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Do Blogs Help Students to Learn?

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Introduction

The use of social software is becoming more popular in higher education as a means of engaging students in their learning, and there is some evidence that students are aided in their learning as a consequence of engaging with this technology (Glogoff, 2005). However, it is clear that it is not the use of technology that is important in enabling the learner to learn but the way that the technology is used to support appropriate pedagogy (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006).

There are a number of learning principles that may be applied to the use of technology in a blended learning context (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; McLoughlin, 2000). It is the degree to which these, or equivalent, learning principles are incorporated into the student learning environment that determines how effective the learning tools might be.

This case study is based on an action research project that used blogs and wikis to encourage students to be reflective about their work and to feedback to themselves, their peers and to their tutor. Students taking part in the project were able to take advantage of the technology for learning because its use was appropriately blended with a number of well established learning principles.

The case study will discuss the following:

1. how the use of the technology was linked to learning principles to support effective learning;

2. how the use of these tools promoted good practice in the students' learning;

3. what were the students' perceptions about the how the tools aided their learning;

4. how effective was the use of these tools in encouraging learning.

A number of examples of using these tools will be discussed and from these a series of recommendations for effective practice will be made.

How the students used the technology for learning

The students, who were Year 3 computing students, were taught

in two groups of 18. Each group was given an initial session on how to use blogs and then a scaffolded introduction to online activities to deal with issues of lack of confidence in using online discussion (see Salmon, 2000; 2002). A blended approach was used in which the students did some activities in sessions and reported them online. They were then encouraged to explore further ideas and share their experiences outside the classroom.

How do we measure learning?

It is not an easy task to measure the effect of an intervention on students' learning as there are so many other influences that might affect how students learn. In particular the assessment is often a poor proxy for learning. After a review of the literature it was decided to use the following proxies for learning, taken from Chickering & Gamson (1986):

- time on task;
- student – tutor contact time;
- student – student contact time;
- student reflection.

Student perceptions of how technology can support their learning

Getting feedback from students using my blog

Feedback from students was elicited at the end of the module by getting them to comment on a blog post written on my blog.

The post was:

> It would be helpful for me if you can give me some feedback about the use of web-based technology in this module.

> Would you please comment on how useful the following have been in helping you to learn:

> - the module website;
> - the module blog (this blog);
> - your module blog.

Note that the students were not asked for specific responses against the proxies for learning but were asked to give general feedback about their learning.

What follows are some examples of student responses which have been categorised by the author against the proxies for learning.

Time on task

Blogs can help to encourage students to spend more time on their work outside sessions.

> 'The blog is a positive nudge to get things done. With the time pressures involved in doing four modules there is a tendency for us students to do what we need to do to get through without extending ourselves. The blog posting requirement helps to encourage, it made me work at least, and should be considered in all modules.'

Student – tutor contact time

Blogs can help to increase student – tutor contact time:

'The module blog helped me to communicate to yourself how I felt about the module so far and any problems that I have had.

This has been a real help as I have another way to try and contact you and also any of the group could have posted a reply as well to help if they had had similar problems.'

Student – student contact time

Blogs can help to increase student – student contact time:

'Being able to view the other students' blogs also gave me an idea of where they were and whether I was doing enough work.

Being able to write a post regarding a problem I was having and have helped comments posted back was a great support between sessions.'

Student reflection

Blogs can help to increase student reflection:

'The module blog gave me a better opportunity to share personal views, experience and researches done on different topics and issues. I could easily upload things researched and re-edit them from time to time.'

'My module blog gave me somewhere to post all of the work I have done and document how I felt at each stage of the module.'

It can be seen from these examples that students perceive that their learning has been enhanced by their use of blogs.

An anonymous survey

All students were given the opportunity to complete an anonymous survey in which there were three questions that asked them about their experience of using technology for learning. The responses were on a five point scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Of the 36 students surveyed, 25 responded giving the results below:

- Question 9: The module website has been useful in helping me to learn – strongly agree 70%, agree 30%;

- Question 10: Rowland's module blog has been useful in helping me to give feedback – strongly agree 40%, agree 60%;

- Question 11: My module blog has been useful in helping me to learn – strongly agree 60%, agree 40%.

Conclusions

There are a number of ways in which learning can be enhanced using blogs.

They can:

• help to extend the learning activities outside the classroom;

• increase the opportunities for student-tutor and student-student contact;

• encourage students to reflect on their work.

Students believe that technologies used in this way help them to learn.

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About the author

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