

Editor's Note: This carefully researched study compares weblogs to other discussion tools. It provides insights and alternative points of view to support the academic value of blogging tools for discourse and opportunities these tools offer beyond current learning management systems and threaded discussions.

Comparing Weblogs to Threaded Discussion Tools in Online Educational Contexts

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Abstract

Weblogs or blogs are being heralded as the "next big thing" in education. In this article we examine the advantages and disadvantages of this form of Internet-based interaction using the *Community of Inquiry* model with its focus on social, cognitive and teaching presences. We conclude that blogging has distinct advantages over more common threaded discussion in its support of style, ownership and identity, and its public nature may enhance resolution phases of cognitive presence. However, its lack of safety and the current inefficiencies of linking and threading messages present greater challenges than the more familiar threaded discussion or email list. Perhaps the blog's greatest relative advantage is for non formal and open education that takes learning beyond the traditional course.

Keywords: Weblogs, blogs, educational blogging, computer conferencing, threaded discussion, online education, distance education, education, Community of Inquiry Model, cognitive presence, social presence, teaching presence, ICT's, Information and Communication Technologies, Web 2.0, E-learning 2.0, RSS

Introduction

The latest buzz emanating from the Information and Communication Technologies world relates to the emergence of Web 2.0 defined by O'Reilly as "the network as platform, spanning all connected devices ...creating network effects through an "architecture of participation"(O'Reilly, 2005) or more recently by Jones (2006) as "all the Web sites that get their value from the actions of users."

The notion of a next generation, more intelligent and semantically linked network has inspired educators to begin talking about a corresponding E-learning 2.0 (Downes, 2005). Of key interest to educators is the learning and teaching capability of network tools that move online learning and other forms of distance education from predominantly read-only text based systems to dynamic read-write and multimedia environments. Currently, the

most popular tool for creating or writing to the Web is the Weblog or blog and its multimedia companions the pod and videocast – a set of applications that allow personalized publishing, archiving and retrieval of content created by anyone.

However, educators have, for at least 20 years, had access to write capacity through email, discussion lists, Usenet groups and, most commonly, through threaded discussions as supported by learning management systems such as Blackboard and Moodle. In this paper, we overview the pedagogical capacity of blogs in comparison to earlier forms of Internet-based educational tools, attempt to winnow the value from the hype and thereby assist educators in choosing between and effectively using blogs and other forms of Web 2.0 communications.

Educational Blogging

Blogs have captured the imagination of many networked educators and the Internet is full of exuberant claims as to their capacity to not only improve but in some instances revolutionize all levels of formal education. James Farmer, professional blog consultant, and founder of edublogs.org, claims that “through the use of blogs, ... teachers and learners are becoming empowered, motivated, reflective and connected practitioners in new knowledge environments.” (Farmer & Bartlett-Bragg, 2005) There is no doubt that blogging is very popular with current estimates of over 200 million active blogs¹. What is less clear are the learning value and potential of blogs and especially that subset of learning that is orchestrated (and credentialed) by formal learning organizations.

