

# EXPLORING WITH BLOGS TO ENHANCE COMMUNITIES OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE DURING TEACHING PRACTICE IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING ECOLOGIES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of blogs as an e-learning journal writing reflective and peer feedback tool in empowering and supporting Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) students learning to teach Economics and Management Science in open distance learning (ODL) environments. An EMSMethodspace was created for subject didactics students during their teaching practice period and they were encouraged to post their reviews on the “blog space” as a communicative platform for reflecting critically on their learning processes, as well sharing teaching practice experiences to enhance professional growth. Data collected consisting of social media questionnaire and student teachers’ blog postings and comments on the “blog space”. The findings indicated that the positive implications of a blog as a reflective tool promote critical communities of reflective practice for student teachers during teaching practice. In addition, strategies were formulated to support reconsidering the use of blogs for student teachers in ODL teaching practice spaces.

**Keywords:** blog, teaching practice, Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE), open distance learning (ODL)

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the last decade there has been increasing interest in the new generation of social media, especially Web 2.0 technologies. The social media landscape is an ever-increasing environment in the nexus of the increasing convergence among residential, distance education (DE) and open distance learning (ODL) institutions globally (Anderson, 2010a; Siemens, 2004; Yang, 2009; Top, Yukselturk & Inan, 2010). Numerous research studies have focused on the use of Web 2.0 social network tools such as blogs and Wikis in educational settings (Glogoff, 2007; Huffaker, 2005). On the other hand, some researchers still employ traditional computer-mediated communication (CMC) applications (e.g. e-mail) to enhance students' communication and collaboration (Panda, 2010; Bloch, 2002). This paper explores Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) student teachers' views of blogging and what they were reflecting on during an ODL teaching practice blog when unstructured journal postings and short social media survey responses were recorded. No particular set of formulations for blog postings were given. The focus of this study is, therefore, to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the way in which blogging supports reflective practice and learning experience during ODL teaching practice ecologies. Accordingly, an interesting question, which has driven this study, is whether blogs can support and strengthen reflective practice in student teachers of Business Education. The context for this study involves the ODL community (open distance learning-university), school-based learning (teaching practice at school level), and the social (diverse student population) and cultural identities (race groups, mother tongue, language of instruction) of student teachers. This is consistent with Lave and Wenger's (2001) view of knowledge, which is contextualised by the influence of context, actions and culture in a particular community. Furthermore, as Pallof and Pratt (2003) and Mezirow (1991) argue, transformation is the most important variable in this conceptual design and is the final form of "real" learning that takes place in an ODL setting (communities of practice). The high activity in the educational use of blogs is exemplified on university websites across the globe and by many leading ICT pedagogy experts, such as Ferdig and Trammel (2004), Armstrong, Berry and Lamshed (2007), Downes (2004), Richardson (2004), Kennedy (2003), O'Donnell (2005) and Bartlett-Bragg (2003). These blog potentials could enrich learning experiences and lead to deeper learning. Rosie cited in Bartlett-Bragg (2003) maintains that deep learning involves constructing connections between concepts in a context. Reflection is deemed to be an important prerequisite for deep and meaningful learning (e.g. Moon, 1999). Models of reflection abound, each with a different focus; for example Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning, Schön's (1983) model of reflective practice, Mezirow's (1991) model of transformative learning, and King and Kitchener's (1994) model of reflective judgement.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A phenomenographic approach was applied to this research, which explores the use of blogs by PGCE students during ODL teaching practice (Prinsloo, Slade & Galpin, 2011; Akerlind, Bowden & Green, 2005). A social media tool questionnaire (n = 60), a Google scholar desktop review of blogging and reflective blog postings (n = 63) were used and analysed for data collection and presentation. A desktop literature review on peer reviewed research articles, a social media tool questionnaire

(Cronbach alpha coefficient = 0.79) and students' reflective journal entries from EMSMethodspace were collected, recorded and thematically analysed. Before beginning the study, consent was obtained from the students and the purpose of the study explained to the participants, as well as the purpose of confidentiality. It was decided beforehand not to use the names of students for this study.

## RESULTS

**Table 1 PGCE EMS students' use of ICT prior and during the study (n = 60)**

To what extent were you exposed to the use of ICT before and during your first degree at university?					
Level of ICT use	Never	Seldom	Often	Very often	Consistently
Primary school	57%	33%	10%	0	0
Secondary school	3%	69%	12%	6%	0
Undergraduate education	0	7%	17%	33%	43%
Teaching practice sessions	0	56%	24%	16%	4%

Table 1 outlines the extent of students' use of ICT during their first degree at university and during teaching practice.

**Table 2 Use of communicative social networking tools (n = 60)**

To what extent are you using the following social media tools for communication purposes?					
Type of social media	Never	Seldom	Often	Very often	Consistently
e-mails	7%	33%	51%	19%	0
MXit	0	3%	27%	21%	49%
Facebook	0	7%	17%	33%	43%
Blogging	24%	56%	14%	6%	0
Twitter	0	7%	17%	33%	43%
Wikis	0	36%	7%	33%	24%
SMS	0	0	10%	27%	63%
YouTube	33%	41%	20%	6%	0

Based on the data in Table 2, the majority of students indicated that they used MXit, Facebook, Twitter and SMS as social media tools consistently to communicate with friends and family and during teaching practice.

