

# **Blog: a tool for reflective practice in teacher education?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

To prepare teachers for work in a rapidly changing, information rich and technology based society, teacher educators are looking for ways to stimulate teacher's awareness of technology and to enhance their communicative and reflective thinking. This article explores the use of web-based diaries (blogs) as a tool to support reflective practice. A brief overview is offered of the educational potential of blogs. An exploratory experience of integrating blogs into teacher education is described. Blogs supported tutor-student communication, but not student-student communication; there was little evidence that blogs supported student reflection. Suggestions for future actions are made in terms of the need to reward certain kinds of student activity, and to embed a culture of assessment for learning into a predominantly Confucian culture of education.

**Keywords:** blogs, weblogs, educational technology, communication, reflection

## **INTRODUCTION**

Teachers are required to have effective skills for communicating with peers, students and parents. Explicit formative feedback from teachers to students has been found to be beneficial to students' learning in every context studied. [1, 2]. The ability to write well is necessary in order for teachers to provide instructive advice to students. Furthermore, the capability for reflective writing is an asset for the professional development of teachers. It helps them to enrich their existing knowledge by presenting their experience or intelligence in papers.

In a technology-based society, both teachers and students are facing variety of technologies in their daily life. Besides, technology is also changing the way one teaches or learns. So teachers are required to know how to integrate technology into teaching and learning process.[3]

Teachers must be reflective in their teaching if they are to manage complex teaching contexts [4]. One approach that teacher educators frequently use is to ask

teachers to write journals on paper. The submitted journals will be reviewed and commented. However, the audience of the journal is limited. If one wants to share one's idea or journals with more audience and to obtain others' feedback, on-line tool might be a better alternative. The purpose of this paper is to describe an exploration of the instructional uses of weblogs (blogs) in teacher education. It investigates the feasibility of blogs as a tool for teachers to develop their communicative, reflective and technological skills.

### **WHAT IS A WEBLOG OR BLOG?**

Winner defines a blog as "a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an HTML browser" [5]. Several years ago, people had to learn HTML or use web page authoring tools before they could publish web pages on Internet. Due to the development of technology, this requirement is not a must anymore. People can develop and update their web pages directly using web browser as if they are writing email. Weblog is a technology that enables ones to create a personal published web site with great ease.

'Blog post' usually contains three basic attributes: title, link and description. The content organization of the web site is automated over time and is displayed with the most recent entry at the top. Therefore Lipton [6] describes it to be "just a web site organized by time".

The technology that works behind weblog is RSS (Rich Site Summary) document. It is an application of XML. There are tools available for one to create RSS documents such as Blogger ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)), Blog Chinese (<http://www.blogchina.com/>) and

Manila (<http://www.manila.com>). The use of this RSS document allows one to exchange content as well as integrate information into one's own weblog. Schroeder [7] describes blogs as Internet based "information disseminating tools". It serves as a form of one-to-many communication. Applications of blogs range from keeping a personal diary with reflections, to a platform for journalism. Blogs have been used as a channel within a discipline where experts exchange ideas and works. The number of active weblogs increases exponentially within the past few years<sup>1</sup>.

### **POTENTIALS AND DRAWBACK OF WEBLOGS IN TEACHER EDUCATION**

One of the barriers for the inclusion of information technology in education is the technical demand on users. In order for teachers to better integrate computer mediated communication tools into their teaching, they need to be familiar with tools available [8].

Blogs have the potential to allow teachers to focus on content production and frees them from the technical aspects of writing web pages. The built-in feature of feedback and trackback within blogs allow teachers to comment on their own work. Blogging can encourage teachers to write and share reflections. Blogs have been introduced to students in writing and language courses. Students report positive experience when using blogs [9] [10]. This can foster communication between teachers. However, as blogs are still new to most teachers, it takes time for them to feel confident in their use.

The experience of Blood [11] shows that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.blogcensus.net>

the practice of writing a journal entry online daily, can enhance positive writing skills, instill self-confidence in voicing personal opinions especially if one receives helpful feedback, and promote reflective thinking. However, use of blogs is not unproblematic. There are issues of persistence - is it easy to keep up the practice of writing a journal online? and of openness - are teachers willing to share their thoughts with others? As blogs are part of the web, the content of blogs is opened to public inspection.

Discovering and examining new technologies that promote student communication, writing and reflective skills in teacher education is exciting. Most of the literature [9] [10] [8] on the application of blogs has been conducted in the context of online education program. Students are geographically separate so web-based communication tools are necessary. It is reasonable to ask if the lessons learned in this context generalize to face-to-face instruction. Is the experience of students using blogs here the same as those in distance education? Bannan-Ritland [12] showed that course instructor place an important role in the nature and frequency of participation by students in an online environment.

### **INCLUSION OF WEBLOG IN AN EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY COURSE**

One of the objectives of the course in Educational Technology at the University of Macau is to introduce learning resources to 18 pre-service teachers so as to engage them in the creative use of these resources in their teaching. Blogs have been introduced as a tool for students to develop their communicative, reflective and technological skills; and to serve as a channel for teachers to communicate with

students in addition to face-to-face meetings.

A brief overview of blog was given on the first lesson of the course in late January 2005. A well-known web site in Macau, [www.qoos.com](http://www.qoos.com), offers blogs facilities to registered users. The number of blog user in this site is more than 6000 users. So students were invited to visit the web site and register to use the service. They were taught how to operate in this new environment for half of a session. Since the user interface is in Chinese and students are mostly fresh high school graduates, they had few problems in creating blog entries. Mechanisms for providing and responding to feedback in the blog environment were explained. Students are encouraged to blog, and to provide feedback to their classmates' blog. Students are required to reflect on lessons weekly and to write their reflections on the blogs as part of their assignment. The course tutor reads their weblogs weekly and provides appropriate feedback and encouragements to students in class.

