Defining Tools for a New Learning Space: Writing and Reading Class Blogs

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Abstract

This paper uses specific issues surrounding course blogging to provide a series of reflections regarding the articulation between pedagogy and technology in creating a next generation learning space and discourse community. It investigates the underlying structure and necessary constituent elements of a successful blog assignment and examines the notion of natural and unnatural virtual environments and the roles of the reader and the writer-reader. It suggests that blog assignments may not succeed equally well in all subject areas and gives a number of possible reasons. Furthermore, it posits a more nuanced criterion for the definition of goals and the evaluation of the success of a blog assignment as a learning community beyond the presence or absence of comments.

Keywords: Web 2.0, learning communities, reader anxiety, constructivist learning, discourse communities, comments

Introduction

In the face of the glowing rhetoric of potential for the educational applications of Web 2.0, it is easy to see how many instructors across a broad range of disciplines are motivated to try to integrate this technology into their teaching. Brown and Adler (2008) tell us that "the most profound impact of the Internet, an impact that has yet to be fully realized, is its ability to support and expand the various aspects of social learning." At the same time, the social element of a class blog is also the point at which many a blog assignment falls short of the mark, to the frustration and puzzlement of instructors. It is too facile, however, to ascribe failed blog assignments to student apathy, or conversely, to student over-commitment. Certainly these constants in education have their role. The break-point in course work, however, does not seem to be an issue of whether or not the students wrote blogs. Rather, the break point, the point at which the instructor feels the assignment to have failed in some way, is when these individual written elements fail to interconnect – when the social element, upon which instructors place high hopes for a subsequent critical element – fails to materialize. This paper uses the specific issues surrounding a class blog to provide a series of reflections about the articulation between pedagogy and technology in creating a true virtual learning community. It examines the notion of natural and unnatural virtual environments and the roles of the reader and the writer-reader in the underlying structure and necessary constituent elements of a successful blog assignment.

Pedagogy 2.0

According to Lenhart, Madden, Macgill and Smith (2007) of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 93% of American teens use the Internet, and of those teens online, 28% have created their own journal or blog. Fifty-five percent of online teens have a profile on a social networking site such as Facebook or MySpace. We can therefore assume that our students are capable, perhaps even comfortable with this technology. Why then, in reading any discussion of the pedagogical uses of blogs, are they still couched so much in terms of potential, rather than fact? Note the extensive use, even here, of words like "can," "may," and "potentially." Beneath the visionary rhetoric lies one of the hidden weaknesses of the educational application of social technology – the fact that the potential for peer learning through technology is inherent neither in the technology itself nor in one's familiarity with it.

One way to understand the transition between traditional assignment structures and the potential for assignments using Learning Management System (LMS) technology would be to apply Tim O'Reilly's (2006) three levels of "Web 2.0-ness" to technology and pedagogy. O'Reilly defines a range of Web applications as level 0 to level 3 according to the degree to which they use the Internet interactively. At the bottom of the scale are applications that, while available over the net, do not depend on the net for their function, and would perhaps function just as well offline as online. At the top of the scale (level 3) are applications that exist only through the network and the connections it makes possible between people or applications. These are applications that harness collective intelligence to get better the more people use them. The difference could be described as the difference between an online dictionary (convenient, but not substantially superior to its offline or even to its paper equivalent) and Wikipedia, which is constantly growing and evolving through user contribution and review. Many will argue that Wikipedia is not in fact superior to a paper encyclopedia, but no one is going to argue that it is the same.

