS Word, MS Powerpoint, DreamWeaver, MindManager, Inspiration, Hot Potatoes, Blogs, and Others?.

Figure 7. Example of a student's blog entry.

**7/29/2004**

Objectives/Outcomes  
Filed under: Objectives/Outcomes — spongebob @ 2:01 pm

Learning Objectives  
1. Identify the right from wrong reasons to get a dog from two options with 100% accuracy.  
2. State all the needs of a dog.  
3. Predict the outcome caused by irresponsible dog owners from a list with 100% accuracy.  
4. Decide on the appropriate responses to some common scenarios in interacting with a dog given a list of choices with 100% accuracy.

Simplified learning objectives for use in the prototype  
1. Recognize some wrong reasons to get a dog.  
2. Recognize the needs of a dog.  
3. Comprehend the role of owners in the life of a dog.  
4. Evaluate some responses to common scenarios in the inter...

Assessment/evaluation strategies  
Objective 1: True/false type questions. Click against correct ans  
Objective 2: Fill in the blanks type setting. 11 boxes for student b  
Objective 3: Drag and drop answers to multiple choice question  
Objective 4: Multiple choice questions. Click against correct ans

**7/18/2004**

Test  
Filed under: General, Project Title, Timeline, Project Scope, Storyboa  
Summative Evaluation Plan, Prototype, Activities Log — spongebob @ 11:00 am

This is a test message entered by administrator. To be deleted

**Are you Ready for a Dog?**  
7/18/04 - v12

The mind map is centered on 'Are you Ready for a Dog? (7/18/04 - v12)'. It branches into five main areas:
 

- Management:** Includes Project Diary, Activities Log, and Portfolio.
- Analysis:** Includes Project Title, Performance Gaps, Target Audience, Intended Outcomes, Delivery (Content, Method), Instructional Needs, Evaluation Plan (Format, Summal), Timeline, and ID Team.
- Design:** Includes Learning Objectives, Topic Outline, Instructional Design Model, and Storyboard.
- Production:** Includes Content, Graphics, Authoring IMM, and Prototype.
- Evaluation:** Includes Testing IMM and Validating IMM.

categories:  
 general  
 project title  
 timeline  
 project scope  
 storyboards  
 objectives/outcomes  
 id team  
 evaluation plan  
 user profile  
 summative  
 evaluation plan  
 prototype  
 activities log

## **Reflecting on the Strengths and Weaknesses**

Over a period of five weeks, the blog entries increased steadily. Initially, students new to blogging encountered problems such as creating and editing entries, attaching documents, and inserting images. However, these were resolved with some guidance from the instructor. After submitting a few entries, students found that it wasn't too difficult to blog. There were times when students were unsure what to enter, although the categories were assigned. Again, some instructor facilitation and advice clarified their queries and prompted them on.

### **Strengths**

The strengths of blogging were evident both in the technical and instructional aspects. Technically, the blogging application "WordPress" was easily set up and maintained. It served both as a personal and communal blog. With simple instructions (a one-page instruction sheet was put up by the instructor), students could quickly log on and start their blog entries. The blogs being available through the Internet allowed students to access their blogs at their own time and pace. Instructionally, the varied blog configurations (as in Figure 4) and strategies (as in Table 2) offered many possibilities to engage the instructor and students in collaborative learning. The student's responsibility for learning was heightened, whereas the facilitation skills of the instructor outweighed teaching skills. This suited the constructivist approach to teaching and learning, where students constructed their own meaning and understanding of facts and knowledge.

The use of pre-defined categories added purpose and objectivity for students to blog. Without which the focus of learning would have diminished or digressed to other areas. A survey of the students' entries clearly indicated that they stayed focused on the assigned categories. The RSS feeds served to add peer pressure on students to keep in pace with the others. Evidently, there were pace setters and followers. However, as each student had an individual project of their choice, individual expression of ideas and challenges was evident, as opposed to copying of ideas. The progressive development of the project through the bog entries allowed the instructor to monitor and comment on the students' inputs. Besides helping the students to work on their projects, it also served the instructor to ascertain authenticity of the individual students' works.

### **Weaknesses**

The weaknesses of blogging were found mainly in two areas: Internet access equity; and preferences to learning online. For example, students did not have equal access to the Internet. Some students had unlimited broadband access from their homes, while others relied on time-based access modems, or their place of work to access the blogs. To the latter group of students, this was an added anxiety, which affected performance initially. During the initial "breaking in" period, it was observed that students with limited access to the Internet expressed a higher level of frustration and anxiety than students with unlimited home broadband access.

Students also expressed differences in preferences to online learning. Those adept in journaling found it easy to log entries into the blogs. To them, it was just another avenue to reflect on the incidences of the day. However, students who do not have a habit of keeping journals found the task a challenge. Without the assigned blog categories to guide them, it would certainly be more difficult to find a focus to write their journals. Nevertheless, by the end of the course all students found the experience meaningful and challenging, and that it opened to them the opportunities of blogging as an educational experience.

## **Conclusion**

As blogs continue to grow exponentially, the level of sophistication will increase in tandem. While we recognize that there are equity and preferences issues with online learning, the academic advantages to educational blogging is becoming evident. By building on previous knowledge of online discussions for education, there is a lot of potential to expound on the strengths and weaknesses of instructional blogging. This paper presented theoretical and instructional strategies for educational blogging. These are not prescriptive but guidelines that can be molded and re-designed to suit different instructional needs. Hopefully, the case study presented some insights to instructional blogging. It would certainly be useful to explore more in-depth studies of instructional blogging.

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