

Graduate Students' Lived Experiences and Perceptions of Using Weblogs for Reflective Learning

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ABSTRACT

As the world grows more connected and turns into a global village, technologically based practices become more embedded into the social fabric of society enabling greater interaction among individuals and groups. This increased role of technology has led scholars to seek to understand the role it can play in education (Churchill 2009; Ducate & Lomicka 2008; Goldman, Cohen & Sheahan 2008). Various technological practices have thus been used to enhance instructional strategies at all levels of learning. One such technological practice is personal web publishing which has emerged as a popular tool of journaling.

Web publishing is increasingly becoming an integral part of supporting learning in many higher education settings (Andergassen, Behringer, Finlay, Gorra & Moore, 2009). In particular, the weblog is steadily gaining acceptance as a viable tool in the learning process. It is used in various ways including as a forum for reflection where students articulate ideas, analyze and make judgments about aspects of their learning, post commentaries and express opinions on a web page.

Due to this important role, scholars have used diverse theoretical models to explore the impact of blogging on the learning process (Sakovic & McNaught, 2013). Notwithstanding the theoretical model used, the outcome has shown evidence of the usefulness of blogging especially from a teaching perspective. Sakovic and McNaught (2013) however point out that what is missing from the academic discourse on this topic is the learner experiences and perspective of its usefulness. In agreement, Xie and Sharma (2005) reveal that there is very little reported exploration into learners' individual experiences and perceptions with the use of Weblogs for reflection. Indeed, I have not come across studies of this nature focusing on the context of my study. This means that while researchers increasingly become convinced of the usefulness of blogging, it is not clear whether the learners share in this conviction. It is therefore extremely important to understand the students' feelings towards using Weblogs so as to make adjustments towards more appropriate uses to support individual reflection and group discourse.

This study offers insights to researchers and instructors about learner experiences and perceptions of the use of weblogs for reflection particularly in the context of the study and lead to suggestions for its use. It has the potential to influence how weblogs are used in similar contexts. The study serves as a springboard for subsequent studies with learners of different educational levels, economic background and cultures as these are some of the factors that lead to disparity in perceptions and experiences. Since literature on individual perceptions and experiences with the use of Weblog is limited (Xie & Sharma, 2005; Sakovic & McNaught, 2013), the findings also contribute to this body of knowledge. It is in light of this that I examine graduate students' lived experiences and perceptions of the practice of course-specific reflection on weblogs.

Research Questions

To explore the learners' experiences and perceptions, the study focused on their approach to reflecting on the weblogs, their perceptions of its utility in their learning and its benefits and barriers. The following questions were used to guide the study and get this information:

1. How do Samaritan University graduate students engaged in course specific weblogging describe their experiences of reflecting on the weblogs?
2. What meaning do the students attach to those descriptions?

Subsidiary Questions

- a) How do students reflect on Weblogs?
- b) What are the experiences that supported or hindered reflecting on weblogs?
- c) How important do students regard reflecting on weblogs?

Definition of Key Terms

1. Web publishing: process of publishing original content and posting to webpages online.
2. Weblog: a personal web page written in reverse chronological order and maintained through software that helps its management
3. Reflection: purposeful thinking, recording and revisiting with the intent of refining to achieve a certain goal
4. Perspective: Point of view, beliefs, opinions, perception or the position of the learners on the various aspects of CF.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Scholars have used varied theoretical models to explore the influence of Weblogs on the teaching learning process. These range from social constructivism, connectivism and a community of inquiry framework among others (Sakovic & McNaught, 2013). Most of these studies have demonstrated evidence that blogging does have positive outcomes for teaching and learning. The studies have reported outcomes such as greater interaction among students (Neo & Neo, 2010); construction of knowledge, self-confidence and improving writing skills (Sakovic & McNaught, 2013) as well as a feeling of ownership for the learning process (Martin & Noakes, 2012). However, few of the studies focus on the individual experiences of the learners who use these weblogs.