There is a side note to be made here, however. While Wikipedia or an online dictionary might be considered to have universal appeal, the term blogosphere, commonly used to refer to the ensemble of blogs on the net as an interconnected community, is something of a misnomer in the singular. Think rather of *blogospheres*, of overlapping circles of information, each representing a different community. Followers of stock car racing and collectors of needlepoint samplers may have few points of spontaneous contact; their online communities do not overlap substantially. The plural *blogospheres* is thus a useful way of expressing the fact that social networking operates on strength of relationship, which is to say that the odds are not in fact even that a professor of French literature will spontaneously read a blog about manga collecting, versus a blog about academic life, or language teaching. Nor are the vast majority of Internet travelers seeking student essays in beginning French describing a pet. And though they may encounter such a blog through a search engine, it is even more unlikely that they will linger to comment. Consequently, the degree of affiliation a given user feels with a particular Web 2.0 environment can also impact the degree to which they actively contribute to O'Reilly's different levels.

For the purposes of this paper, therefore, O'Reilly's categories are principally useful as a notion of continuum, a notion that can be transposed in interesting ways from the technology of teaching to a reflection on pedagogy. In his article, O'Reilly is attempting to define Web 2.0 technologies on their own terms, as they exist in the real virtual world. Within the context of a syllabus or a classroom, however, these same technologies take on different characteristics according to the structure of the assignment, sometimes becoming something quite distinct from their original virtual world application. In other words, one might be tempted to assume that if a technology is interactive in its natural user environment, it will necessarily be interactive in its academic user environment. The question of the pedagogical efficacy of a given technology is thus shifted away from the instructor and towards the technical support staff; away from the assignment and towards the tool.

The idea then would be that if you know how to post to a blog, you automatically know how to assign a blog, and that when you do, the results will in most ways mimic the real-world application of the tool. There are several problems with this assumption. First, while traditional assignment structures do transfer to blog structures fairly cleanly, they do not automatically transform themselves into interactive assignments as a result. In other words, while the blog world might be interactive, the assigned blog can very easily be no more than a complicated way to submit an individual essay. To give another example, while a community-authored blog, in which a group of people collectively author and comment and re-author a blog together, might represent a level-2 or a level-3 level application on O'Reilly's continuum, a blog used to communicate documents primarily from the individual to the professor or from the professor to the individual, with little or no lateral movement, and little or no reciprocation, might actually be classified as a Web-0 application. Which is to say, it might be convenient, but paper is cheaper.

Or, to take it back to a different O'Reilly article (2005), Web 1.0 is the personal Web page, whereas Web 2.0 is blogging, the difference between the two residing in the level of writer-reader-writer interaction. And not all class blogs are blogging. Why? Well, students are remarkably adept at distinguishing between "work" and "fun". Personal blogging might be fun. Blogging for a course is homework. Or, to cite Bugeja (2008), in our attempts to engage today's students, "we have embraced consumer technologies on the flawed assumption that students want to learn through the same devices that amuse and distract them." It is therefore not sufficient to say that blogs "allow" for students to provide feedback and encouragement for each other; that students "may" engage in critical discussion outside of the classroom; that students should be "encouraged" to read and comment on each others' blogs. In order to design successful blog assignments, we have to remember that a class blogosphere is a fundamentally artificial social environment. This means that a class blogosphere actually has to impose the interactive structure spontaneously present in the public blogosphere through a combination of assignment design and student accountability. It is not enough that blog technology allows other students to read and respond to content; they must be held accountable for this reading, or it will not take place. The very key to the success of a blog assignment structure, then, is fundamentally counterintuitive. In order to take advantage of the virtual social space that is spontaneously created in the natural blogosphere, course work must dictate the precise level of engagement of the participants, must make the class blogosphere entirely *unnatural* because not spontaneously social.

Another factor to take into account when reflecting on the natural tendencies vs. assigned use of social software is a little tip-of-the-iceberg idea from Ben McConnell (2006) called the "1% rule." Looking at statistics from Wikipedia and Yahoo, McConnell estimates that for every one hundred visitors to a collaborative online environment, only one will add content. That's ninety-nine silent lurkers for every visible contribution, which means that even very successful and highly visible social networks have extremely low levels of direct participation from the larger reading (lurking) community. It is therefore hardly surprising that it takes effort and ingenuity to implement a collaborative environment as part of a course, if the interactive element that seems such a natural outgrowth of social networking software in everyday use is in fact only a small portion of online activity.

