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BLOG, BLOG, BLOG: ONLINE JOURNALING IN GRADUATE CLASSES

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In his recent publication, *Grown up Digital* (2009), Tapscott points out that many young adults between the ages of 25 – 35 are able to interact with various media in addition to multitasking approximately five activities at the same time. The same age group—many of whom are practicing teachers pursuing advanced degrees for a variety of reasons—are enrolled in graduate education classes. In addition, the same population or age group are members of the Net Generation. This distinctive generation is made up of what demographers call the “echo” of the baby boom.

Members of the “echo” have grown up with technology. Now, with classrooms of their own they are seeking advanced degrees in addition to new and innovative ways to teach to their students who are members of the Next Generation—students who are social-networkers, bloggers, facebookers, and twitterers. In addition, members of the “echo” are entering online courses in great numbers due to their preferences for learning as well as the availability of degrees delivered via course management systems and the web.

Many practicing teachers who are enrolling in graduate programs are members of this same population and are currently faced with the additional challenge of meeting the needs of a rapidly growing diverse population of students who represent many cultures and who speak languages other than English.

In a recent article in *The Tennessean*, Carey (2009) reports that the region’s growing immigrant population continues to place pressure on districts in terms of program expansion to meet the needs of unique populations. Carey (2009) also suggests that—although the state will allow teachers to work on a waiver while they are completing licensure requirements for ESL—there is still a shortage of approximately 200 teachers. This number is projected to reach 400 over the next five years. Therefore, the challenges posed to

school systems and districts are also of great importance to universities and teacher education programs. Not since the 1900s have classroom teachers faced the challenges posed by large numbers of immigrant students enrolling at such an increasingly growing number. With new populations of students comes the need to reflect on personal views of immigration and immigrant students.

Holmes and Gardner (2006) suggest that e-Learning has the potential to assist students in overcoming the limitations of traditional learning. In a face-to-face educational foundations class, students are required to explore historical, cultural, political, and societal factors that influence the education process. Many times, the discussions are hindered due to the limitations imposed by the face-to-face environment such as lack of time for reflection, large class sizes, and fear to express opinions and thoughts.

Several studies and researchers in the field suggest that the use of online discussion forums promotes interaction and assists the teaching and learning process in several ways. For example, online forums promote individualization of learning. If designed effectively, online discussions encourage critical thinking and deep learning because the discussions require students to synthesize multiple theories, ideas, and resources. The online forum also promotes student autonomy and flexibility. The forum allows for reflection and analysis. In addition, all students are “equal” in that stereotypic confines are removed; there is no demographic information available; therefore, interaction is authentic and based on the analysis of ideas. The process promotes deep learning within a non-threatening community of learners. The online discussion forum encourages students to learn from each other, to seek out expertise, and to identify relevant resources. Last, the forums are an excellent tool for archiving information, which may be used later to improve practice (Bradshaw

and Hinton, 2004; Cavanaugh, 2008; Palloff and Pratt, 2007; Weigel, 2001).

Although there are several notable studies that examine online forums as a means for deep discourse in the online learning environment, research on the use of blogging to promote reflection, inquiry, and dialog within the structure of online classrooms is fairly new—especially in the professional education arena within the higher education setting. This framework as well as the “newness” of Web 2.0 tools in traditional education graduate programs prompted the researchers to examine the use of blogs in graduate courses as a means for discourse, dialog, and discussion.

Methodology

Because of the nature of the inquiry, the researchers used the process of action research and took a qualitative stance in examining and analyzing the depth of discourse among graduate students enrolled in several foundations of education, multicultural education, and methods classes required for the Specialist in Education degree as well as the M.Ed. Because the classes were delivered online, education blogging, online discussion forums, e-mail, and surveys were selected as tools for the inquiry.

The study was structured with a set of overarching research questions—as appropriate for qualitative methods. The overarching questions served as the framework for the study. Questions included:

1. How would the use of blogging assist students in engaging in the practice of reflective journaling?
2. What differences and/or similarities might emerge between blogging and online forum discussions and would these differences/similarities hinder, deter, promote, or encourage reflective blogging and journaling?
3. What demographic factors—if any—might emerge (experience in the classroom, Ed.S. students, M.Ed. students, practicing teachers, etc.) that may have a potential impact on depth of discourse and insight

and how would these factors promote reflective blogging and journaling?

