Sharing Class Experience in using NUS Blog system

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Rationale and example

- Use of blogs as a method of science communication and a basic internet tool of our time were integrated in the module’s learning outcomes.
- I post to the module blog at the beginning of the term – these are mainly pointer posts and not communication posts which they point to sometimes.
- Examples of good science blogs are provided, such as by Ed Young and Carl Zimmer (can be a bit too technical for this module of non-biology students) and local natural history blogs such as Habitatnews.

Method

- The structure of a post was explained to students with an example.
- Students are required to support their post with a reference – levels of credibility were explained.
- Tagging was required for admin (group number; else not marked) and relevance (topic).
- Content by group was PDF-ed for submission to Turnitin – a few instances of plagiarism was detected. (E.g. late submission by a brother and sister!)

Pros and Cons

In my module LSM1303 Animal Behaviour, I am not concerned about teaching them about the diversity of blog systems and tier pros and cons (besides a brief mention), but concentrate on the writing and interpretation.

- Administratively easier to manage. Teaching staff can use their existing user ID to login, so there is no lag time waiting to get accounts.
- Their full name appears with the post which is very useful.
- Manual addition of class user ID’s required – about 200 students! Manageable but would be nice if is integrated with IVLE.
- Making posts public – with the names appended might act as a quality control mechanism!

Feedback and Evaluation

- TAs are non-bloggers, therefore, need to be trained to comment for corrections, better ideas and motivation. They did not find this easy.
- Students were told to check comments as an indication the blog post was marked.
- Since TAs were new to this, marking was done by Kenneth Pinto (communication), Adrian Loo (science) and myself.

Admin

- Blog posts can be archived at year-end and removed from circulation.
- I empty out the blog, and use MarsEdit to retrieve and recycle old posts for reposting each year to coincide with lectures.
Blogging for Large Classes

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Abstract

In this short article, I hope to provide some examples of failures and successes in managing blogging in large classes, and some indication of where this might go in the future. Like many people, I started blogging in small senior-level seminars. This was in 1999, and at the time there were not really blogging systems available, and like many other people, I had to write my own. What I saw as a very simple way to replace email lists and bulletin board (forum) systems turned out to be an extraordinarily effective way to encourage conversation among students, and I have used blogs in most of my classes in the years since. Today, blogging in a small class is a fairly easy way to get started for both students and teachers.

How blogging can be used in large classes is not as immediately obvious. Many assume that once the class is large enough to exclude, for example, written term papers, it also means blogs are out. By that definition, a "large class" might be as few as thirty or forty students, depending on the composition of your university. My experience of using blogs in larger classes includes classes ranging in size from about 50 students to those that include nearly 400 students.

The single course blog

Just as with smaller classes, there are a number of ways in which blogs may be deployed to help with the learning process in a large class. The most obvious example is the single teaching blog, something of a replacement for other forms of course management software. In this form, the blog acts as the central communications organ of the course, with links to the syllabus and schedule, and posts for assignments, handouts, news items, and course discussions.

This is, naturally, a fairly "low-intensity" use of blogging in a course. For small courses, instructors often make the students authors of the blog as well. This can work for large courses, but it can lead to a bit of a mess if you have students writing on a regular basis. If only a subset of the students write posts each week (and the remainder post comments), then things become a bit more manageable, but this sort of participation may lead to more administrative overhead than it is worth.

One of the advantages to the single course blog is that it provides another place for students to ask questions, and those questions remain public. One alternative is to ask students to comment each week in the comments of the course blog. At first, this may seem as onerous as allowing them to post, but that is not necessarily the case. If you look for large-audience blogs outside of education, it is not unusual for some posts to attract hundreds of comments. If a large number of comments are expected, one of the various Slashdot-style plugins that allow viewers to rank up or down comments on the page can be an interesting and useful addition.

Everybody blog!

The other alternative is to set up either blogs for small groups of people or individual blogs. In my experience, working with group blogs carries with it many of the logistical difficulties of working with groups in a large class, with the additional difficulty of managing the blogs. For that reason, even in very large classes, I usually have students set up blogs individually.

The same sorts of questions apply when choosing a blogging platform for large classes as do when looking at small classes. The grouping functions of Livejournal can be helpful, although for especially large classes they may not scale well. Other free blog hosts: Blogger, Wordpress, Edublogs, among others, are all good choices. I have tried mixed-blog classes, requiring only that students use a blogging system that provides RSS feeds, but in terms of support for new users this can become difficult.