In their article on weblogs in higher education, Andergassen et al., (2009) observe that many studies have adopted a constructivist view on learning, and described weblogs as supporting active knowledge construction, incremental improvement, self-directed learning, and situated knowledge construction. Others see today's learning as gaining the competence to form connections under the term 'connectivism' where learning is described as collecting knowledge through collecting people (Siemens, 2004). With the constructivist view of learning as the underpinning theory, Andergassen et al., (2009) conduct an empirical study to gain insights into the decision-making process of students when deciding whether to keep a blog or not. Understanding students' motivations for (not) blogging relates to the present study on learner experiences and perceptions but is just a small aspect leaving out aspects such as how the learners approach blogging.

Ayao-ao (2014) also cites the theory of social constructivism and the concept of scaffolding as important considerations in his attempt to identify emerging issues in the utilization of weblogs in higher education classrooms. Powell and Kalina (2009) elaborate that social constructivism allows learners to construct ideas through interaction with the teacher and other students and that scaffolding, on the other hand, is an assisted learning process that supports Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, or getting to the next level of understanding, of each student with the assistance of teachers, peers and other adults. The study reveals issues such as limited time and access to computer and internet; tedious preparation, maintenance and management of blogs; technological difficulties of students; low level of interaction among students; digression in comments posted; and unfamiliarity with online teaching. Although the study is not from the perspective or experience of the learner, the issues that emerge relate to learner experiences thus the importance of this article for the current study.

In the study supporting learning through self-reflection blogs, Sakovic & McNaught (2013) explore how student written blogs support student learning through student perspective. The results show blogs supporting learning through providing real world connections, aiding review of what is studied and fostering interaction among other things. Although the study covers student perspectives, it uses a voluntary survey to collect data with questions to be answered on a five point likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. This denies the study the probing nature of interviews that would allow sufficient information for a thick description of learner perspectives. The article also does not explicitly bring out the theory that underpins it.

Closely related in design but with a clear theoretical underpinning is Yang's (2009) study on using blogs to enhance critical reflection and community practice. The data consisted of blog postings, group reflective dialogues and an end of semester questionnaire to gather opinion on the blogging experience. Like the survey questions in the study discussed earlier, the questionnaire might be limiting and may not provide sufficient information to describe the learner experiences. In addition, no themes outside the scope of the questions may emerge easily. The study is based on the critical reflection and community of practice theories.

The empirical investigation on the impact of weblog use on individual learning in a university environment (Du & Wagner, 2005) on the other hand, lays its theoretical foundation in constructivism which focuses on learning as a process of constructing knowledge rather than being transmitted through instruction. The focus of the study is however not on learner experiences but on variables such as blog, exam and coursework performance. The study finds weblog performance a significant predictor of learning outcome, more than the traditional coursework.

In moving away from the individual to the institution, Lujan-Mora and Juana-Espinosa (2007) look at the benefits and barriers of the use of weblogs in higher education with an aim of contributing to the functionality of weblogs as a tool for enhancing the teaching and learning process. The paper classifies the uses of weblogs according to user perspectives, citing creating of connections between students with diverse opinions and interests as one major benefit of the weblogs. This study does not explicitly reveal the underpinning theory.

The positive outcome of use of weblogs that we see in the studies indicates that learning is best accomplished by engaging students in constructing knowledge and shared understanding through interaction. Constructing ideas through interaction with the teacher and other students corresponds with reflecting on weblogs as it involves constructing and exchanging of ideas on blogs. This represents a shift from instruction focused learning to a learner centered style, which is the hallmark of the social constructivist learning model. This study is thus informed by the theory of social constructivism which from the studies discussed, also seems to be the dominant theoretical foundation for studies in this field. This is true to Ravitch and Riggan's (2016) observation that the theories that comprise a theoretical framework are usually found in scholarly literature.