A class blog with blog posts but no comments, potentially considered a failure by an instructor with high hopes for mutual criticism and encouragement, takes on a different light with McConnell's 1% rule in mind. Certainly the active discussion element, in the form of comments, remains a desirable goal. The failure of a blog exercise to generate these comments spontaneously, however, is not necessarily a sign that the exercise as a whole is failing. The students very likely *are* reading, but even with the hypothesis that interaction levels are naturally higher between students than they are in the general population, the odds are still very much against the spontaneous development of a virtual community around a course blog. Consequently, if an active discussion around blog posts is one of the principal goals of the blog assignment, the precise degree and nature of that discussion must be imposed through realistic comment quotas combined with specific grading rubrics. Then, ideally, the discussion will take on a life of its own and expand beyond the imposed discourse. But don't wait to start class until it happens.

The importance of this level of detail in the imposed structure of the class blogosphere is somewhat obfuscated in literature on the topic by three factors. Firstly, very few published articles are generated by failed assignments. Success stories are much more marketable; certainly more flattering. So, it is important to bear in mind the unknown and unnamed numbers of failed applications of blog technology to teaching, and be reminded that without more information about those failures, the portrait of other successes is necessarily incomplete. Secondly, those success stories that are published also represent a skewed sample, insofar as many of them narrate the use of blogs *in classes about information literacy and technology*. When a blog is introduced into a course called "Learning, Reading and Culture" as part of a unit on new literacies (Betts & Glogoff, 2004), or into a course called "Instructional Technology Foundations and Learning Theory" (Dabbagh & Gilbert, 2005), it is both a tool for study and the object of study in and of itself. The second point, therefore, is that the numerous course case studies of blogging assignments attached to courses involving the application of information technology are misleading in their success. While they offer important reflections, they also benefit from a certain "naturalness" of context for the blog assignment that a course on 17^{th}-century literature, for example, simply does not have.

Finally, class blogospheres attached to courses about blogging (or indeed, any other active, contemporary topic) are much more likely to intersect spontaneously with real-world readers and bloggers from outside the instructional context. A professor contemplating incorporating a blog element into a less directly related area of study needs to be aware of this factor and realize that all of the promise of blogs is not equally accessible to all subject areas, even though this discrepancy between disciplines is almost never incorporated in discussions about the positive potential for blogging in education. To give another example, Brown and Adler (2008) cite the experiences of David Wiley, a professor at Utah State University, to demonstrate how the power of participation can be harnessed within a single course. Wiley mentions that one of the student assignments in his course was commented on and linked to from a very prominent blogger, and that many people read the student blogs and subscribed to some of them. According to him, there was a direct corollary between the proof of outside readership through comment and subscription and improvements in the quality of student writing, an improvement he attributes to the power of peer review. The title of Wiley's course? "Understanding Online Interaction."

Okay, but how do I do that?

At this point, it seems appropriate to move the discussion to a more specific analysis of different factors affecting the success of class blog assignments, organized around a series of questions.

Expert… or not ?

As an online publishing exercise, the class blog is fraught with potential for insecurity for the posting student. First and foremost, in contrast to real-world blogs, where individuals principally write from their strengths about things that they know well, course blogs frequently ask students to publicly display their attempts to write about things that they do not necessarily know well and that they may in fact misrepresent entirely. This difference potentially transforms the blog assignment from a seemingly friendly technology into a very threatening assignment. The nature of the blog writing assignment is thus an important factor to take into consideration. Will the students be writing personal narrative, presenting factual information about a real-world topic, or writing critical responses to a text not included in the blog diegesis? These considerations are important because the degree of personal authority that the student brings to the assignment, the external accessibility of the argument or information included, and the degree of personal exposure that the student feels in executing the task are all interrelated. Correspondingly, if the class bloggers are unsure about exposing their work to the group, they will likewise be even more reluctant to comment (read, criticize) the work of their classmates.

