Blogs: Supporting Staff Development

Rosanne Birney, Dr. Mícheál o hÉigeartaigh, Mary Barry

Department of Computing, Mathematics and Physics, Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland

Introduction

This poster aims to describe the uses of blogs from a staff development perspective and also to demonstrate how students can use blogs to fulfil learning outcomes. A variety of educational blogging activities that can be undertaken by staff and students are described in terms of the three main uses of blogs; Read, Write and Interact (Sandars, 2006). Firstly, there is a brief overview of the literature on educational blogging.

Background

A blog (or web log) is a website that contains dated entries (or posts) in reverse chronological order. Blogs are published using 'blogging' software. Blogs are often part of a larger community, as they link together using features such as permalinks, trackbacks and commenting. Blog authors often make content available to their readers using RSS (Rich Site Summary) technology, which allows readers to receive notification of blog updates using an 'aggregator'.

In education, blogs are useful as a tool for both collaboration and reflection. Ferdig and Trammell (2004) suggest that blogs provide a space for students to reflect on their learning. They also propose that blogs can increase student interest, and provide students with ownership of their learning. A study at Brisbane Graduate School of Business (Queensland University of Technology) concluded that blogs provide students with a high level of autonomy while also providing an opportunity for interaction with peers (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Another recent study found that blogs can be used to support collaborative learning (Du & Wagner, 2005). Sandars (2006) summarised the three main uses of blogs as 'Read, Write and Interact'. The staff and student activities seen in Figure 1 are based on these three main uses of blogs.

Learning Outcomes

In terms of the Bologna process, blogs can be useful in allowing students to demonstrate that they have met learning outcomes. Kennedy (2007) defines learning outcomes as "statements of what a student should know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning". Any learning outcome that can be expressed in written form can be articulated in a blog. The benefit of using a blog to demonstrate fulfillment of learning outcomes, rather than 'offline' forms of writing, is that blogs allow for regular, formative feedback from lecturers and/or peer assessors (Wagner, 2003).

Walsh (2008) discusses the difference between intended learning outcomes (which are linked to credit and will be assessed) and emergent learning outcomes (which are linked to personal learning). Blogs which are used as reflective journals may be particularly well placed to demonstrate emergent learning outcomes.

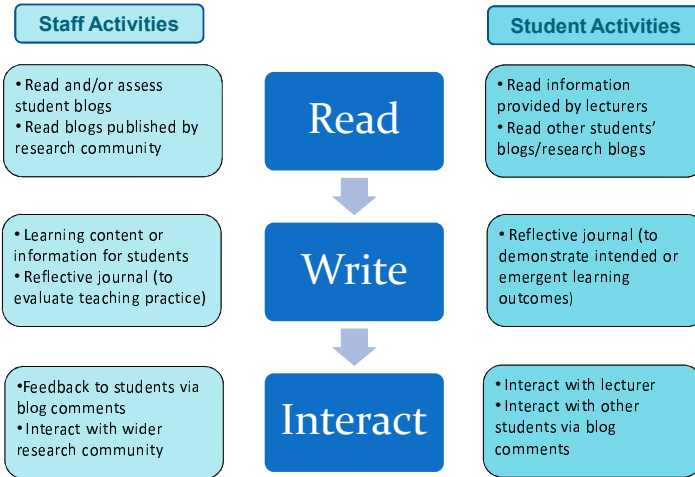## Educational Blogging Activities

Figure 1: Educational Blogging Activities (based on the main uses of blogs described by Sandars, 2006)

Blogs and Staff Development

In addition to being used by students as a learning tool, blogs are frequently used by staff for personal and professional development. In the field of education teachers or lecturers often use blogs to reflect on their teaching practice (West, Wright & Graham, 2005). Blogs can also be used by staff to provide information to students (e.g. course updates) or to provide structured learning content. In addition, blogs can afford staff the opportunity to interact with a wider research community.

A number of staff development workshops on the educational uses of blogs have been conducted at WIT. These workshops have encouraged staff to use blogs for their own personal and professional development and many staff have, in turn, encouraged students to use blogs as part of their coursework.

Conclusions

Many studies have examined the use of blogs in education with a focus on how blogs can be utilised by students. However, blogs are also a useful tool for staff development, allowing staff to reflect on their teaching practice and interact with a wider research community as well as providing an effective means of interaction with students.

Blogs can promote a culture of reflective teaching and learning throughout an institution and also encourage more frequent interaction between students, staff and a wider research community. Staff development workshops on Educational Blogging at Waterford Institute of Technology have been successful at implementing the use of blogs at both the staff and student level.

References

Du, H. S. & Wagner, C. (2005), 'Learning with Weblogs: An empirical investigation', in 38th International Conference on System Sciences, Hawaii.

Ferdig, R. E. & Trammell, K. D. (2004), 'Content Delivery in the 'Blogosphere'', *Technological Horizons in Education Journal*. Iss. February. Available from: http://thejournal.com/articles/16626 [26th May 2006].

Kennedy, D. (2007), *Writing and Using Learning Outcomes: A Practical Guide*. Cork, University College Cork.

Sandars, J. (2006), 'Twelve tips for using blogs and wikis in medical education', *Medical Teacher*. Vol. 28. Iss. 8. pp. 680-682.

Wagner, C. (2003), 'Put another B(log) on the Wire: Publishing Learning Logs as Weblogs', *Journal of Information Systems Education*. Vol. 14. Iss. 2. pp. 131-132.

Walsh, L. (2008), 'Learning Outcomes & Staff Development', in Bologna Stakeholder Conference, Edinburgh.

West, R. E., Wright, G. A. & Graham, C. R. (2005), 'Blogs, Wikis and Aggregators: A New Vocabulary for Promoting Reflection and Collaboration in a Preservice Technology Integration Course', in Society for Instructional Technology and Education, Chesapeake: VA.

Williams, J. B. & Jacobs, J. (2004), 'Exploring the use of blogs as learning spaces in the higher education sector', *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*. Vol. 20. Iss. 2. pp. 232-247.

For further information

For more information about this research please contact:

Rosanne Birney, WeLearnT Research Centre,
Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland.
Email Address: rbirney@wit.ie