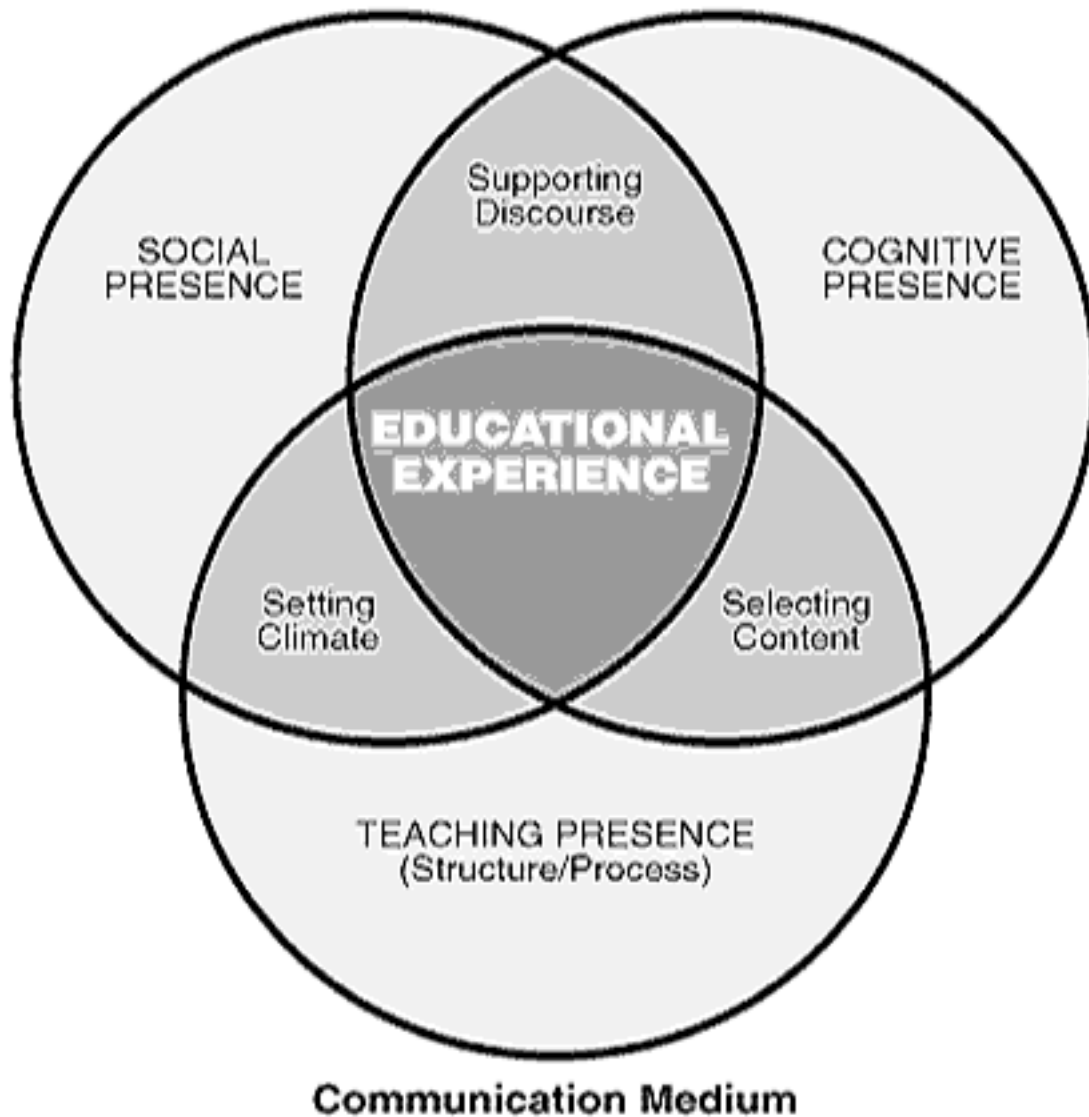
Definitions of blogs abound, but instead of listing them here the best approach for those unfamiliar with educational blogs may be to provide a snapshot of one. Educator Will Richardson maintains an educational blog called *weblogg-ed* at <http://www.weblogg-ed.com>. This blog opens with the usual reverse chronologically ordered commentaries, authored by Richardson on a diverse set of topics, most of which focus on the application of the ‘read-write web’ to education. It is a personal publishing system in which Richardson shares his insights, comments, and recommendations with everyone, but the focus of this blog is an educational audience. Richardson also provides organized links to his personal recommendations of favourite blogs, resources, events – in sum creating a personal portal of all things education and blog related. One can think of a blog as a Web based, multi-media publishing system, that is very low cost (often free), very easy to use, customizable in terms of look and feel, content, target audience and hyperlinked to other content spread across the Internet.