Social constructivism is a dimension of the constructivism learning theory which focuses on learning as a process of constructing knowledge by an individual (Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1995). Rather than being transmitted through instruction, knowledge is constructed or created by learners as they build their own cognitive structures or mental models (Jonassen, 1993). Social constructivism then adds the aspect of collaborative learning that emphasizes sharing and interaction (Slavin, 1990). Learning emerges through the construction of shared understanding and through interaction with others (Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1995). As suggested by Alavi, (1994), collaborative activities such as blogging enhance learning by allowing individuals to exercise, verify, solidify, and improve their mental models through interacting with others and sharing their thoughts, ideas, and information. The theory of social constructivism is thus an important consideration for this study.

METHODS

In seeking to understand graduate students lived experiences and perspectives on the use of weblogs for reflection, a phenomenological approach was selected as the most useful research approach for this study. This was in line with Marshall and Rossman's (2016) idea that the phenomenological approach seeks to explore, describe and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience. The study therefore sought to explore the

students' approach to reflecting on the weblogs, their perceptions of its usefulness in their learning and its benefits and barriers.

To gather this information, the study adopted an in-depth interview protocol with several open-ended questions. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) observe, "interviews are used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (p. 103). The interview method was therefore preferred since the study hoped to elicit the learners' experiences and perspectives first hand, and describe them to understand how they view the use of weblogs for reflection. For the purposes of data triangulation which strengthens the reliability and validity of an investigation (Creswell, 2009), three interviews were conducted to allow deeper probe into the phenomenon under investigation. The use of multiple sources was meant to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon as observed by Denzin and Lincoln (2007); enable building a logical justification for the themes that emerge in the study (Creswell, 2009) and enhance the rigor of the study. It would also help ensure that biases emanating from one source are overcome by the other.

I conducted one on one semi structured interviews with each of three graduate students. Each of the interviews lasted between 30 – 45 minutes. I used initial open ended questions such as about the participants' interests, hobbies, and aspirations to establish rapport in line with Bogdan and Biklen (2007) assertion that most interviews begin with small talk to search for common ground and develop rapport. The semi structured interviews enabled me to probe for meaning and clarify questions for respondents, for instance by rephrasing some, to pursue emerging issues and get relevant data. Indeed, Cohen, Manion & Morrison, (2000) assert that a semi structured interview "... enables participants to raise and pursue issues and matters that might not have been included in a pre-devised schedule" (p.147).

I audio recorded the interview after seeking the consent of the participants to capture the full script and to free me to reflect on the course of the interview and plan for the next line of questioning, as well as to take reflective notes and comments (Henn, Weinstein & Foard, 2009). I used a semi-structured interview guide which allowed for pre-determined and spontaneous questions to enable me collect only relevant data in a systematic and focused manner. The questions revolved around the students' approach to reflecting on Weblogs, their experiences and feelings about using Weblogs and their perceptions of its importance in their learning.

The research site was a private research university in Northern Eastern United States with an enrollment of over 20,000 students including over 6000 graduate students. Other than the fact that there are no studies on this phenomenon that have been carried out in this site, I also settled on this institution due to the convenience of accessibility.

Study participants were three graduate students, two females and one male. The participants were chosen based on criterion sampling (Xie and Sharma, 2005) which involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion. In this case, the participants had to have taken at least one graduate level course requiring the maintenance of Weblogs as a course requirement. The participants were Marcelle, a PhD student in teaching and curriculum, Jon, a masters student in special education and Kristen, a masters student in the Instructional Design and Development program. All the names are pseudonyms.

Analysis of Data

As advised by Wiersma & Jurs (2009), the data analysis process was ongoing and ran concurrently with the progressive collection of data and interpretation. In this case, I reviewed the interview data shortly after recording in order for me as researcher to familiarize with it. This was quite helpful as it enabled me to restructure subsequent interviews by considering emerging issues related to the study. During this process, I transcribed all the three interviews verbatim from audio data to produce textual records of everything that each of the participants said.

I then read through the interview transcripts to make sense of them while making notes and markings on the margin of the text. I went through the text again interpreting what was said and assigning code labels to segments.

