Blogging for Intellectual Development: Towards Promoting Excellence in Higher Education

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Abstract

The blogging phenomenon has taken the world by storm in recent years. It has been regularly used as a platform for free expression and critique, alike. According to Campbell (2003) blogging provides an environment where students can think, reflect and create social interaction for a real-life audience. It also can be used as a pedagogical tool to motivate technologically savvy young learners today as it is a mode for learning beyond the classroom. Blogging, as a form of reflective learning that complements critical thinking, provides the ideal avenue for students to freely express their own view points, and thus develop intellectually. This study investigated whether bloggers were critical thinkers and better academic performers. This study compared the performance of 55 blogger and 55 non-blogger undergraduates of a Malaysian private university through a structured comprehension test which tested their critical thinking abilities on inferencing, predicting, evaluating and analyzing skills. In addition, the 't-independent group test' was conducted on the participants' CGPA scores to determine their academic performance. This served to answer the question of whether bloggers performed better academically. The results of the study would establish the benefits of incorporating blogging into the higher education curriculum as an interesting means of sharing knowledge and learning whilst encouraging critical thinking.

1. Introduction

Research into interesting and varied teaching techniques and learning styles are an on-going process. Language researchers are always probing into how learners can be motivated to practice language skills and communicate with others freely. Today, there are many interesting multimedia resources such as the computer with internet facilities that teachers can use to encourage learner independence and autonomy. An interesting activity using such resources is blogging which can be used to encourage critical thinking or reflective learning as it allows for free expression of ideas and thoughts. Only when learners are provided adequate opportunity to express themselves, challenge ideas and justify standpoints will they progress intellectually. For such progress to occur, teachers should promote reflection, co-ordination and social interaction. According to Moshman (2003) intellectual development proceeds through processes of reflection, where sophisticated metalogical knowledge is constructed about the "nature of inference, argument and logic". Additionally, reflection on various points of view creates a platform for higher order

thinking to coordinate multiple perspectives. Both reflection and coordination necessitate the presence of social interaction.

1.1 Background

At Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), a private institution of higher learning, students range from those who are computer savvy to those who have very limited knowledge of computers. These students come from a school system which has recently incorporated multimedia and computers in the school's curriculum. However, the exposure at schools is limited to the classroom. Hence, many learners appear to have limited technological skills when they enter the university. A majority of these students appeared to be non-bloggers. On the other hand, those who blog are usually from the urban areas, whose home backgrounds expose them to technology. At the university, learners are expected to use the computer to complete assignments. Adequate computer lab facilities, including free internet service and various electronic databases, and wifi are made available to the students. These facilities are provided so that students can be motivated to develop intellectually through independent learning. Thus, the university environment encourages intellectual development among learners.

1.2 Statement of Problem

One of the main objectives of higher education is to develop learners who are critical and of high mental acuity. To this end, teachers often strive to encourage learners to be more participatory in the classroom. However, students who come from a system of school education which had not actively encouraged open participation, would find this a challenge when they embark on their tertiary studies. Learners are faced with limitations when they have to provide their own opinions or points of view in class, especially when they are compelled to justify these points. Many are deficient in skills necessary to participate in these interactions, which require them to evaluate and analyze the plethora of information available. In addition, succeeding at the university calls for learners who are independent and reflective in their learning, and who, periodically, evaluate their own performance.

1.3 Objectives of the study

This study endeavours to discover whether blogging promotes intellectual progress. In particular, it aims to determine whether bloggers possess the specific skills which make them critical thinkers. The study also hopes to identify whether students who blog perform better academically to ascertain the impact of blogging in the learning process.

1.4 Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- Does blogging enhance critical thinking among students?
- Do bloggers perform better academically?
- Should blogging be incorporated in the higher education curriculum?