Beyond the creation of content, is the means of distribution. Blogs are syndicated using a variety of XML based standards (RSS, ATOM etc). Readers interested in the blog content can subscribe and be alerted to new content or discussions that have been added to the blog using these syndicated protocols and compatible readers known as RSS aggregators. Much more detailed (and often heavily hyped) descriptions of blogs and syndication and their application in education are available online² and in print format³.

Community of Inquiry Model

In this paper we build on our earlier work and discuss the use of blogs as tools to create and sustain a community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). The *Community of Inquiry* model (Figure 1) was developed to guide analysis of formal learning and inform teaching in online environments. The original work entailed developing indicators by which three critical components of an educational experience - teaching, social, and cognitive presence - could be defined, identified and measured. The original work was done through content analysis of computer conferencing transcripts but it has been enlarged and validated through survey and other qualitative investigation⁴. Farmer (2004) first applied the model to a blogging context and our work expands his initial analysis and focuses specifically on comparing blog affordances with those of computer conferencing within which the COI model was developed. It is hoped that this analysis will aide educators and instructional designers to determine how best to use blogs to enhance teaching and learning.

Community of Inquiry



Communication Medium

Figure 1. Community of Inquiry Model from Garrison & Anderson (2003)

Figure 1 illustrates the three 'presences' and the overlapping educational activities that define the Community of Inquiry model. We discuss the capacities of blogs and discussion boards in the support and development of each of these presences in turn.

Social Presence

We defined social presence quite simply as "the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally as 'real' people" (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 94). Given the "lean" communication context of text based interaction, we felt that establishment of social presence in the absence of body language, voice intimation and graphic aides would be challenging. We developed a series of indicators (affective, open communication and cohesive markers) and proceeded to analyze the text of educational transcripts. We found that social presence was present in quality courses and were able to triangulate the perception of this presence with survey and interview results (Rourke & Anderson, 2002). Although social presence can be established in conferencing environments, we also noted that it is not easily done and many are challenged to express themselves as 'real persons' within this text based and usually institutionally dominated environment.

In comparing social presence within discussion board and blog environments we find five areas of distinct difference – focus, identity, safety, style and ownership.

Focus

In order to project oneself as a real person, one's focus must be directed towards topics and tasks of real personal interest. Topics of discussion within a computer conference are typically course focused and instructor directed. Student involvement usually consists of posting ideas and responses on assigned topics. It has been argued that the computer conference can act as an "equalizing tool, which encourage(s) universal participation in discussion compared to face-to-face dialogue" (Godwin-Jones, 2003) indicating that all participants have the ability to initiate new topics or discussions. This "decentralization allows for more emergent and unpredictable directions that may reflect the group's desires as a whole" (Lefever, 2004). In practice however, conference postings are permeated by the educational and usually institutional context of the delivery institution. This facilitates social presence if one is comfortable in exposing and hopefully developing themselves in an educational context, but can be intimidating and even repressive to the expression of one's real self. This sense of institutionalized attitude and behaviour is one of the hidden agendas of all forms of education including that delivered online (Anderson, 2001).

Blogs are personal, learner focused tools that are designed for learner directed and orchestrated activity. A blogger has the ability to determine subject matter, customize design, organize content, edit current and past work, and delete unwelcome comments from the blog space at will. Blogs can simultaneously be focused on the educational application, while still retaining the self-directed, internal focus of the owner. For example, the blog enhances social presence by exposing the learner's affective response through the self disclosure evident in the earlier, perhaps unrelated postings, the links and the graphics they chose to exhibit on their blogs.