4. What role—if any—would technology play in enabling depth in discourse and detailed exploration of educational foundations, cultural issues, and methods application?
5. Would patterns emerge among participants, depth of discourse, and technological literacy and if so—what may be gleaned from this information that may assist future online course designers and instructors?

Through the framework of action research, those working within practitioner-based environments are encouraged to use their expertise and knowledge to conduct systematic inquiry to improve practice (Craig, 2009). Because the process is viewed as community-based research, action research was employed in terms of the structure and processes of the inquiry. The action research process utilized a qualitative approach in: (1) overarching questions that frame the study, (2) triangulation processes, (3) coding and analysis procedures, and (4) reporting findings in a thick, descriptive narrative.

Data Sets and Analysis

The qualitative approach demands that the study include a variety of data sets. The researchers collected the following data sets:

1. Demographic information (current teaching, years of experiences, program, etc.).
2. Pre- and Post Study Surveys.
3. Graduate student blog entries based on structured readings, resources, and related materials.
4. Forum postings based on readings, selected outside sources, and course content.
5. E-mail collected through the study.
6. Researcher field notes—recorded throughout the study.

The data sets were aligned with the overarching questions to ensure triangulation for purposes of validity. Taking a qualitative approach to action research requires the researcher

o: (1) collect multiple forms of data, (2) utilize coding, (3) examine emerging themes and patterns, and (4) report findings in a descriptive narrative.

The researchers employed coding as a means for in-depth analysis. The process included transcribing field notes, conducting simple coding of all data sets collected, dating all data, copying data sets, organizing according to emerging themes and patterns, and adding memos in order to assign attributes. The use of triangulation matrices will provide an organizational framework and will assist the researchers in determining the results of the inquiry. In addition, the researchers will engage in epoche in order to re-examine all data, engage in reflection, and remove any preconceptions, biases, and assumptions (Craig, 2009; Patton, 1990).

The next step in the analysis required the researchers to identify chunks of meaning derived from emerging patterns and themes. Subsetting enabled further analysis. Additional coding included open coding, selective coding, and axial coding in order to break down the data sets, examine, compare, and categorize one last time (Corbin and Strauss, 2007; Craig, 2009; Maykut and Morehouse, 1994).

Findings

One of the benefits of online learning is the ability of this particular delivery to encourage discourse due to the fact that all students become equal partners within the online learning community. The online environment allows the reluctant graduate student to fully participate via online discussions by removing the uneasiness that sometimes presents itself in face-to-face classrooms.

In addition, the online classroom removes the barriers of bias, prejudice, and stereotypes that are present in many face-to-face learning environments in that—in many cases—students are not aware of race, culture, or gender. For example, a student who goes by the name of “Casey” may be male, female, Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, a rural, urban, or suburban resident. Within the online learning environment, however, there are varying degrees—based on the tools utilized—of interaction, engagement, and

sharing. This was one factor that emerged early in the study.

Early findings indicated that although most students had never interacted with blogs, the perceptions of blogging changed as the interactions increased—therefore promoting depth of reflective discourse as students became more comfortable with the process of blogging as a means of online journaling. For example, at the beginning of the study, many participants named their blogs with titles that implied surprise, novice status, or beginner status. Examples of blog titles created by participants include:

- *OMG, I'm blogging!*
- *Canyoubelieveit?*
- *I'm blogging.*
- *Look, I'm blogging!*
- *Who is this blogger?*

Early entries also reflected surprise in terms of ease of blogging, blog design, and online journaling. However, as the study progressed, the blog entries gradually focused more on reflection and less on the novel idea of blogging. Secondly, most participants—although new to blogging and other Web 2.0 tools, reported that they designed classroom blogs for student use as a result of participating in the study. In addition, most participants indicated that they were more comfortable with sharing personal thoughts, reflections, and ideas regarding meeting the needs of second language learners and dealing with issues related to culture and race via blogs than with face-to-face classroom discussions or online discussion forums. In delving further into this pattern, the researchers found that many participants viewed blogging as something more personal than the online forum discussion posts. Blogging was equated with personal journaling. A blog entry, therefore, was a form of personal reflection, thought, and reaction. This in itself was an interesting finding because anyone, anywhere in the world can view an individual's personal blog. A blog and blog entries are “public.” Blogs are considered by many to be a form of social networking.