An analysis of the labels enabled me to see the emerging patterns and group related code labels together. I then aggregated them into descriptions to form preliminary categories of students' lived experiences of using Weblogs, which I then organized into themes. I then interpreted the themes with reference to literature to make meaning. The codes served as evidence for the themes and the process led to a detailed description in narrative form discussing the relationships between the themes. It is from these themes that I was able to draw an interpretation or meaning from the data in relation to my research questions. Throughout the process, I constantly reflected and wrote memos to help me identify and make a follow up on emerging issues relevant to my study.

Trustworthiness and Validity

High standards and rigor were maintained throughout the study for example through recording the data as accurately as possible. To triangulate the data I used three participants to corroborate the findings in line with Gay, Mills and Airasian's (2006) suggestion that triangulation of data sources increases the rigor and credibility of a study.

To ensure accuracy and credibility of the data collected from these sources, I personally transcribed the audio recorded data. In addition, I conducted member checks with the participants by going through my records with them to ascertain that I had a true record of what they had said. This helped establish the accuracy of data before reporting and ensured the validity of the study.

In line with Creswell's (2009) contention that when a detailed description of the research process is given the results become more realistic and richer, I gave a thick, rich description of the findings and a detailed description of each process of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Since a researcher deals directly with and at times interferes in peoples' lives, ethical issues are highly important and need serious consideration (Creswell, 2009). I therefore endeavored to be ethical throughout my research activities. To this end, I sought clearance from the Institutional Review Board of Syracuse University (See Appendix D) to conduct the study. All the participants signed informed consent forms (See Appendix E) indicating acceptance to participate in the study.

For confidentiality and to ensure anonymity, I used pseudonyms to protect the names of the research site and the participants. To reciprocate for the participants' role in the study, I intend to share the findings of the study with some of the participants who made the request.

The methods section has presented the data collection methods, sampling and data analysis procedures as well as the steps followed to ensure trustworthiness and the ethical considerations. The following is a discussion of the findings that emanated from the analysis of the data collected.

FINDINGS

The discussion of the findings on graduate students lived experiences on the use of weblogs for reflection proceeds under several themes that emanated from the data collected in the study. Generally, the themes bestride both positive and negative experiences with the positive experiences being prominent. The themes relate to how weblogs supported thinking and learning and how they created a sense of community. They also relate to the absence of a structure for blogging procedures as well as how blogging lacks privacy and could have issues of security. The following is an in-depth discussion of some of these themes.

Weblogging Supported Thinking and Learning

The first theme is related to participants' perceptions of the utility of Weblogs in supporting thinking and learning. All the participants felt that Weblogs supported their learning in many ways including providing access

to different viewpoints; providing space for organizing and synthesizing thinking; and encouraging careful analysis of content.

Access to different viewpoints

The participants felt that weblogs provided access to different viewpoints, which was considered important in supporting learning. They felt that visiting other students' weblogs was useful in providing a wide range of perspectives and information on the topic of discussion as well as helping one direct their own thinking. Kristen, a female Instructional Design Masters student admitted that, "sometimes it was necessary for me to look at other people's blogs before I would form my own response just to see what they thought of the article and to figure out how I should respond." This means that she would visit other students' blogs to get some ideas on how to approach an article. In this case therefore, Kristen used the blog to support her thinking and develop ideas for reflection as the theme suggests. The blog provided her with different viewpoints of the discussion and she was able to develop her own thinking. Access to different viewpoints is a beneficial experience of blogging that encourages students like Kristen to engage in weblogging, thus a response to the sub question on the experiences that support weblogging.

The weblogs also enabled the students to link the course content to their own experiences as well as other learners' experiences. Jon, a male Special Education Masters student, in proclaiming that the diverse perspectives were important in developing in-depth view of the content put it thus:

...having others offer another point of view... you may find more ideas richer than your own thoughts through reading what others have to say. It might reveal ideas you had never thought of prior to that. So it gives you new ideas, and different thoughts in your mind and deepens your understanding.

Jon's statement suggests that access to other students' blogs provides a broader perspective of an issue as one can get a lot of information on the issue from the many blogs that they visit. This resonates with Lujan-Mora and Juana-Espinosa's (2007) idea that weblogs help create connections between students with diverse opinions and interests, thus encouraging critical thinking and teaching the value of respect towards other students' points of view.

