

The Use of Blogs in LIS Online Courses: A Case Study

Introduction

Blogs are a major player of the Web 2.0 wave. They are “easy-to-update web site characterized by dated entries displayed in reverse chronological order” (Stefanac, 2006, p. 230), enabling people to quickly share with their families, friends, or even the entire web population their thoughts, reflections, and emotions online. These characteristics have gained blogs popularity in educational settings (Divitini, Haugalokken, & Morken, 2005; Glogoff, 2007; Huck, 2007; Lin et al., 2006). Previous studies have acknowledged that blogs function as reflective devices and interactive devices with respect to their pedagogical benefits (Deng & Yuen, 2009). For example, Brescia and Miller (2006) as Ferdig and Trammell (2004) have found that educational blogging provides students opportunities to engage in reflective thinking process and express themselves, which could help relieve emotional stress. Stiler and Philleo (2003) found that writing educational blogs encouraged the students to think deeper and reflect on more issues. Recognizing blogs as interactive devices, Ferdig (2007) found blogs to be a shared space for collaborative and cooperative learning. Researchers found that blogs afforded social reflection and helped connect online learners by enabling them to express their feelings, socialize, and support each other in learning activities (Dickey, 2004; Farmer, 2004).

Many research studies have been conducted to understand the impact of blogs in the context of higher education in various academic disciplines including science (Brownstein & Klein, 2006), business (Williams & Jacobs, 2004), teacher education (Stiler & Philleo, 2003), pharmacy (Bouldin, Holmes, & Fortenberry, 2006), nursing (Shaffer, Lackey, & Bolling, 2006), language learning (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005), and Library and Information Science (Virkus, 2008). In Virkus' (2008) paper, the author described the experiences of the Institute of Information Studies of Tallinn University in introducing ICT, including Web 2.0 technologies, in LIS education, and claimed that integration of Web 2.0 technologies into LIS education is an important challenge for LIS educators. In this paper, we will discuss a case study that investigates the use of blogs in teaching an LIS online course: Social Software and Libraries. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: we first describe the class context including the class

design, the students' demographics, and the evaluation mechanisms. Then we present our original plans for data collection and analysis, and contrast those plans with the data we actually received and analyzed. We then present our preliminary findings, followed by our future research plans.

Social Software and Libraries

Social Software and Libraries (SSL) is a popular technology elective course in a Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program at a major Canadian university. To date, the course has only been offered online. The MLIS program is a professional program which generally entails three terms of coursework with a co-op option. Some students are working professionals in the field.

In winter 2011, the SSL instructor used Edmodo (<http://www.edmodo.com>) as one of the platforms for the course. Designed for educational purposes, Edmodo is a microblogging site which enables students and instructors to send notes, links, files, alerts, assignments, and events to each other. With an interface very similar to Facebook, Edmodo eases the students from learning a new information system in the class. Figure 1 shows an anonymized screenshot of the class' Edmodo site.

The screenshot displays the Edmodo interface for a course group. At the top, the navigation bar includes the Edmodo logo, 'Calendar', 'Grades', 'Library', 'Settings', 'Logout', and a search bar. On the left sidebar, there is a user profile picture, navigation options like 'Everything', 'Direct', and 'Connections', a 'Groups' section with 'Join or Create' and a list of groups including 'LIS 9763, Winter 2011', and a 'Communities' section with a 'Support Community' link. The main content area features a post titled 'LIS 9763, Winter 2011' with a 'Refresh' button. The post includes a note input field with a 'Send' button and an 'Attach' section with options for 'File', 'Link', and 'Library'. Below the post, there are three entries: a post about a library on the prairie, a post about the Washington Post's future of journalism via Tumblr, and a post by Nicola M. about Flickr and Me! Each entry includes a thumbnail image, a title, a link, and a timestamp.

Figure 1. A Screenshot of the Social Software and Libraries Class' Edmodo Site

There were 39 students enrolled. The students' learning progress and learning outcomes were evaluated through three aspects: *class participation*, *individual assignments*, and *group assignments*. As a form of class participation, the students were required to post a minimum of 10 personal blog entries throughout the term using WordPress. Although not required, the students were encouraged to post microblogs to Edmodo. Students completed two individual assignments as well as one group assignment: the final project. Each group consisted of four or five students, and there were eight groups in total.

In addition to providing frequent Edmodo posts, the instructor posted a weekly WordPress blog entry containing the week's lesson. For synchronous interaction, the instructor hosted an optional online group chat session in Meebo for one hour per week.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The research question that we originally sought to answer in this case study is *how do blogging and microblogging impact LIS students' learning experiences in an online course?* We administered a survey at the end of the term in April 2011 to understand the participating students' learning and collaboration experiences in this online course, and their perceived use of weblogs and microblogs. We planned to collect the students' microblogs and weblogs and analyze the usage patterns, e.g., the types of microblogs (links, announcements, replies, etc.), the purposes of weblogs (reflection on course materials, discussion on group project, etc.), and statistics about microblogging and blogging (the number of microblogs and weblogs per week, the maximum/minimum number of microblogs and group posts, etc.) We planned to include both individual and group level analysis for understanding the effects of blogging and microblogging on individuals' learning experiences and the group activities. We received ethics approval for the study, and waited for the class to end to collect data.

Unfortunately, due to a low survey response rate (n=12) and a small number of students who consented to the use of their microblogs and blogs in this study (n=5), we were not able to conduct the study as originally planned. However, we found that the blogs of the five students who consented to the use of their blogs presented an opportunity for using Potter's (1996) discourse analytic approach to understand how these students experienced the course through the discourse presented in their blogs. This approach to blog analysis has been used successfully in the past by one of the authors (Neal & McKenzie, 2011).

Both authors read the participants' blogs several times to get preliminary understanding of the content and the role of blogs in the course. One author completed the analysis in several iterative stages. In keeping with Potter's approach to discourse analysis, she approached the blogs as constructed within a community of learners who were engaged in publicly sharing their collective educational experiences. She looked for language that would, in effect, describe their

community-shared learning journeys with social media technologies and their applications in library settings. As a result of this analysis, she found the following interpretative repertoires:

1. Definitive growth occurred in the students' understanding of social media throughout the term.
2. Past experience influenced students' experiences with class activities.
3. Quasi-public informal sharing of personal learning experiences led to a sense of community among the students.

Conclusion

We have been investigating how students use blogging in carrying out learning activities of an online LIS course: Social Software and Libraries. It seems that blogging is a valuable tool for students to reflect on their experiences and for instructors to track students' development throughout the term. The findings of this study contribute to the research effort of exploring best teaching practices about integrating Web 2.0 technologies in online classes. Future research will incorporate additional qualitative analysis of these students' blogs and microblogs. Since the instructor will be teaching this course again in fall 2011 and winter 2012 using similar online modalities, additional data collection will also be possible.

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