The inclusion of weblogs is to arouse students' awareness of new technology and to foster the practice of reflection and communication. After 7 weeks of lessons, a questionnaire comprising 13 questions was set, addressing areas such as students' self perception of computer knowledge, perception of the ease of using blogs, the practice of distributing ideas and reflections online, frequency of reading self reflections and peers' reflections, expectation of receiving comments from peer and tutor, and the potential value of blogs as a tool for communication and reflections. Responses were anonymous. One student was absent in the 7<sup>th</sup> lesson so a total of 17 questionnaires were collected for data analysis.

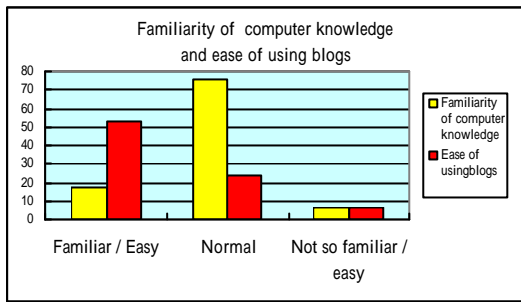


Figure 1. Students' self rating of their computer knowledge and the ease of using blogs.

Most students reported that they had little experience of using blogs. Figure 1 shows that only 18% of students rate themselves familiar with appropriate computer knowledge. However, most students reported that they find it easy to write and post entries using the blog environment.

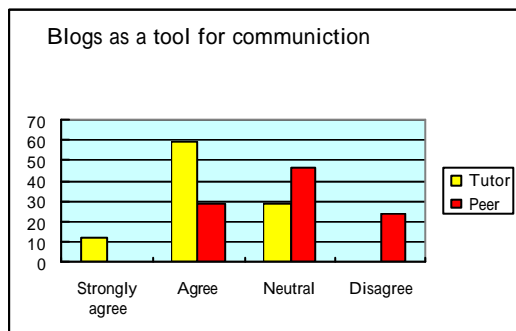


Figure 2. Students' response to blogs as a tool for communication

Since tutor responds to students' questions and shares peers' reflections with them, a high proportion of students agreed that blogs serves as a communication tool between them and the tutor. However, the response of students about communication with their classmates shows a different picture – relatively few students endorse the view that blogs help communication with their peers. One possible reason for this situation is that students do not

consider interactions with peers to be part of the educational culture. Students have a higher expectation that they will receive feedback from tutor, but rather weak expectations that they will receive feedback from other students, as shown in Figure 3. The weak culture of peer assessment in Macau is documented elsewhere [13]. Support for this idea can be found in the reported frequency of use of blogs for different purposes as shown in Figure 4. A great majority of students do not read their classmates' journal weekly (and their reports of the frequency of reading their own blogs are disappointingly low). Further evidence (not reported in detail here) of the absence of a culture of self-assessment was found by an analysis of the content of the online weekly journal; content focuses mainly on tasks set by the tutor.

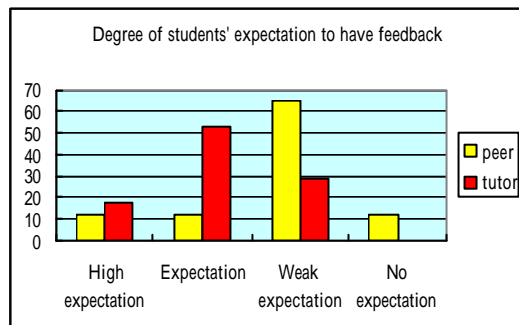


Figure 3. Degree of students' expectation to have feedback from peer and tutor.

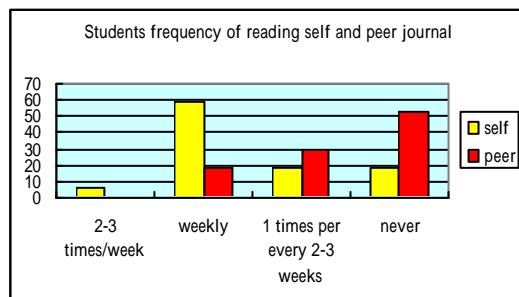


Figure 4. Students' frequency of reading

self and peer journal.

Overall, these results show that blogs can serve as a communication tool between students and tutor. However, there was little evidence that blogs helped communication among students. A lesson from the study for current practice is that more work must be done to encourage students' participation (such as making participation a requirement in the assessment system). The results show that blogs did not help much in students' reflective thinking. This has important implications for course design. In informal conversations, many students report that they have problems in writing journal weekly, and are unclear about what should be included in the journal (for example, students often record lesson activities, rather than their reflections about these activities). The unfamiliarity of the concept of assessment for learning [12] in Macau was noted earlier. More radically in this context, appropriate use of blogs needs to take account of the deep cultural assumption that the teacher is the source of knowledge, and the student is relatively passive recipient of this knowledge. The existence of a powerful tool does not mean that it will be used appropriately, across cultural contexts.

This exploratory and small scale report on the inclusion of blogs in an educational technology course in Macau does show that students can have a positive experience of using blogs in fostering communication with their tutor. However, evidence that blogs support communications amongst students, and develop students' reflective thinking, is weak. Far more work needs to be done to ensure that blogs become part of student activities, to exemplify appropriate uses of blogs, and to modify a Confucian culture of learning so that students benefit from

more active participation in the learning process.

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