Identity

Social presence, with its focus on freedom to express one's true nature, is dependent upon the learner being able to create a sense of their personal identity. The development of identity through blogging has a number of contributing factors including permanence, personal responsibility, control over content and writing for an infinite audience. Due to the persistent nature of blogs, learners get a chance to develop an online identity over time and that voice can be reviewed via the automatic archiving of previous posts. The blogger's "voice" will develop as he or she continues to practice the skill of writing and becomes more comfortable with the medium. Ownership of a publicly visible space like a blog encourages a strong personal connection with the material presented and a desire to create identity that simply cannot be replicated in a course discussion board which lacks personal space.

A blogger's identity will develop through continual interaction with online content and ideas. Hoem and Schwebs (2004) state that "being responsible for one's own blog implies that a person writes for himself, but is aware that he also publishes for a public audience... a blog is very well suited for mediating a role that a person – conscientiously or not – wants to play while facing other users." Students who blog are writing for an audience beyond that found in a typical course computer conference thus have a greater potential for the development of identity. Godwin-Jones (2003) observed students' writing in blogs and argued that "self-publishing encourages ownership and responsibility on the part of students, who may be more thoughtful (in content and structure) if they know they are writing for a real or infinite audience. This same degree of personal responsibility is lacking in discussion forums." One can dispute whether classmates in a formal course of study are in fact a 'real audience' or not. However, Cohen and Riel (1989) reported that the quality of their students' work improved when preparing it for distribution beyond their class.

Ferdig and Trammell (2004) discuss the public nature of educational blogging and argue that, "blogging opens up assignments beyond the teacher-student relationship, allowing the world to grade students and provide encouragement or feedback on their writings." The infinite potential for comment on their work can be at once intimidating and encouraging for learners and will have implications for how learners want to be perceived by this larger audience. Widening of the audience obviously affects the potential for developing identity but could also result in exchanges that may negatively impact learner confidence as their words are released to anyone on the open Net.

Safety

One cannot project one's 'real' self and establish social presence unless one has a feeling of safety, whereby users have reasonable expectation that their input will not be ridiculed or result in their prejudicial or unfair treatment. The closed conferencing environment is inherently a safer and more secure environment than the distributed (and often public) postings on a blog. Some blogging systems (notably elgg.net) allow selective release of posting such that they are only distributed or syndicated to selective audiences (such as those enrolled in a particular course or authenticated by a particular school logon system). In this case the blogging environment comes closer to providing the closed and secure context of the computer conference. For the most part, control of the security of the system has devolved to the individual student (they choose with whom to syndicate their responses). Leaving control in the hands of the blogger does increase the potential for loss of data through unsecured or improperly backed up blog environments and unauthorized distribution beyond the intended audience increases.

The ability to close comments on specific postings and to delete any unwanted comments can add a feeling of safeness within the blog environment. LeFever (2004), who calls this ability "pollution control", argues that the value of a blog then shifts from comments made to ideas presented. The blogger can actually free him or herself from potential criticism and, in the protective place created within the blog, has the opportunity to develop an online identity that projects their true personal or professional self.

Style

Connected to the development of an online identity or 'real' voice is the use of a specific writing and presentation style. Blogs can include everything from bulleted lists of links to fully polished, ready for publication, academic papers (or at least within the presentation constraints of HTML). It is up to the user to determine the best writing style or format depending on the information being presented. Blogs are personal but they are also intended to be read by an audience so the most readable blogs combine a variety of writing styles to retain reader interest (Gahran, 2004).

In computer conferences, the writing style usually depends on the assignment and tone dictated by the instructor. Conferencing space (like blog space) can however be used to present different genres of writing, such as reports, reviews, debates or stories for instructor or peer comment. Learners often use a more formal style and tone if the assignment is to post a review of a reading but a conversational style of writing is usually the norm as students post answers to direct questions and rebuttals on a course computer conference. Writers in a course conference will generally conform to the style, tone or format expected by a particular assignment while bloggers are generally more free to determine the overall style of their postings and their blog.