Marcelle too, a female PhD student in Teaching and Curriculum, felt that the diversity of perspectives was helpful in furthering their thinking. She says that other students' views and experiences challenged some views she had and she had to often change her line of thought. This means that she would look at a discussion from one perspective but later discover other aspects she had not thought of after visiting other students' weblogs, thus enrich her thinking.

Kristen on her part once again felt that other students' perspectives allowed her a general picture of the topic: "I was excited by the fact that I could see different perspectives at the same time, which was kind of eye opening...I think the different ideas are helpful to have a general idea of the topic." Here, Kristen suggests that by offering many different viewpoints, weblogs offered a forum for consolidating ideas after considering different viewpoints to promote learning.

Clearly, the participants seem to lay a lot of premium on the ability of weblogs to provide many perspectives to a discussion and thus support learning. This means that the participants view weblogs as useful for their learning.

Providing space for organizing and synthesizing thinking

The participants also perceived that Weblogs helped their thinking and learning by acting as a space for organizing and synthesizing thinking. Marcelle and Kristen valued the presence of a structured space to organize different pieces of information and thus come up with an overall view of the ideas. Marcelle liked the utility of the weblog to organize her ideas and present the material. Indeed, she adds that, "I really appreciated the time that I had. Like for every blog or our responding to discussion questions we had like one week's time or something and I had the convenience of researching my responses and my answers." Marcelle means that unlike

in the face to face responses which were sometimes instant, for blogs she had the time to research and synthesize her thinking before organizing a response and in the process acquiring much more knowledge. Kristen likewise commented:

...as a part of my own study, I gain from so many different places. Like, I have to read a chapter, an article, and another article. They are isolated in their presentation, but the weblog kind of helps me to organize them into something that makes sense. The process I was going through I thought was exciting.

For Kristen, the blog offers a space for consolidating all the information she has gathered from different sources so as to make sense of it. Generally, the weblog features of linking, replying, and tracking, provide an organized structure that makes sharing knowledge and information easier (Lujan-Mora & Juana-Espinosa, 2007). By providing space for organizing and synthesizing thinking the weblog supports graduate students' thinking and learning.

Careful examination of content

The participants also felt that Weblog publishing encouraged careful examination of content. Participants were obliged to focus deeply on the reading materials provided for the course before reflecting on them on their blogs. Jon for example indicated that the requirement to write on Weblogs pushed him into more intense analysis of the articles that he had to read. Kristen concurred with Jon through her opinion that, "it encouraged us to think a lot deeper in what we were doing and reading." This means the students found themselves pushed to analyze their readings more keenly since they had to reflect about the readings on their blogs. Lujan-Mora and Juana-Espinosa (2007) rightly observe that discussions in weblogs promote higher levels of thinking, because people have to think before answering or posting anything.

The requirement to post on the Weblog therefore gave the students a reason for engaging in in-depth analysis of reading materials and content. Marcelle explained that writing for the Weblog made her more prone to evaluate content. She said, "I would want to know something more and would even take time to research further..." This clearly shows that the obligation to post something worthwhile that is worth reading on the weblog, motivates students to take the exercise seriously thus contributing to their thinking and learning.

In summary, participants appreciated the ability of Weblogs to support their thinking and learning. The three subthemes all point to blogs supporting student learning and thinking. Participants used the Weblogs to spontaneously archive reflections, chart their progress, and reflect on their growth. In addition, reading others' reflections challenged individual thinking. This is significant for the use of blogs in that it can provide space for synthesis of knowledge, increase learners' commitment to their learning by requiring them to make postings and providing access to different viewpoints to a discussion to widen their scope of thinking. All these portray experiences that support weblogging and why students consider weblogging important. However, Weblog usage also produced some negative experiences as described in the next theme.

Uncertainty about the Usage of Weblogs

The participants also expressed some negative feelings and disengagement regarding Weblog usage. Participants were mainly concerned about lack of guidance on format and frequency of Weblogging in some courses where weblogging was a component and concerns about privacy.