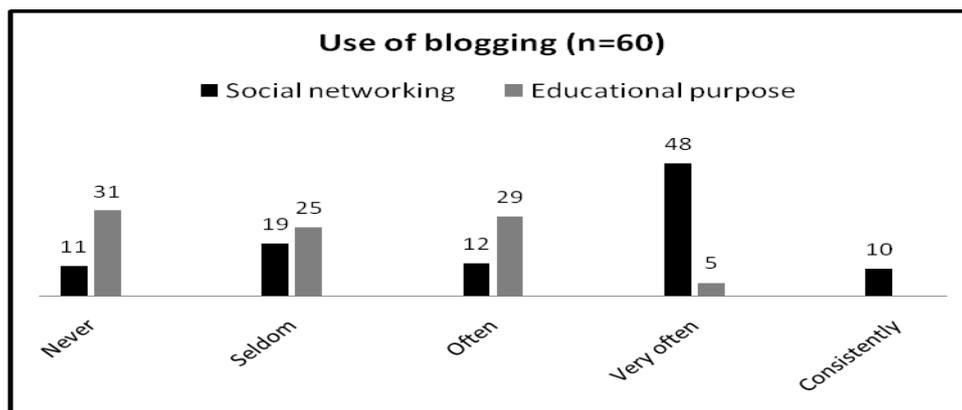


Figure 1 Use of blogs as a Web 2.0 social media tool

Based on the information in Figure 1, the majority of PGCE student teachers used blogs very often (49%) as a social networking tool. On the other hand they used blogs often for educational purpose (29%).

## STUDENT TEACHERS' BLOG POSTINGS

The following themes emerged from the blog postings:

### Theme #1: Collaboration between diverse communities

Students' postings indicated that blogs encouraged the integration of personal, peer and expert views on how to build relationships with others, supporting each other and giving advice during teaching practice. One student commented:

*You may have doubts about stuff, then realise everyone else has them. You realise you are not alone. You find you did the same thing and you were questioning it, and found they (other students in blog group) did the same thing. It's handy to have that feedback.*

The outcomes noted by the students regarding the benefits of blogging align with the concept of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

### Theme #2: Exchanging insights and information on teaching practice

Students reported that it was one of the best ways of continually monitoring of their reflective ability before, during and after the ten weeks teaching practice placements. Some of the responses included: *Excellent ideas around how to "teach big classes" was unique. I never really had such brilliant ideas before. It helped make things more relevant. It was interesting to know what others are thinking ... it opens things up, you know what others are thinking and what they are going through.*

### Theme #3: Blogging as an educational tool for reflective practice

The blog required students to reflect on their teaching sessions in subject practice, which they found to be beneficial as it *"forced you to reflect ... you had to make time to stop and think"*. This is what some of them said in this regard:

*Only later in the semester were there some good conversations, but early on they were not so great. Some were reluctant to respond because some of us were so busy to get ready for TP (teaching practice).*

#### **Theme #4: Group cohesion and trust**

Some student teachers stated they were able to build up trust in the group although there were still students who would avoid making “deep” comments and kept things very superficial. Students’ responses:

*Blogging is not as personal as a personal journal so you could put more sensitive and personal stuff in your own journal – you tended to focus on more professional vs. personal stuff.*

This is consistent with group theory development and stages of growth.

## **DISCUSSION**

Several researchers agree that blogging supports collaborative learning by enhancing learning performance in both individual knowledge development and group knowledge sharing (Yang (2009) and Killeavy and Moloney, 2010). Participants in this study stated that blogs provide a useful platform for reflecting and communicating with each other. Makri and Kynigos (2007) reported the integration of group blogging in a postgraduate course, which enhance student reflection as an integrated communication and reflection process. This blog experience was able to support students through a range of teaching practice sessions, as well as creating opportunities to explore evidence-based practices in a school setting. Many of the same issues were noted by the students, who commented on, for example, the neutrality and informality of blogging and the value of learning about how others see the same question in the study (Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Farmer *et al.*, 2008). Another advantage was the operational aspects of the blog facilitation which supported discourse among students. It was an effective medium for creating a community of practice among the students and academic moderators. This was confirmed by Churchill (2009), Yang (2009) and Killeavy & Moloney (2010). The need for reflection, as part of the experiential learning cycle, and the development of professional competence were also reinforced by the use of blogs, especially in advancing student teachers in this study. The current study indicated that some student teachers did not take full advantage of the collaboration and peer feedback sessions. This impeded their reflection or they did not engage as fully as other students. This should not necessarily be taken as a measure of learning effectiveness, even though some students were frustrated by some of the bloggers’ lack of input into the discussions. Moreover, Ellison and Wu (2006) and Nonnecke and Preece (2001) note that “lurkers”, individuals who read but do not necessarily participate in the online discussion, may still be learning through their passive or vicarious participation. In terms of implementation practicalities, it was clear that student teachers need clear guidelines to support them in the blogging environment to optimise learning outcomes. The introduction of blogs earlier into the curriculum is important to develop competency in their use and in reflective writing and practice (Ellison, & Wu, 2008). Similar issues have been raised in other studies where blogs have been used to promote learning and discourse in higher education (Top *et al.*, 2010; Farmer *et al.*, 2008). Facilities should also consider providing students with internet access while at their facilities in order to increase the timeliness of reflective writing and group feedback. The idea of having blogs that are designed for a subject didactics specialty area, such EMSMethodspace was an excellent idea as it focuses issues and feedback within that area.

## CONCLUSION

This study supported the use of blogs in a group of PGCE student teachers involved in an ODL teaching practice programme which assisted with reflective practice and reasoning and added value to their learning experience. Blog as a Web 2.0 tool is undervalued and underutilised for the purpose of enhancing teaching and learning in an ODL teaching practice ecology. Further research is to be conducted on student teachers' attitudes, beliefs and amount of use and change over time after being exposed to blogging in ODL learning spaces.

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