Who is reading? The anxiety of the anonymous reader

To return to the original analogy between "Web 2.0" and "pedagogy 2.0," both concepts hinge upon the active presence of a reader. Note the use of the word "active" here. Web pages (already identified as Web 1.0 documents) have many readers. Their presence on the page, however, is no more intrusive or explicit than the numbers on the hit counter at the bottom of the page. The key difference between a true blog and a Web page, then, is not reading itself, but what we will call "visible reading," the act of reading made visible through the traces left behind in the form of comments. Visible reading, however, is much more stressful than mere browsing, reading without leaving a trace, insofar as it exposes the writer to criticism at the same time as it records the reader's passage. Consequently, in order to create a successful class blogosphere, "the first task of the e-learning teacher is to develop a sense of trust and safety within the electronic community. In the absence of this trust, learners will feel uncomfortable and constrained in posting their thoughts and comments." (Anderson 2004, Bender 2006) Windham confirms this anxiety – "posting information online makes users think twice about its content and perception." (Windham 2007)

Note the emphasis on perception here. Perception is not just a reception question but also a production question, and the imaginary reader is the source of both anxiety and pleasure in this dynamic. The hesitation that many students bring to a class blog in the early stages is in part the expression of their anxiety about reader-perception, about how their work will be perceived by their peers. The emphasis is on the peer reader here because in the context of the traditional assignment structure, student work targets only one reader – the instructor. Face-to-face peer review in the context of the classroom directly expands that readership; peer readership outside of the classroom opens it up entirely, insofar as the asynchronous nature of the blog environment means that at any point, any one of the student's classmates could be reading, could be reacting or even judging their work. Windham goes on to suggest that these early anxieties are usually temporary, and in a successful class blogosphere they are – almost by definition.

One small but important factor mitigating the feeling of exposure that many students experience with online discussion is the (potentially) personalized nature of the blog environment. Ducate (2005) describes the blog space as a personal home, created by one owner as a place to express his or her personal voice and opinion. A blog is private space despite its public visibility, because its basic tone, shape and content are controlled by the blogger. Comments, by their organization, marginal position on the page, and minimal esthetic control, do not impinge upon the private-space nature of a blog. The primary identity of the blog-space will always be that of the bloggers themselves. For this reason, the degree to which blog support allows for individualized blog spaces appears to have a very real impact on its success as a social-environment tool. With no visual customization options, the advantages of a blog space over a forum space are minimized, and perhaps disappear entirely.

This is significant in the context of blogs contained within LMS environments because, compared to blog environments such as Wordpress or Blogger, for example, they currently offer very little in the way of personalization of the virtual learning space. Becker and Henriksen (2006) attribute this lack to LMS designs based on 19th and 20th-century pedagogical models that fail to recognize the potential in social constructivist models for learning. According to their vision, the next generation of LMS need to provide the personalization options necessary for each student-user to be able to shape their own PLE, or Personal Learning Environment, within the context of the LMS, instead of imposing one static learning environment for all users. The nature of this larger shift towards a decentralized, learner-centric model for the LMS is already apparent in the role of the instructor in the class blog environment.

What is the role of the instructor-reader?

If we move from the question of the invisible reader to the visible reader in our discussion of student blogger anxiety, we see that the issue of reader-perception as a source of anxiety or reassurance also shifts according to the identity of the commenter. Instructor comments and student comments do not play the same role in the class blogosphere. This is an important point in defining and maintaining the nature and degree of instructor presence necessary to successful course blogging, in particular because the instructor's role in the class blogosphere is potentially quite different from their role in the classroom. In the traditional classroom, instructor feedback on individual written assignments is entirely private, a privileged communication between the instructor and the student. In the more public context of a class blogosphere, however, instructor comments not only provide feedback, but also model feedback in a way that directly informs the normative effect of the public writing project. The instructor's input into the class blog thus serves as a constant example of how to engage not only with the primary source material but also with one's fellow students. In order for this example to be most effective, the instructor must take on the role of a student in this community – a very articulate, well-informed student, perhaps, but nonetheless that of a student, writing about the material within the context and limitations of the assignment while demonstrating the sort of that the student will hopefully achieve over the course of the class.