Lack of specific structure and guidance about Weblog usage

One of the participants' main concern was the unavailability of a specific structure and guidance about Weblog usage and practice from the instructor in some courses where weblogs were used. The participants felt that procedural and content guidelines for using the Weblogs were necessary for good use of weblogs but this was lacking in some courses where weblogs were used. Contrary Marcelle and Kristen's earlier view that the weblog provides a structured space for organizing thinking, the lack of a specific structure in some courses was

frustrating for them. Kristen for example finds it difficult to identify important topics for reflection. She says that,

for some courses there was no conclusive, this is what you have to do, I want you to write about this topic or tell me your thoughts on this in particular. It was so open that when you have no limitations, it's hard to figure out what you write, what should be public knowledge, and what you keep private, and what the instructor feels is meaningful as compared to what is nonsense. It was hard because there were no guidelines. So it was frustrating in that sense.

This means that there are classes where the use of weblog is a requirement but there are no clear instructions on what exactly is to be done. There is for example no prompt or reading to respond to, how often one is required to blog or respond to other students' blogs. Yet as Ayao-ao (2014) argues, clear and specific prompts are helpful for students to be directed properly to the issue at hand. There might also be no guidelines for students encountering blogging for the first time and Ayao-ao (2014) adds that instructors are the primary support of the students as these students venture into online activities of which they are not yet proficient and clear instructions with examples should be given before the blogging assignments commence.

Marcelle also felt that the lack of structure was disappointing and wore out her motivation after a few weeks of trying to Weblog. This is because she had no structure to guide her in her blogging. Jon added that it can be very difficult without specific guidelines since there are many ways in which blogs can be written. Some students could choose to write their blogs in a way that is not beneficial to their learning in the course. It therefore makes sense when Ayao-ao (2014) says that students need to be oriented on the manner or structure of blogging to guide them to respond appropriately, and scaffolds such as provision of a checklist can be helpful.

In the absence of clear structures, weblogging activity therefore became purely for the purpose of meeting the class requirement. Jon mentioned that the external pressure increased the difficulty of the task and interfered with his ability to post. He also felt that for some students, the pressure resulted in their posting "something just to meet the assignment but not reflecting." This means that the pressure to post responses on the weblog as a course requirement but without proper guidelines and adequate knowledge led to low quality postings meant just to fulfil the requirement and not to learn.

Although the three participants, Jon, Marcelle and Kristen were not using blogs for the first time, they all had encountered students in some of their courses, who were experiencing the first opportunity to use Weblogs. Such students experienced a lot of uncertainty about the correct usage of the weblog technology. Marcelle, for example, felt that lack of technological knowledge or exposure to weblogging resulted in a feeling of stress since there was pressure of doing it correct. This tended to slow down the Weblogging of some students. This experience explains some of the factors that discourage students from using weblogs.

Concerns about Privacy

The participants also expressed concern with the use of weblogs especially in terms of privacy and by extension security. Some courses used weblogs that were on open sites and one participant, Jon, expressed doubts about the security of the environment because of its potential to be viewed by anyone with Internet access. Anybody could therefore respond to the writing on the Weblogs, and Jon was particularly afraid of attacks on his ideas without proper reasons and factual backup. He explains it thus:

There are bad guys on the internet. They don't care what you post on the blog. They just want to make bad comments on your blog. So they make me feel upset. No one cares about what am doing, what am posting. But they just want to devalue my work.

Jon feels that since some blogs are not hosted on private institution servers and can be accessed by anyone with internet access, some people may comment on his blog not for learning purposes but with malicious intent. In agreement, Lujan-Mora and Juana-Espinosa (2007) observe that if the weblog is public, it may suffer troll infestations, people that intentionally try to cause disruption by posting messages that are inflammatory,

insulting, incorrect, inaccurate, or off topic, with the intent of provoking a reaction from others. Jon was also concerned about the attention to be given to responses by unknown individuals, since he found it difficult to trust the sources, not knowing the background or expertise of the person.