Beyond the written word, bloggers have a variety of options for customizing including changing colour schemes, adding images, sound files and links to other communication media, categorizing of blog postings and including blogrolls⁵. Farmer (2004) also notes the capacity for "photo", "audio" and "video" blogging to enhance social presence. This ability to develop personal style is evident in Stephanie Neilson's blog (<http://www.sumofmyparts.org/blog/>) where she has adopted the punctuation style of author E.E. Cummings as one of the ways to add to the unique nature of her blog. A look through the blogs of the "pioneer edbloggers" listed on Farmer's edublogs.org site, <http://educational.blogs.com/edbloggerpraxis/>, gives a glimpse of how some other notable educational bloggers have stylized their blogs.

Ownership of Space

Social presence is also constrained by ownership of space. When a learner registers for an online course that uses a LMS they are typically connected to course material including a course syllabus, activity calendar, reading material, and a discussion area organized by course content or structure. Learners do not own or occupy one specific area of the system. Learners contribute to computer conferences but discussion areas are closed upon completion of the section or topic and typically all discussion material is removed from the LMS at the end of the course. There is no easy means for storing or compiling data for reflection or revision over a sequence of courses or over the long term.

Learning through distributed connection with a learner blog is a very different experience. A learner names, designs and builds their blog. The learner is then free to use the blog as they wish. They may be directed to use the blog for course related activity but the very nature of blogging allows learners the freedom to take ownership of the blog space and use it to organize and write about any area of interest, both personal and education related. Bloggers have control over all content and can edit posts or delete comments at any time. Most blogging software allows the user to restrict access to blog postings so learners can leave work in progress in "private" postings and can, in this way, use their blogs as online editing spaces. This level of control over the usage of space is absent on discussion boards where a learner is simply following the rules and patterns of the institutionalized computer conferencing space.

Farmer argues for the importance of learner control as an essential element of "fostering appropriation of the technology for unintended uses" (Farmer, 2005). Squires (1999) originally coined this way of designing software as "incorporated subversion" and described this design as follows:

Rather than design with constraint in mind, design with freedom and flexibility in mind ... this emphasises the active and purposeful role of learners in configuring learning environments to resonate with their own needs, echoing the notions of learning with technology through "mindful engagement". (p.1)

This freedom easily translates into the capacity to develop and share social presence. At first glance, blogging seems to simply be an independent activity – a way to create a private, online diary or journal. However, given the freedom to control a blog's content, design, appearance, organization, and more, the user can turn what appears to be a simple journaling tool into a highly personal, dynamic and reflective online learning space.

Farmer (2004) also argues that the development of social presence is further limited in computer conferencing because the learner is uncertain to whom he or she is trying to project themselves to – just the instructor, a group, an individual student or just self reflection. However, it can be argued that this uncertainty of audience is an even greater factor in a blog composition. Uncertainty about the receiving audience impacts, in often exciting ways, the communication style and content of the writer. However, Farmer (2004) suggests that bloggers are "writing to their own area and context"; the blogger writes for him or herself, to a potentially infinite audience who is interested (hopefully) in similar topics. So, in essence, the blogger is forced and offered the opportunity to create their own mental image of their audience. In writing for this audience the blog author is developing what Hoem and Schwebs (2004) refer to as "media competence". This issue of effective distribution is also apparent in the development of cognitive presence to which we turn next.

Cognitive Presence

Our conception of cognitive presence grew from Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social construction of knowledge, Dewey's (1933) practical inquiry models and Garrison and Anderson's (2003) notions of phases of the development of critical thinking. From each of these theoretical constructs emerges a sense that cognitive presence needs to develop within a collaborative environment in which triggering ideas are introduced, explored through discussion, then integrated and finally resolved through application.

Triggering Cognition

The initial generation of topics is usually teacher directed in a computer conference and self-directed in a personal blog. However, when blogs are used in educational settings and topics are dictated to students in the same fashion as in a computer conference is there any difference in the cognitive process that follows? For the purpose of this discussion let us assume that blogs, even in educational settings, are being used in a fashion to allow for the emergence of their subversive nature (Farmer, 2005). Therefore, students may be asked to blog on a general topic or area of interest but are not directed to blog on specific questions or narrow teacher-defined topics.