From this we discern yet another contradiction in the underlying structure of a class blogosphere. To the degree to which writing is a self-conscious social act performed with a specific audience in mind, the instructor, as the shaping authority of the "discourse community" is all-powerful and students are constantly aware of that power (Johns, 1990, 31). This means that despite the importance and desirability of transforming a class into a blogging community, the first and most important reader in every student's mind remains the instructor. For while student-student interaction is critical for learning designs based upon constructivist learning theories, student-teacher interaction currently has the highest perceived value among students and thus commands highest market value. (Anderson, 2002) This is in part the obvious and natural consequence of the fact that blogs which count towards the student's grade are, in fact, graded. Most of the time (excluding peer review structures that actually incorporate peer grading into the assignment) that grade will be determined principally, even exclusively, by the professor. The level of accountability necessary to ensure universal participation in a course blog thus virtually guarantees a hierarchy of readership in course blogging, with the instructor at the top of the pyramid. Student awareness of this hierarchy impacts the structure and interaction of the community, regardless of whether or not the instructor participates openly through posts and comments.

Understanding blogs as a "discourse communities"

One way to look at the impact of these dynamics on a class project is to borrow the notion of discourse community from the literature of English for Academic Purposes (Swales,1990). A discourse community shares common goals, a means of internal communication and feedback, an agreed-upon (although not always overtly defined) format or genre for its communications, and a certain shared level of content or discourse expertise among its members. A class blogosphere clearly meets all of the basic criteria for a discourse community and thus potentially experiences many of the same patterns as those studied in the context of composition courses. The point of bringing this literature into this discussion is that almost all blog assignments are *writing assignments* – and people who teach writing as a profession have a lot to offer people who assign writing in other contexts in terms of the different ways in which writing communities come into being, interact, and dissipate. In other words, part of the myopia of the teaching and technology discourse is the way in which new technologies have propagated this kind of assignment far beyond the English composition class, without necessarily also propagating the pedagogical knowledge that would normally accompany it.

If a blog is written and no one comments, did it make a sound?

This paper began with the statement that instructors might be tempted to label a blog project as a success or failure based on the number of comments elicited, rather than the number or quality of posts, or on the reader experience. The obvious question in this case is what degree of effectiveness can be found in the blog assignment alone, independent of any commenting activity. Certainly it seems that the blog writing assignment should not be somehow less effective than the traditional written page handed directly to the instructor, particularly if the instructor provides feedback and evaluation. It seems clear, however, that the blog assignment can offer added value over the private writing assignment, even without an active comment field. This added value comes as a result of student reading of peer blogs from the class, and leads to several questions :

1. In the absence of comments, what are the signs and effects of student reading?
2. Are there other ways besides comment quotas to enforce student reading?
3. Is the silent reader a passive reader?

1. In the absence of comments, what are the signs and effects of student reading?

Making coursework public, as is the case with a class blog, can have a marked (and usually positive) normalizing effect within a very short amount of time. This normative effect takes place within the first or second cycle of shared assignments, almost without instructor intervention. Students investigate the work of their peers to measure their effort and ensure that they have not failed in any conspicuous way to match at least the average performance. This private comparison, in combination with the private feedback they receive from the instructor (their grade for the assignment) rapidly communicates a clear sense of the standards of the community, and of their relative standing in relationship to those standards. Without knowing the precise grade received by anyone but themselves, students very quickly identify the most successful work, and work that seems inferior or insufficient in relationship to the class norm, and adapt their efforts accordingly. The advantage of this approach is that the students themselves do the majority of the critical evaluation necessary to bring their work in line with the standards of the community, instead of merely receiving a recipe for improvement from the instructor. Note that in this context a credited but ungraded trial run of a community assignment structure, ostensibly to ensure that everyone is able to use the technology required, can be an efficient and non-confrontational way of defining the goals of the assignment through this sort of private comparison of the qualities and defects of peer texts with the student’s own production.