It is helpful to aggregate blogs for small classes, and vital for large classes. Unfortunately, there is not a single, easily used solution for creating an aggregator for a large class. It is a good idea to plan for some time to collect the urls of students blogs, along with their true names. I have done this over email, set up a special web form to collect
the data, and even integrated this with a Lylina aggregator that was altered to allow anyone to add their information. There are some early tools that can help with this, but generally it may be easier, if time consuming, to collect these via email or on paper and enter them manually into an aggregator (and your grade book).

The biggest barrier to large-scale blogging? Every blogging class has a small contingent of students who have a great deal of difficulty understanding how to blog, and of course this group grows proportionately with the size of the class. There are several strategies that can be used to mitigate this. First, choose a single platform, and one that already has helpful resources and tutorials you can provide to students. A quick search will turn up tutorials for a number of platforms. Second, seek out your most experienced bloggers in the class who are willing to help the neophytes. The culture of blogging often attracts those who are willing to help others get a handle on things. Finally, plan for this hurdle. Once cleared, students are usually off and running, but instructors often overestimate students’ exposure to blogging and facility with computing generally.

Evaluation

Naturally, the reason most teachers forgo blogging in large classrooms is that reading and grading and responding to hundreds of blog posts every week seems impossibly time consuming and counterproductive. Students are accustomed to the idea that their written assignments are graded on a timely basis, and despite the size of the course, may expect that if they spend the time writing, they should be getting a response.

One of the reasons that blogging is pedagogically such a nice tool is that it takes the focus off of the instructor, and your evaluation policy should reflect this. Like all writers, students want feedback on their work, and indeed, that sort of feedback is often what motivates bloggers outside of the class context. In each of my courses, I require students to comment on each others blogs as well as write in their own. This might appear to only increase the amount of grading left to the teacher, but in practice it provides students with the opportunity to have a different kind of audience—and audience of their peers. It also encourages conversations, which is at the root of the blogging experience. A good aggregator—preferably one that presents all posts sequentially (sometimes called a "river of news" format)—provides students with a way of locating interesting posts to comment on.

As a practical matter, then, grading can take several forms. Generally, I let students know that they will be formally evaluated (i.e., graded) not on each post they make, but only several times during the semester. I often scan the entire class during the first few weeks of each semester, to make certain that everyone is getting the hang of things. I then set up groups of students I monitor on a weekly basis, cycling through several of these groups and not so much grading as making comments and responding.

In a large class, you will not be able to do much about the mechanics of writing or details in the way that students present their arguments. Generally, if I see something that is a common error, I will make a short posting on the course blog. Like other forms of low-stakes writing, the idea here is to encourage students to express themselves, to get in the habit of writing, and to find other writers in the class to model themselves after.

In many of my courses, I have attempted to integrate popularity of blogs, or "buzz," as part of the course evaluation. This has met with varying degrees of success. An attempt, for example, to develop a karma system like that found on Slashdot, and to attach a grade to karma, led to the formation of blocks of students who promised to rank each other highly. Rather than quantifying buzz, I now let students know that their objective is to engage in a distributed conversation and that therefore comments from other students and from those outside the class provides an indication of their success in blogging.

There are other approaches to evaluation, many borrowed from other forms of journal writing, that are also effective. Students may choose at the end of the semester, for example, to be evaluated on several posts that they feel best represent their efforts or an instructor may choose posts at random to evaluate. At its root, however, the idea is that the activity of writing itself is beneficial to the student, and provides an opportunity to open up a dialogue among students that is rarely possible in a large classroom.
The Use of Blogs as a Knowledge Management Tool

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Abstract

Based on the authors’ experience with using class blogs in 22 classes over a three year time frame, this paper discusses three approaches, instructor-focused, learner-focused, and community-focused, as ways to teach both explicit and tacit knowledge. Both benefits and concerns of using blogs in the classroom are addressed.

Introduction

According to Diana Oblinger, Vice President of EDUCAUSE, a major teaching challenge present in today's college classrooms is helping our students acquire both explicit and tacit knowledge. As she notes,

Technology challenges people’s assumptions about what it means to be educated... Moreover, technology changes both the ways in which we learn and the ways in which we conceive of the learning process...We have grown increasingly aware that learning facts is not enough. Knowledge management in particular is leading us to question our focus on explicit knowledge, gained from textbooks, and our relative neglect of tacit knowledge, gained from experience. Tacit knowledge consists of knowing how to get things done, wisdom acquired through years of practice. (Morrison & Oblinger, 2002, p. 2).