While Jon expressed a stronger level of distrust not as apparent in the other participants, the public nature of the Weblog caused some concern for the other participants too. Participants were cautious about topic selection and chose not to write about anything personal or anything seen as controversial. Kristen expressed concerns about posting items related to the actions or opinions of peers. She refrained from posting group or personal issues on the Weblog, and chose to keep a professional focus. She expresses her apprehension of the internet thus:

What am concerned about is security. Because nowadays the online security needs to be considered. Someone on the internet can find you through your information. Through what you posted on your blog. It is dangerous. So sometimes I don't want to put my personal information or my friends but something general. So that way I don't expose our personal information on the internet.

Kristen clearly fears that information that is too personal may lead to her exposure. She feels it also leaves her friends exposed and therefore she only focuses on general issues. Reflection at times touches on very personal experience but this aspect is now sacrificed for security and privacy concerns. Marcelle added to this concern and said she was guarded about posting a comment on any contentious issue. She fears her stand might bring her in conflict with unknown people of different opinion and attract distasteful comments on her blog.

In summary, negative experiences related to Weblog usage were largely related to lack of structure and guidance about appropriate usage and concerns about privacy. Participants suggested that these experiences resulted in sporadic and inconsistent blogging thus constituting barriers to blogging.

A few other themes emerged but are not discussed exhaustively in this paper. For example, participants perceived that Weblogs created a sense of community and extended discussion outside the class. For some participants such as Jon and Marcelle, the involvement with other students contributed to a sense of togetherness, which seemed important in supporting their learning. Jon commented on the importance of shared learning experiences in stimulating mutual progress among class participants.

Implications

Bearing in mind that the study focuses on the experience of learners, it is important to take into consideration what works best for the learner. Participants for example indicated that they valued access to varied perspectives provided by using weblogs. It would therefore be important for instructors to focus on finding diverse mechanisms for encouraging students to integrate various information sources into their writing, as well as to encourage them to publish comments to a wider audience. By interacting with a wider audience through comments and feedback, student reflections are likely to become more evaluative and critical (Brockbank & McGill, 1998).

Since the participants expressed frustration with lack of a clear and specific structure for the use of weblogs in some cases, a clear and specific structure is necessary for blogging activities always and scaffolds such as provision of a checklist on how to write on a blog would be helpful (Ayao-ao, 2014). In addition, the concern for privacy and security over the use of weblogs as expressed by the participants calls for the hosting of learning weblogs on private servers as suggested by Lujan-Mora and Juana-Espinosa (2007) to avoid infiltration by people out to cause disruption. The curriculum aspects covered by the use of weblogs should also emphasize non-personal, content focused reflection to reduce personal information that would attract inflammatory and insulting comments on the blogs.

Future Research

Since the participants valued access to varied perspectives provided by the use of weblogs, an important research opportunity would be to establish the effects of other students' commentary on the quality of a student's reflection

or how the student's own reflection is affected by giving commentary to other peers. It would also be prudent to explore some specific mechanisms, strategies, and practices that would encourage student reflection on the Weblogs so that they benefit from the benefits of using weblogs that emerge in the study.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore graduate students' lived experiences and perceptions of using weblogs for reflection. The findings reveal that graduate students reflected on weblogs mainly by responding to articles they have read, responding to prompts by the instructor, posting their own reflection or responding to other students' commentaries.

The findings generally reveal the students regarded the use of weblogs as important for their learning although weblogs also engendered some negative experiences. Participants expressed appreciation for weblogs supporting their thinking and learning and creating of a sense of community as the foremost experiences and benefits that support their use of the weblogs. On the other hand, the participants decried the uncertainty of the use of weblogs and concerns about security as some of the factors that hindered reflecting on weblogs.

Overall, the findings reveal that as it is, weblogs can be used to support individual reflection. However, the negative experiences suggest that a more structured usage of the weblogs would be appropriate. More studies therefore need to be done to explore strategies by which weblogs can be used more effectively to foster individual and group reflection while eliminating situations that students find threatening and discouraging in using weblogs.

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