2. Are there other ways besides comment quotas to enforce student reading?

When a topic or assignment is directly connected to a larger assessment exercise, such as an exam or a paper, students also read each others’ posts as a way of studying the material through exposure to different approaches and observations. Obviously, there is a risk that some of the material posted will perpetuate incorrect information, but it must also be noted that for a post to actually propagate a mistake, its errors must be indistinguishable to the average reader. This is often not the case – in fact, the process of identifying which material is useful and on target and which material lacks the necessary substance significantly contributes to the larger goal of developing critical thinking skills. Furthermore, as long as the instructor comments, even if no one else from the course does, the instructor can ask questions that will point both the original author and any other readers in the right direction, without necessarily rejecting the post out of hand.

3. Is the silent reader a passive reader?

Our exploration of the first two questions in this section would suggest that the answer to this third and final question is “No.” Reading other posts to compare them with one’s own production involves critical reading and comparison of a series of texts both to each other (to establish the norm) and to one's own work (to ascertain one's standing relative to the whole). Reading, even browsing the global output of the class blogosphere to prepare for an exam, involves evaluating the quality, and therefore usefulness, of each proposed text. While it cannot be ensured that every student is experiencing every step of this critical progression, these are not passive reading tasks – in fact, quite the opposite.

To blog or not to blog?

Blogging *does* have tremendous potential for the classroom, and this potential is in large part linked to the social network structure. This potential is not an automatic consequence of using or assigning the technology, however, despite the fact that many of today's students are practitioners outside of the context of the classroom. Furthermore, the emphasis on the educational potential of social software, on Web 2.0, on learning communities and virtual and personal learning environments, has defined the "social" in social network too narrowly, concentrating attention on the visible manifestation of interaction (comments) to the neglect and dismissal of the invisible interactions that take place even in the absence of documented response. The picture is therefore incomplete. In order to understand fully and implement successfully blogging assignments, the anxious writer must be reassured, the neglected reader must be revived and rewarded, and the comments, if desired, must be assigned.

Blogging in the next generation LMS

In order to empower the writer and validate the reader, and perhaps in the process facilitate the creation of a truly active and interactive online community around a course, LMS blog tools need to learn from their real-world counterparts, while taking steps to address the ways in which the course blog environment is not at all analogous to the larger blogosphere(s). The adaptations that must be made to accomplish these goals in the context of blogging fall into two categories; personalization and assessment. Personalization of the blog environment is necessary to create the private space effect described by Ducate (2005); it is a necessary component in the construction of a virtual identity for each student, which is itself the foundation of any desired social or community effect. (Becker & Henriksen, 2006) In this respect, therefore, designers of LMS blogs need to be very careful before they dismiss the aesthetic options available through the public blogosphere as unnecessary components.

The second key element to creating a successful LMS blog tool is motivated by the problems discussed here in assessing a successful blog exercise. Instructors need better monitoring tools, tools that will allow them to quietly track student activity through the class blogosphere, tools whose development has been actively suppressed in the public blogosphere because of privacy concerns. RSS feeds, widely advertised as the miracle answer, are in practice a woefully inefficient way of sorting and tracking a class blog with required comments. Each student represents two separate feeds to follow, and even then only if the class uses the Wordpress platform (tracking student comments on the other platforms is even more difficult.) Furthermore, comment tracking is an obviously inadequate method of tracking reading, as opposed to reading-and-writing, of blogs. The need for improved tracking tools in next generation LMS, tools that will allow instructors to better evaluate the sometimes-silent successes of blog exercises, is thus clear and pressing. Instructors able to follow the life of the virtual environment more closely from behind the scenes will better perform their role as open facilitator in the virtual learning environment, and in the process greatly increase their odds of success in leveraging the power of social networking software for educational purpose.

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