As faculty, we are experienced in presenting explicit knowledge on a particular subject. However, organizations want employees who are able to integrate both explicit and tacit knowledge in the workplace (Asllani, Ettkin, & Somasundar, 2008). By using the Internet as a resource, we have “opportunities for treating teaching and learning as truly social activities where knowledge is built through interaction and dialogue rather than lectures and recitation” (Deitering & Huston, 2004, p. 273). The students can learn from us, each other, and virtual experts online. In addition, technology accommodates diverse styles of learning and allows students to be more active in growing their own new knowledge (Watkins, 2005). In this paper, we discuss our experiment with one type of technology, weblogs (commonly known as blogs), to help our students gain explicit and tacit knowledge but in ways that are effective and efficient for both students and faculty.

Our Decision to Use Blogs as a Pedagogical Tool

Three years ago we began experimenting with class blogs because we believed these would be an efficient way to communicate class expectations and to engage students in conversation with us as professors, with their fellow classmates, and with outside resources. We saw advantages to blogs in allowing us to insist on, and track, 100 percent participation in course discussions, to provide links to timely articles and podcasts, and to invite experts into the conversation, all to create an environment where students not only experience the subject matter but also learn how to find credible sources for learning in the future. Thus, a familiarity with how blogs can be used would benefit the students beyond the classroom experience.

We came to our decision to try class blogs as part of our course design for a number of reasons.
We were encouraged by Deitering and Huston’s findings that blogs were “easy to integrate with the traditional classroom” (2004, p.277). We liked Martins and Kellermann’s (2004) claim that “transferring administrative and purely informational aspects of instruction...[outside the classroom] frees up class time for students to work on interpersonal and communication skills” (p. 8). Another reason for our decision to use a class blog was ‘time on task.’ One of the authors began teaching a weekend class that met only once a month and he was worried about the ‘fadeout effect,’ knowing that many of his students wouldn’t think about the material between classes. We also believed it important for all of our students to participate in class discussions but, despite our best efforts, on many days only a small percentage of the students ever had anything to say. And finally, and most importantly, we wanted to see our students take greater ownership of their own learning, not only for our classes but in their future lives.

**Choosing a Focus for the Class Blog**

Before introducing a class blog to our students, we had to determine the focus it should take to help in achieving our learning objectives. We determined that this depended upon the course being taught, our teaching philosophies, and the comfort level we each had with giving up some control in our classrooms.

Edbauer writes that the typical response she gets from colleagues when she shows them some of the blogs on the Internet is, “Cool! But, how in the world would I actually use this” in my class? (Edbauer, et al, 2005, p. 3). How blogs are used depends on the professor’s teaching style and course subject matter. We determined three possible approaches that varied from instructor-focused, featuring one-way communication from faculty to students; learner-focused, using two-way communication between faculty and students, or an interactive community-focused teaching tool between and among the students and the professor, as well as others identified as experts to create a virtual learning environment.

**Instructor-focused Blogs**

The simplest way to use a blog is as a one-stop source where the professor posts syllabi, assignments, and links to articles and websites for the students to read. Faculty retain ownership and students are expected to access the blog on a regular basis. The blog allows the professor to be more efficient as he or she doesn’t have to make copies of course materials and can point students to the blog for answers to questions on assignments. Sample papers or grading rubrics can be posted to guide students in understanding expectations. The blog is also a good way to hyperlink to visual aids used in class. An instructor-focused blog may be the best approach for classes that don’t involve a lot of discussion. As noted by a colleague who teaches finance, “I deal with questions such as, ‘what’s the present value of $500 received five years from now if the interest rate is 8%?’ The one and only right answer: $340. Not much discussion needed here.”

However, we found that it is easy to move beyond ‘the student as passive recipients of content’ stage by posting weekly questions or links to relevant articles and requiring the students to comment on these. Quibble (2005) used a blog to post scenarios of a poorly written business letter in his Business Communication courses. The students then respond as to what should be done to correct the letter using techniques they were learning in class. Even our finance colleague mentioned earlier would be able to link to current articles and have the students read and comment, thus allowing her to see if the students understood the concepts being taught.

**Learner-focused Blogs**

In this approach, the professor would expect the students to be more active participants in the blog. Learning can occur peer-to-peer in addition to teacher-to-student. Students could write their own posts or comment on what they had been learning in class, relating the course topics to work and personal experiences. Students could create their own portfolios of their writing and get feedback from their fellow classmates. They could also create learning
journals, a technique strongly advocated by Ramsey (2002) except in this case these would be online and easy to access offsite. Faculty can have students create their own individual blogs on topics either chosen by the instructor or by the students themselves. In this instance, the student creates the blog, and the professor (and potentially classmates) is the commenter, thus giving the student more control over his or her own learning experience.