Exploration

This element of cognitive presence depends on personal reflection as well as social exploration. A breakdown in the cognitive process can occur at this point regardless of the communication medium in use. Often learners respond to a topic without taking the time to

explore and develop, in a critical manner, ideas on the issue. Learners in a classroom discussion are typically expected to respond to topics based on their immediate knowledge. They learn through the information exchange process but the discussion is typically not influenced by sources external to the classroom. If learners have not kept up with course readings or activities, classroom discussions can break down or lack effectiveness. However, the asynchronous nature of communication in discussion boards and blogs allows learners the opportunity to explore a topic before responding, potentially leading to a more complex level of discussion. Learners who take time for reading (Richardson, 2004) and reflection before writing will probably contribute well informed, interesting and readable posts.

Blogs are implicitly tools for reflection and journaling. Unlike computer conferencing posts, there is no need to start with the final product in mind when posting to a blog. Learners can start with initial ideas that can be edited or added to over time or entirely new posts on the topic can be initiated at any point. There is an expectation in course conferences that students have done their reflective work offline and that postings to a discussion board represent the learner's formal understanding of the topic. Not only does this impact how blogs and discussion board postings are written but it also impacts how they are read.

Many educational blogging researchers have indicated that the ability to use blogs as both writing and reading tools could have a transformational effect on learners. Will Richardson (2004, in Downes, 2004) asks the question, "Could blogging be the needle that sews together what is now a lot of learning in isolation with no real connection among the disciplines?" and suggests that blogging has the potential to teach learners "how" to learn. Stephen Downes argues that "despite obvious appearances, blogging isn't really about writing at all; that's just the end point of the process, the outcome that occurs more or less naturally if everything else has been done right. Blogging is about, first, reading. But more important, it is about reading what is of interest to you: your culture, your community, your ideas" (Downes, 2004).

Farmer (2004) indicates that "access to experts and other professionals beyond the boundaries of the classroom environment has been perceived as one of the most valuable aspects of the blog publishing activity." The process of reading and commenting, and in turn writing and receiving feedback, is essential for social exploration. It is in this capacity to organize and display feedback that conferencing is yet superior to blogging. The technical abilities of blogging software to support discussion, such as RSS, trackback and pingback, offer rudimentary support for interaction, but it is currently more difficult to track, sort, query and aggregate postings distributed across a large number of independent blog sites than those posted in the confined technical space of a single threaded discussion system. However, we expect developments in this field as automated and semantically based tagging and aggregation tools are developed and implemented.

Integration

Once learners have had opportunity to investigate and reflect on a topic they are ready to

construct meaning from new ideas in a process that continually involves reflection and interaction. In formal education contexts, some form of teaching presence is critical for encouraging and modeling this critical thinking process. Teaching presence takes a more traditional form in computer conferences where instructors and fellow students have the ability to question, comment and inform learners. In blogs, teacher presence is much less tangible since focus of individual postings may diffuse beyond the topics instigated by the teacher and the challenge of effective aggregation may mean that not all students are following and reading teacher posts and comments to the posts of others. However, blogs are platforms where learners have the possibility of interacting with peers, teachers, researchers, significant outsiders on a level that goes beyond one topic or one course. In his conference paper, "Weblogs and Discourse", Wrede (2003) claims that blogs promote discourse while online conferencing systems encourage discussion. In differentiating between the two, Wrede (2003) describes discourse as being about making connections between ideas, people and communities, possibly using several media over time that continues until participation stops and describes discussion as an instance of debate or dialogue on a topic.

