

In-service teachers' learning in weblog-based learning environment: A case study

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This study sets to investigate the learning of 25 in-service teachers through their self-created Weblogs. The blog serve to document their reflections in a professional development course. The learning design provides teachers' initial exploration of instructor's Weblog and podcast, their designing of individual Weblogs to record on-going reflections and linking to their peers' Weblogs for collaborative learning during the course. They are required to read and comment on each other's reflections daily. The teachers' reflections were analysed qualitatively. Findings have shown the teachers' articulation of technological, pedagogical and social affordances of Weblog as an open learning space. They also identified personal experiences and regular updates of resources were characteristics found in quality learning Weblogs in this case study.

Keywords: In-service teachers, learning environment, reflection logs, Weblog

Introduction

Weblog represents a dynamic learning space that supports learners' independent, social networking, learning from progressive journal entries and ownership of learning (Richardson 2004; Martindale & Wiley, 2005; Chan & Ridgway 2006; Cheung & Kwok 2006; Loving, Schroeder, Kang, Shimek, & Herbert, 2007; Plaisted & Irvine, 2008). Weblogs have also been found to be appropriate for teachers' professional development (Anderson, 2007). This study investigates the teachers' experiential learning in this professional development course with the following research questions: (1) What did the teachers learn about the affordances of Weblog-based learning environment? (2) What did the teachers identify as characteristics of quality Weblogs for learning?

A learning design refers to a method to describe the teaching and learning process (Cameron, 2007). The learning design in this study focuses on teachers' learning in a Weblog learning environment. The first part was content learning in the online mode and the second was the face-to-face mode in class and writing individual reflection with blog. The participants logged on to the instructor's blog to access the course material (the instructor's podcast and references). They gave individual comments (to the instructor's blog) after viewing the podcast. They recorded their reflections in their own blog. They also experienced face-to-face learning where they were engaged in the use of Weblog as learning tool to reflect on daily sessions, share daily readings and analyse a classroom case daily in groups.

Method

The sample consisted of one class of 25 teachers (6 male and 19 female teachers) from 25 secondary schools. In comparison of blogging experience, the male teachers had about 30% while the female teachers showed only 10%. The instructor tracked the teachers' on-going reflections with the assistance of blog aggregators or RSS feeds. The teachers' data were collected throughout the course. The first source was obtained from their individual Weblogs based on their activities and on-going reflections. The second source was based on the teachers' end of course reflection. The content analysis was done by constantly reading the teachers' entries and searching for emerging key areas, the coding of the content based on the key areas emerged after two months.

Findings

These teachers' understanding of technological affordance of Weblog environment could be seen from their use of blogs successfully for reflection and sharing of resources. They used features such as hyperlinks, photographs and video to make their reflections come alive. Pedagogically, they found that Weblogs to be a different learning environment from the face-to-face learning environment. They found that Weblog allows the individuals to document the learning points and thoughts in the virtual learning space for collaboration among peers and building a learning community. Socially, the teachers found that Weblogs enable them to share resources and stay connected with the bloggers. The teachers regarded quality Weblogs for learning to detail the

bloggers' ideas and thinking processes. Timeliness of information was also highlighted as important feature in learning blogs. These teachers' experiential learning had helped them articulate their own understanding of affordances of Weblogs for learning. Two characteristics reported by teachers as 'must have' in quality Weblog for learning (e.g. personal experiences and timeliness of information) were not comprehensive because of their limited experience and time to explore more Weblogs for learning beyond the course.

Conclusion

This is the first learning design situated in in-service teachers' professional development using Weblog (as a learning tool) to support their writing of reflections. This experiential learning was anchored on teachers' inquiry on affordances of Weblogs and articulation of characteristics of Weblogs for learning. Its design aims to connect their exploration in an encouraging environment with peers and the instructor as facilitator to interact with so that they would consider possible options in designing more flexible learning tasks and resources for their current blended classrooms. This experiential learning also served as a launch pad for teachers to re-design their pedagogical approaches to be a more learner-centred and socially constructed learning environment in schools.

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