Sparacio and Witonsky (2006) advocate using learner-focused blogs as they believe that “teaching can be significantly enhanced by the integration of blogging” (p. 2). They have their students in a course in Logic & Reasoning develop their own blogs on a topic of their choice that they then write about during the course of the semester. According to them, the students tend to put more effort and care in their work as they get to choose their subject matter and they know that their peers in the class are reading their work.

Liz Kleinfeld (2008) at Metropolitan State University at Denver also has students develop their own blogs in her English composition classes. She gives them ten minutes in class to blog on a topic developed from activities or discussions that day or from the previous class. She sometimes does this at the beginning of class and other days at the end and doesn’t allow the students to make up the assignment, thus also modeling her value of on-time attendance.

Community-focused blogs

A third approach to using blogs is to involve participants from outside the class itself. Students could be required to find, read, and evaluate blogs from “experts” outside class on assigned topics and then to share this information with their classmates. Tryon (2006) incorporated the requirement that his students read blogs in his first-year English composition classes in order to encourage students to make a connection between the classroom and the ‘real world.’

Students can also develop questions related to course topics and contact others outside of class who participate as “guest teachers.” One of the authors of this paper was asked questions in class on how to manage people with disabilities. She went on the Internet and found a man who was blind and another whose legs were paralyzed who both agreed to help. She then had the students post their own questions on the blog. As noted by Gould (2002), “research evidence and common sense tell us that students learn more about a subject when they are emotionally involved with the intellectual context being taught” (p. 23). Thus, designing the course to provoke curiosity and emotional reactions can bring about insights and learning.

In some of our other classes, we contacted authors of books that the students were reading and asked them to contribute comments and feedback on the class blog. The students were very excited to have meaningful interaction with the person whose book they were discussing. As one student noted, “It gave a whole new meaning to my reading of his book.” Opening up the learning process to include personal connections with book and journal authors, subject matter experts with their own blogs, and others including potential employers created a virtual learning community unlike anything we had ever done or even envisioned in the physical classroom.

What Have We Learned From Our Use Of Weblogs In Our Classes?

We have experimented with using blogs as a pedagogical tool in undergraduate courses in Principles of Management, Organizational Behavior, Managing Diversity, and Human Resource Management as well as in graduate courses in Leadership, Creativity, Project Management, and Corporate Politics. Course management systems such as Blackboard and WebCT have blog capabilities and there are also other free or inexpensive sites such as Typepad, Blogger, or Edublogs. We found that we only needed to be tech comfy, not tech savvy, as all blog writing is done in a Word document and does not require any programming skills. For the most part, students are comfortable with using the Internet so the format was easy for them to use. The most recent information posted is listed at the top of the blogpage and the students can even have updates forwarded to their email accounts.
We found blogs to be much more useful than just discussion boards in terms of ownership and ability to hyperlink to journal or newspaper articles and other blogs. A blog is controlled by the person who created it; others can comment but cannot create blogpost content unless given administrative access. As noted by Trammell and Ferdig, “On a discussion board anyone can start a thread of conversation and all contributors have the same editorial authority” (2004, p. 61). We agree with Asllani, Ettkin, and Somasundar (2008) that blogs appear more successful than discussion boards in communicating tacit knowledge.

We asked our students for feedback about their experience of the class blogs at the end of each semester. The students’ responses were overwhelmingly positive as noted in the following major themes:

**Blogging invites more students into the conversation**

Students who were unwilling to speak up in class indicated they felt more comfortable writing their thoughts and responding to the thoughts of others in a blog/comment format. In addition, using a blog allowed students with different learning styles (for example, those students who would rather reflect before answering) to interact with the class.

> I found the blog to be very effective as a learning tool, mainly because I am one of those more quiet people in class. Things don’t always come to my mind right away, but once I give them time to sink in and realize how I really feel, this is when I find the blog to be quite useful...

**Blogging extends the conversation**

Allowing students to participate in mini-conversations via blogs keeps the classroom conversation alive even when the students are not physically present. As universities create flexible class times and schedules such as night and weekend courses to meet the needs of the students, using blogs may be even more useful in preventing the fade-out effect.

> Often after class ended, I would think of good points that I could have added to the discussion. However, after the week’s gap, those ideas are long forgotten. Also, some students are not as outspoken as others and often their opinions do not get heard. Having the ability to share these unspoken thoughts would benefit the class as a whole.

