ED BLOGS: A VYGOTSKY DIALECTIVIST TECHNOLOGY PORTAL

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a brief history of Web logging and subsequent examples of Web log use specific to an educational arena. Although the blogging phenomenon began a few years ago, it is only recently that a critical mass of educators has realized its potential in and out of the classroom for teaching and learning content while acting as a catalyst for becoming technology proficient. The authors present a connection between blogging and Vygotsky's theoretical foundation for learning through communication. The blogging analogy parallels Vygotsky's dialectivism where an initial concept is proposed, a contrary idea is provided whereby a comparative discussion occurs toward synthesis of the ideas.

INTRODUCTION

It seems that children are born to be more technology literate than those who actually created the technology. As educators, we must strive to take the effects of being born with a mouse, in the hand, rather than a silver spoon to provide students with opportunities to reach higher technological goals than competency in surfing the web or participating in on-line games. We must utilize technology with a dual purpose: To integrate meaningful content while, at the same time, teach the science of the technology, itself. To do this, we must realize, first, that technology provides the scaffolding for the student to reach the higher level thinking ability we desire for them. Secondly, we must utilize the subject area content as the vehicle by which the student can break the mould of pen and paper. Through this process, we seamlessly integrate the objectives of technology education into our pedagogy. How, then, can we capture some of the current technology trends that are available to us while concurrently infusing technology into the content? This approach can be facilitated through journaling, using its technological counterpart, the Blog.

Traditionally, educators have encouraged the use of reflective journaling for students to process information. One assumption of human information processing theory is that it is analogous to computer processing, in that it receives information, stores it in memory, and retrieves it as necessary (Schunk 1996). Journaling can be an effective method to assist in the transfer of information from memory or short-term memory to long-term memory, where it will reside theoretically forever. Upon appropriate prompts, the learner will be able to retrieve the information from the long-term memory. Varner and Peck (2003) indicate that journaling can provide practice in management skills, facilitate comprehension and retention, and can act as an assessment tool. Barlow (2001) identifies how a daily journal writing can help students to become strong and confident writers. Students can use journals to reflect on what they are studying, brainstorm on a topic before writing an essay, track and react to current events, and explore ideas in their imaginations. So the use of journaling is not new to the

educational arena. Transferring a traditional teaching method into a technology vehicle is also not new.

The fusion of these two powerful learning tools is a natural progression of how technology can do much more than simply enhance the delivery of a known pedagogy. It can, rather, become a teaching method to enhance technology education. For example, the student preparing for a class presentation, works with and learns the nuances of Microsoft Power Point, and teaching long mathematical processes using Microsoft Excel to develop formulas, not only enhances the conceptual understanding of the math processes, but teach the program and the skills needed to use it for real-life applications. Not only program skills are taught through math content, but communication skills are also enhanced while learning technology.

How We Learn?

Long before the computer and the Internet were invented, we spoke and taught in Blogs. In storytelling, you share background on the concept with the audience, provide an interesting introduction, define terms and nomenclature, then reinforce with examples, anecdotes and analogies in the form of physical objects, verbal representations or simple waving of arms and impromptu devices such as salt and pepper shakers. Blogs clearly and distinctly parallels this approach. They provide text as a background and introduction and in place of the examples, they provide specific websites, many times interactive that aligns with the topic. Now, through the use of Blogs, technology skills are taught and developed as learning takes place, rather than as an isolated experience.

What is a Weblog or Blog?

A Blog is a Web page made up of brief, frequently updated entries that are arranged chronologically like a journal. The purposes of blogs vary greatly from links and commentary about other sites, to news, to diaries, photos, poetry, mini-essays, even fiction. Blog posts are similar to instant messages to the Web. Many blogs are personal, "what's on my mind" type musings. Others are collaborative efforts based on a specific topic or area of mutual interest. Some blogs are for recreation. Some are for work. Some are both. Blogs are also excellent team/department/company/family communication tools. They help small groups to communicate in a way that is simpler and easier to follow than email or discussion forums. A blog can help to keep everyone in the loop, promote cohesiveness and create a community culture. Although blogs are relatively new, a significant amount of literature has already been gathered.

Dialectivism

Vygotsky generated the idea of dialectivism (http://web.archive.org/web/19990502065118/http://werple.net.au/~andy/txt/vygotsk1.htm), or the examination of opinions or ideas logically by question and answer (Bodrova 1996). He developed a three step dialectical process, which included a thesis, or main idea; an antithesis, or the opposing idea and the synthesis or a resolution, which produces a higher-level response to address both the thesis and the antithesis. Using this socially meaningful activity, students can build collaboration skills through communicating or social interaction, designed to enhance their abilities in reasoning. Efficient asynchronous collaboration can now more effectively be used through various technology tools such as Web logs.

Practically every classified advertisement for a job contains this infamous statement, "Good oral and written communication skills are essential." Oddly enough, practically everyone would answer this question affirmatively. However, as instructors, we have all seen our share of poor communication. This paper attempts to add

to the literature addressing a new easy to use, free technology tool, which can improve communication skills. The very same skills are closely tied with effective teaching learning. In the 1950's, a Russian social scientist derived his beliefs on learning, which centered on discussions or dialect. We all know that we are more attentive when one tells a story, especially one with a good plot (thesis), a conflict (antithesis) and a happy ending (synthesis). An updated version of this dialectic approach or logging has occurred with a grassroots movement online. In 1998, a few people believed there was value in expressing themselves in writing on the Internet for the shear joy of writing. Most were unconcerned if their thoughts were even read, the point was simply to write and enjoy it intrinsically. Hence the Web logging, weblog or simply blogging was altruistically born. A secondary purpose of this paper is to pack the idea of blogging for educational purposes into a paper machete animal and let those who wish to swing away, in hopes of bursting the sides and letting the idea fall to the ground, for those who have perceived its contents as valuable treats to gather and implement it to die and wither a natural death.