Farmer observes this difference as well and describes how the level of discourse found in some blogs fits into the culture of academic writing:

Certain research (Herring et al. 2004) across the blogging spectrum has indicated that there is a possibility that weblogs encourage significantly more in-depth and extended writing than communication by email or through discussion board environments and yet less extensive than more formal modes of publication, producing in an academic sense a kind of discourse somewhere between the conversational and the article. (Farmer, 2004)

Blogs not only have the potential for high levels of external communication but also "offer a way to engage in a discursive exchange with the author's self (intrapersonal conversation)" (Wrede, 2003). A blog needs to be treated as an active participant in the discursive process. Wrede (2003) argues that, without continual, consistent attention a blog loses its dynamic nature and takes on characteristics of a regular Web site. In essence, blogging works when a blog is 'fed' through reading, writing and making connections to information, individuals and groups throughout the blogosphere and beyond.

Mejias (2006), in a blog posting entitled "The Blog as Dissertation Literature Review?", discusses the potential for blogs as tools of discourse and for academic research. He proposes that chronological sequencing, categorizing of postings, ease of publishing and editing options make blogs technically sound research tools. Mejias (2006) also highlights the pedagogical potential that blogs possess for enabling collaboration with a wider audience throughout the process of developing a literature review. In a related way Anderson (2006) blogs about the use of a blog as a precursor and stimulation to more formal academic publications in his post 'Blogging as an Academic Publication'. In these cases, both the blog's writer and readership could be connected to and influence the research process as it develops.

Richardson (2004) describes blogging as a genre of writing itself which have "great value in terms of developing all sorts of critical thinking skills, writing skills and information literacy among other things." The elements of this new genre as he sees it include the ability to "a) reflect on what they are writing and thinking as they write and think it, b) carry on writing about a topic over a sustained period of time, maybe a lifetime, and c) engage readers and audience in a sustained conversation that then leads to further writing and thinking." (Richardson, 2004) The potential that blogs offer for persistent activity and connectivity clearly distinguishes them from course discussion boards.

Resolution

One of the surprises uncovered in our studies of the *Community of Inquiry* model with regards to computer conferencing was the relative low rate of the final, application phase of critical thinking (Garrison et al., 2001). Kanuka and Anderson (1998) attribute this in part to "the democratic nature of the medium and the way it is used" and to the "sharing and comparing nature" of most computer conference exchanges. The blogging environment is situated outside of the somewhat artificial environment of formal learning. Thus, bloggers can be expected to focus more on actual application and testing of ideas developed through discourse and on real world problems and applications. Further, since contributions may be made in a more public context, they are more likely to be read and tested by others who are removed from this artificial domain of higher education.

Computer conferences are now commonly situated as a component of a larger learning management systems and the Web. Thus, they are connected with other sources of knowledge beyond the discussion board. With modern Web based conferencing systems, as with blogs, students can easily incorporate links and references to such external resources, thus encouraging readers to move beyond the confines of a closed discussion. However, discussions on conference boards are still typically confined to other enrolled students. Since knowledge construction has never been confined to formal classrooms this external potentiality adds to the possible development of cognitive presence in blogging contexts. This of course raises issue of privacy and of the value (or not) of safe spaces outside of the purview of the open Net. Further empirical research is needed to compare the development of cognitive presence in blogs as compared to computer conferences, but the critical application component may well be enhanced in the more public context of the blogosphere.

Teaching Presence

What perhaps most vividly differentiates formal education from self directed learning (besides tuition fees!) is teaching presence. Note that from our earliest use of the term we spoke of teaching presence – not teacher presence – thereby acknowledging that teaching presence can and often does, especially in graduate classes, emerge from students as well as teachers. Teaching presence indicators include activities related to design and organization, facilitating discourse and direct instruction.