1.5 Significance of the study

This study will have an impact on the curriculum design of ESP classes for the programmes offered at UTAR. Many researches have proven that blogging places students in an ideal position to reach out to,

network with and, ultimately, build knowledge communities. As blogging encourages bloggers to express their ideas, feelings and thoughts independently, it is a mode through which learners can be trained to become critical thinkers, and thus, progress intellectually. In relation to this, an environment which promotes learner autonomy can also be developed. As such, the results of the study would have significant implications on learners' learning environment and teachers' teaching methods at UTAR.

2. Literature Review

A spectrum of related literature was reviewed to discover the benefits of blogging as a means of creating reflective learners who could become independent in their search for knowledge. Hence, areas that were reviewed were intellectual progress to enhance learning and critical thinking which is described below.

2.1 Learner Autonomy in Higher Education

The aim of higher education is instrumental in nature, namely, that of meeting manpower needs for socioeconomic development. Thus, higher education should be able to produce graduates who are competitive and able to generate new knowledge through world class quality research. According to Barnett (1990), higher education is ideologically committed to the pursuit of knowledge, academic freedom, and rationality, and to the development of students' ability to gain autonomy over their own learning. It also prepares students to go beyond acquisition of forms of discipline-based reasoning to stages of self-reflection and emancipation –where examination of own beliefs, values and actions is connected to the ability to assume the ethical and practical demands of rationality (Barnett 1990).

Brown and Duguid (1993) suggested that transforming the forms of classroom learning into more authentic forms of workplace learning requires re-conceptualization of established ideas of teaching, learning, technology, subject matter, and the system. This calls for a paradigm shift in the teaching and learning process. Teachers no longer play the central role of knowledge provider, and students mere listeners. Yet, the common role learners assume is one of passivity. It is usual for learners to depend on teachers heavily for input and most are reluctant to participate or generate ideas. However, there are concerted efforts to move towards a more learner-centred classroom as learners are now "expected to assume greater responsibility for, and take charge of, their own learning" (Thanasoulas:2000, p. 1).

According to Holec (1981) learner autonomy involves taking charge of one's learning and being responsible for all the decisions related to all aspects of learning process including setting objectives, choosing methodology and evaluating what has been learned. One activity widely believed to encourage learner autonomy is blogging. Pinkman (2005) claims that blogs have the capability of developing students' interest in reading and writing. This interest is an essential driving factor in inculcating self reliance and in motivating learners to direct their own learning process, conditions necessary for learner autonomy. This shows that blogging has the potential of helping students to take control of their own acquisition of skills and knowledge. In short, blogging builds a platform in creating autonomous learners.

2.2 Blogging and Intellectual Progress

Blogging creates an environment where there is a real audience to write to and when optimised, a collaborative environment where feedback can be given and received (Barlett-Bragg, 2003). In blogging, learners gain the opportunity to participate in the social construction of knowledge and meaning making involving real-life participation, which in turn promotes intellectual progress. This is mainly because blogging provides an environment where students can think, reflect and create social interaction for a real-life audience (Campbell, 2003). Intellectual progress, on the other hand, is characterized as an on-going

process of reflection, coordination and social interaction, the basic processes of intellectual development (Moshman, 1999, 2003). From this definition, we can draw a connection between blogging and intellectual progress, that is, blogging promotes intellectual progress among learners.

In addition, blogging encourages reflective learning in meaning-making, an essential factor in intellectual development. Fiedler (2003) states that the informal practices and interactions that emerge through blogging support many of the requirements of reflective learning, since they support prolonged engagement with information, provide visible tracking of data to help reflective and recollection, allow engagement with peers and other experts and support opportunities for authentic feedback. Reflective learning illustrates an individual's capabilities and autonomy for learning as they become more critical and introspective in relation to self, knowledge and the world.

According to Thomas & Harri-Augstein (1985), the reflective process involves recording thoughts, returning and reflecting on earlier thoughts and engaging in conversation with self and others about one's learning. It shows the individual has a complete control in acquiring knowledge in formal and informal situations. In other words, learner is involved in self-organised learning, where the learner is encouraged to take control and be responsible for his own learning processes and criteria of evaluation (Augstein and Thomas, 1991).