**Classroom blogging provides a “safe” mechanism for introducing students to social media**

Even with the proliferation of blogging, Facebook, and Twitter, there are many students who are only vaguely aware of social media’s business possibilities. Once students see how blogs can be used, they begin to realize the professional benefits of extending “conversations” to the online world. While some students resisted the classroom blog at first, they quickly embraced the medium and started seeing ways to use these in both their professional and social lives.

> The blog is great! I know I’m still being dragged in but rest assured that I’m coming around. ... The “peer pressure” actually did wonders for me. I will be entering the blog world soon. I definitely have seen the social aspect work and it does make me very curious about the professional benefits.

**Blogging makes the students into subject matter experts**

The process of creating a blogpost or answering a well-crafted question requires students to search for, filter, and then share information found on the Internet. The process exposes students to vast amounts of information and in the process makes them become more knowledgeable on a topic. Doing this on a regular basis “creates a repetitive process where the blogger student can build on what he learned last week and find more advanced information for the current week,” thus increasing both explicit and tacit knowledge (Trammell & Ferdig, 2004, p. 62).
**Blogging helps students take ownership of their own learning**

We have been pleasantly surprised by the depth and breadth of our students' blog comments and posts. They tended to spend more time and effort than required by the assignments. When given a choice of using a blog or a more traditional paper method of journaling, those with blogs appeared to be more creative as they were leveraging online resources, linking to other blogs, and finding meaningful graphics. The students who wrote in more traditional ways tended to stay strictly within the stated expectations of the assignment.

**The Downside to Using Blogs**

Although we found many advantages to using blogs, there are disadvantages as well. Finding the time to post on the blog and read comments made by students can feel overwhelming. It's important for faculty to budget time to provide adequate feedback. Spending more time reading and responding earlier in the semester seemed to help prevent problems later. Setting a deadline by which students must comment was very important to allow time to read and respond. We have considered setting a word limit to make reading the students’ comments more manageable and to aid the students in learning to be more succinct in their writing.

Another issue can be the comfort level of the professor with technology and new teaching methodologies. While writing a blogpost is essentially as easy as sending an email, the prospect of using it as a classroom tool can be daunting. We found that using an instructor-focused approach the first time helped with the learning curve of having a class blog.

Some students and faculty may perceive communicating online as a loss of a personal connection. It does negate the ability to observe body language and vocal tone, both of which contribute heavily to the communication process. However, we found the 100 percent participation rate far offset this perception that effective communication needs to be in person. In addition, we find that students today are quite comfortable with communicating online, either by cell phone, text messaging, or through social networking sites.

Allowing students to comment on each others’ blogs may have some potential draw-backs. Students may not be as open to sharing their thoughts and opinions if they know someone other than the professor is reading it. Hurlburt (2008) notes that these feelings of insecurity are usually temporary and vanish as the students get more comfortable with the class and their peers.

One last issue: as students link out to other sites, their posts and comments may become visible to the public on social search engines such as Google and Technorati. Thus, it might make sense to password protect the class blog. However, on the other hand, if you think of blog readers as “participants in conversation,” this can be beneficial. It has provided our students a way to begin conversations with book authors who blog, with subject matter experts in their fields of study, and with other interested students outside the classroom.

**Conclusion**

While blogs can be useful, it is important to note that they are just tools and not the objective itself. They are not for everyone or for all classes and need to be made an integral part of the course design. However, as noted by Trammell and Ferdig (2004), the use of blogs as a learning tool seems to be low-cost with high-returns. While more research needs to be done as to how blogs can more effectively be used, it is a given that technology will continue to influence learning. According to Diana Oblinger, “Already, our focus has shifted from teaching to learning...Much of what we have done in the past has been constrained by the prevailing conception of the classroom, but the lecture and the lab are only two ways to learn...The next step may be the integration of knowledge management and e-learning systems to augment current practices” (Morrison & Oblinger, 2002, p. 3).
Our experiences in using classroom blogs have been overwhelmingly positive. While student acceptance of technology in the classroom requires its perceived usefulness and ease of use (Martins & Kellermanns, 2004), students do tend to learn best when they need information that they can put to use immediately. Blogs are an effective and efficient method of allowing students to access information as it is needed and to make connections between explicit knowledge from textbooks and tacit knowledge gained as students see how others can and are using the knowledge being shared. Blogs also introduce students to online learning communities so they can access and evaluate information, and construct new learning paradigms for themselves. Finally, effectively modeling ways to use blogs as a teaching and learning tool is a useful skill for our students to have as they embark on their journey of life-long learning.

References