Blogs are native to the Internet and thus are inherently linked to learning objects, syndicated postings from mass media outlets, and distributed databases. Computer conferencing emerged in an era that predates the Web, thus the tendency is for use that is separated from Internet resources and focuses on discussion of readings, or activities that take place off-line or behind passwords. Second, course design tends to use only those set of tools that are contained behind the password of closed Learning Management Systems (LMS) systems. This means that the design of LMS based courses tend to exclude use of emerging Internet tools such as collaborative bookmarking, FOAF, podcasting, synchronous web conferencing and other social software and external database systems. Thus, the design and organization component of teaching presence is generally more restricted when LMS based conferencing systems are used as opposed to blogging tools.

The current generation of blogging tools were not designed for closed class courses and thus the component of teaching presence referenced as facilitating discourse is in some ways more challenging in a blog environment. Richardson (2004) notes how a teacher can establish a page in which the syndicated feeds from each of the registered students in a class can be viewed. However, threading by distinct topic within these feeds is not permitted and thus the discussion may be more challenging to follow. We have also found that RSS aggregation works for displaying blog posts in chronological order, but does not usually draw the reader's attention to new comments added to these postings. Some LMS systems also offer tracking services that allow a teacher to see when messages have been read by respondents. This is not possible in most of today's blogging environments.

Finally teaching presence requires direct instruction whereby the subject matter knowledge of the teacher is shared with the students. The form of this instruction may be didactic postings, multimedia presentations or more Socratic questioning. In all cases the teacher's input is often necessary for feedback and for motivation to look deeper into tentative solutions and applications of knowledge. In formal education learners are required to read and often to comment on blog posting of other students in a class, often using RSS and other syndication tools. This form of reciprocal syndication is more complicated than normal default membership in conferences that are established and managed by the teacher in a standard LMS system. The posting of instructor interpretations, guidelines, feedback and insights to the content is relatively similar in either blog or conferencing contexts. However, teacher presence may be more publicly exposed and have longer persistence in an open blogging context, possibly giving rise to copyright infringement concerns.

Conclusion

In an editorial on technology and lifelong learning, Koper (2004) highlights factors that should be driving the development of educational technologies. Koper (2004) cites the need for tools that facilitate lifelong learning – learning that creates a network of knowledge that entwines work, formal education or personal interests and that focuses on learning how to learn and the application of that learning over a lifetime. As noted in our discussion, blogs

have many pedagogical and technological aspects that make them suitable tools for this type of lifelong learning. Lifelong learners could blog to record thoughts and experiences over time, to build and maintain connection with peers, to compile resources and to create a body of knowledge representative of personal growth and achievement. Whether blogs are incorporated into formal courses, included on the periphery of a course of study or used as purely individualistic tools for personal learning, bloggers will reap the benefits of their use over time - becoming better readers, writers and better self-directed learners. To build on the sentiments of Downes (2004) and Richardson (2004), effectively using blogs to reinforce these skills will involve learners in an experience that can be drawn upon over their lifetime.

With regard to the comparison of blogs with discussion boards, it may be time to move past the debate – each have specific strengths and it is possible that the best of both could be combined into a very effective learning tool⁶. The lifelong learning potential inherent in blogs makes them attractive to education professionals. If learners have an opportunity to experiment with blogging they can make a decision about its potential for future learning. Some will be motivated by the experience of blogging and adopt it as part of their learning landscape while others will be motivated to move on to other tools that are more in line with their learning styles.

Notes

[1] Blog Herald Blog Count February 2006 <http://www.blogherald.com/2006/02/02/the-blog-herald-blog-count-february-2006-200-million-blogs-in-existence/>

² “RSS: A Quick Start Guide for Educators” by Will Richardson available at <http://static.hcrhs.k12.nj.us/gems/tech/RSSFAQ4.pdf>

³ Search titles on these topics at amazon.com

⁴ See communitiesofinquiry.com for links to various contributions to this work

⁵ A blogroll is a collection of links to other weblogs. (Wikipedia definition)

⁶ Blogging capabilities are currently being added to many LMS's and group blogging tools have the potential to include threaded discussion options. However, the implications of these developments go beyond the scope of this paper.

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