Although a blog entry and blogs in general are public, an online forum post—on the other hand—is protected and may be viewed only by

those enrolled in a particular online course. The researchers found that the protected online discussion forums were viewed as an avenue of discourse that required students to “guard” their thoughts in fear of offending others. Many participants indicated that although they were comfortable posting and interacting in the forums, they felt that the blogs offered a more authentic

means of expressing ideas. In an age of the Internet, Internet predators, and public sharing at a cost, this was a significant finding as many of the participants were parents who closely monitored their children’s Internet use.

Returning to the overarching questions, the following Table provides a brief overview of findings.

Table 1. Overarching Questions and Overview of Findings

Question	Findings
1. How would the use of blogging assist students in engaging in the practice of reflective journaling?	Findings indicate that students preferred blogs and blog entries and indicated that the blog was more like a personal journal than the forum.
2. What differences and/or similarities might emerge between blogging and online forum discussions and would these differences/similarities hinder, deter, promote, or encourage reflective blogging and journaling?	Participating graduate students viewed the blog as distinctly different from the online forum. The blog was personal; the forum was viewed as public—when in fact the opposite is true.
3. What demographic factors—if any—would emerge (experience in the classroom, Ed.S. students, M.Ed. students, practicing teachers, etc.) that may have a potential impact on depth of discourse and insight and how would these factors promote reflective blogging and journaling?	Although the participants began slowly with designing their blogs and entering the first few entries. There were only slight differences in terms of design, graphics, and aesthetics among participants. Demographic factors did not seem to make a difference.
4. What role—if any—would technology play in enabling depth in discourse and detailed exploration of educational foundations, cultural issues, and methods application?	Participant blog entries illustrated more depth in terms of discourse than the online forum posts. The researchers concluded that this might have been due to the emerging view of the blog as a personal journal and the forum as an arena where personal ideas, reflections, and thoughts were to be shared with caution. The blog entries, therefore, illustrated more depth and application of information.
5. Would patterns emerge among participants, depth of discourse, and technological literacy and if so—what may be gleaned from this information that may assist future online course designers and instructors?	Patterns that emerged include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proceed with caution in the forum—online course instructors and designers may consider structuring the forums in a manner that encourages small group discussion so that students are more open with responses. • Reveal all in the blogs—designers

and instructors may consider using blogs in order to encourage depth of reflection, application of course material, and generating ideas as findings indicate that the participants preferred the blog when delving into sensitive subjects involving culture, race, gender, and religion.

- Internet safety—Due to these findings, designers and instructors may also consider integrating and stressing Internet safety with regard to sharing in open arenas—particularly when graduate students are also teachers who may be using classroom blogs with their own students.

Conclusion

The study provides additional insight to course developers, professors, teachers, and curriculum designers in terms of the successes, perceptions, and applications of using the Web 2.0 tool of blogging within higher education coursework. In addition, the structure and curriculum integration of blogs provided a model for participants—who are practicing teachers—to duplicate in their own classrooms. Overall and general benefits of the study include:

1. Providing insight for other faculty members who design online courses.
2. Providing insight for other faculty members who teach online courses.
3. Offering suggestions to improve online discussion forums.
4. Offering suggestions and insight for others who are considering using blogs in the structure of the teaching and learning process.
5. Sharing findings in order to assist practicing teachers in meeting the challenges posed by cultural diversity and linguistic diversity in classrooms.
6. Encouraging graduate students—who are teachers and parents—to rethink the use of public sharing and social networking functions such as blogs as a means for journaling and reflecting as well as further examining their own personal practices

with regard to this particular technology tool.

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