Connecting to Standards: Classroom Applications

Planning and Designing Learning Environments and Experiences

A storyteller relays the details of a tale to a group of listeners. In our case, the teacher is the storyteller and the students are the audience. By using blogs, the teacher is able to meet ISTE Educational Technology Standard II, by planning and designing learning environments that facilitate enhanced experiences through the use of technology to extend, enrich, and accommodate a wide variety of learners, addressing their particular needs. The teacher sets the stage by posing a thought provoking and challenging question to the students. In a classroom setting, a teacher who possesses such an idea might receive responses only from those who are able to process the information quickly. By the time before the others form ideas and synthesize information, the classroom discussion ends. Blogging alleviates the limitations of some student's ability to react instantaneously. It allows those who need greater processing time to formulate their reaction to the initial concept, weigh the contrasting information, thereby allowing them to fully participate in the conversation. They are able to respond individually, and within their own time frame, alleviating the pressure of a class discussion and allowing meaningful participation by all students. Through this dialective approach, all students are on equal footing. By placing students on equal ground, the teacher is able to implement strategies to manage student learning in a technology-enhanced environment, further meeting ISTE Standards.

Teaching, Learning, and the Curriculum

Many curriculum related technology standards are addressed by the teacher using blogs in the classroom. The teacher can assure content standards are being met by structuring the blog in a way that meets the objectives of the subject matter. Through careful planning of the topics to be addressed in the blog, the teacher is able to go further with discussion than classroom time will allow. Further, higher order thinking skills will be developed by posing questions that involve creative thinking and synthesis of prerequisite knowledge. This will have a powerful impact on learning. The environment will become more student-centered as each student reacts and responds in their own way.

Education Blogs or Ed Blogs

Oravec (2002) suggests that educators can use weblogs to encourage students to access the Internet for useful information; weblogs can also help students to organize the resources they locate. Weblogs are increasingly being used in education by researchers, teachers, and students.

Professors are keeping research blogs, requiring students to blog, or creating course weblogs. Students are keeping course blogs or personal blogs. Scholars are studying and writing about the weblog phenomenon while keeping weblogs about weblogs. A site entitled "Professors Who Blog" (http://rhetorica.net/professors_who_blog.htm) contains 116 distinct blogs from higher education professionals, which range in titles from War, Peace and the Mass Media (http://warmedia.blogspot.com/) to the Hairy Eyeball (http://www.hairyeyeball.net/blog/) and the Cranky Professor (http://crankyprofessor.com/).

Duber (2002) in his article on Weblogs identifies SchoolBlog (http://www.schoolblogs.com/), a free blogging package and community with the primary aim of providing a forum for children to publish and interact with others over the Web. Schoolblogs indicates that teachers and students are motivated to share information because they have ownership of it. Duber (2002) also indicates recent advances in the field include multimedia blogging, such as using audio and video with Flash animations. Blogging has been sufficiently integrated into education that Hacker (2003) has created a site for "Choosing a Blogging Package for Students" at_http://www._Oreillynet. com/pub/wlg/1894. This site states criteria, such as,multiple authors, should be free, searchable and commentable. This resulted in the sites called Greymatter (http://www.noahgrey.com/greysoft/),MovableType(http://movabletype.org/),Blogger(http://new.blogger.com/),Live Journal (http://www.livejournal.com/) and Radio User Land (http://radio.userland.com/).

Higher education research has ventured into blogging with articles in The Chronicle entitled Scholars Who Blog (http://chronicle.com/free/v49/i39/39a01401.htm). In addition, techLEARNING.com - The Resource for Education Technology Leaders has included an article on (http://www.techlearning.com/db_area/archives/TL/2003/02/blogs.html).Harvard University has a Blog site to encourage professors to use this tool (http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/about). Finally, there is an entire site on research blogs (http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/txt/researchblogs.html).

Weblog Literature

Blood (2000) provides a nice summary of the WeBlogs: A History and Perspective at http: // www. rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html. Basically, they have been around since 1998 and have grown exponentially as one would expect, since there are no rules or criteria and several servers provide free blog services. Garrett (2000) provided a list of current blogsathttp://www.jjg.net/portal/tpoowl.html although since that time, he has discontinued that list and now maintains the site as a historical snapshot. The site does refer the browser to a more extensive site called The Weblog Madness List of List at http:// www. larkfarm.com/wlm/lists.htm. However, even this site has been overwhelmed and abandoned on July 2002 and yet again redirects those in search of the holy grail of blog list to Eatonweb (2003) portal located at http://www.portal.eatonweb.com/wlm/. This site is organized by 17 different categories ranging from Books to Roll Your Own. Each category contains many weblogs, which in total equals 555 distinctly different weblogs. However, upon casual browsing, it seems apparent that this number is most likely an order of magnitude short. In addition, specific type or genres of blogs have been developed. When used in an educational arena, the blog becomes an educational Web log or an Ed Blog.

Conclusion

Blogging is a natural extension of a process that is already occurring in our classrooms through the traditional forum of discussion. Using weblogs allows the teacher to integrate technology into the curriculum, extending and

enhancing the ability for all students to participate more fully in a discussion, and make better connections. It further provides the scaffolding for development of higher order thinking to take place, not just for some, but for all students, serving the diverse population that exists in our schools. Blogging encourages deeper thought, and requires the development of communication skills that are imperative for success, not only in an academic setting, but for real-world applications. Through the thought provoking dialogs that occur through this application, the student is able to synthesize ideas and communicate them to others.

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