2.3 Blogging and Critical Thinking

An important aspect of intellectual progress is the development of critical thinking skills. Warnick and Inch (as cited in Petress, 2004) define critical thinking as "involving the ability to explore a problem, question, or situation; integrate all the available information about it; arrive a solution or hypothesis; and justify one's position." When students engage in blogging, they tend to participate vigorously in giving their opinions and comments in addition to providing justifications for their own stands. This necessitates the analysis and evaluation of the multitude of information that bombards them on the Net.

Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht's (2004) reported that weblogs served as a format for 'thinking by writing' and for self-regulating of their thinking and expression. Besides, suggestions put forward by students on their blogging experience also indicated guidance on tasks could help in forming their thoughts (Luca & McLoughlin, 2005). In addition, these technologies and practices allow sustained archival of thoughts and reflection and meaning making (Fiedler, S 2003). In short, blogging plays a vital role in promoting critical thinking among bloggers.

3. Methodology

An overview of the methods and procedures used in the study included an experimental comparison of the test scores of critical thinking skills for bloggers and non-bloggers. In addition, A One-Way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also used to compare the CGPA results of the bloggers and non-bloggers.

3.1 Population

The population for this research was 55 blogger and 55 non-blogger students from Universiti Tunku Abdual Rahman, Selangor, Malaysia.

3.2 Data Collection

This is a quantitative research. The students' profile mainly on their background was collected. A structured comprehension test which tested their critical thinking abilities was given. The students' CGPA scores were also compared to determine their academic performance.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Critical thinking among learners

This study explored how blogging could stimulate critical thinking and promote intellectual progress. Bloom (1956) developed a classification system of intellectual behaviour in learning upon which all teaching is based. The cognitive domain identifies higher learning skills such as inferencing, analysis and evaluation which can be used to determine critical thinkers. According to Mynard (2007) blogging is beneficial for language learners as it is a medium for reflecting on learning as well as for critical thinking. Therefore, a test was run to identify critical thinkers by using higher learning skills categories of the cognitive domain.

Learners were asked to read two passages and answer ten questions on inferencing, analysis and evaluation. The scores were then tabulated in percentages and the results were compared between bloggers and non-bloggers. At the same time these learners English language proficiency in SPM (a Malaysian examination equivalent to O level exam) was also taken into consideration in the analysis.

Report (TEST1)

BLOGER	SPM	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
BLOGGER	A	56.7901	27	14.71543
	B	45.0758	11	16.22521
	C	41.6667	17	13.89757
	Total	49.7727	55	16.12584
NON BLOGGER	A	53.2407	18	17.41902
	B	45.6019	18	21.97705
	C	42.7632	19	12.56481
	Total	47.1212	55	17.89229
Total	A	55.3704	45	15.75695
	B	45.4023	29	19.68076
	C	42.2454	36	13.03052

Total	48.4470	110	17.00590

The report above was calculated based on results obtained from bloggers (55) and non-bloggers (55). Their SPM results were used to classify them into three categories A being higher level proficiency, B being intermediate level and C being lower level. There was no significant result obtained for critical thinking among the two groups of participants.

To identify critical thinkers a mean of 66.67% was required based on the test score. On the other hand a mean of 33.33% mean represented average level critical thinkers while below 33.33% confirmed a low level of critical thinking ability. The report above clearly shows that students do not achieve a high percentage in critical thinking. However all bloggers and non- bloggers fall in the second category of average level critical thinkers. Thus, it can be concluded that blogging does not necessarily enhance critical thinking among students. Although Luca & McLouglin (2005) suggest that students who blog form their thoughts well. While Nadi, Schiano and Gumbrecht's (2004) state that weblogs serve as a format for thinking by writing creating self-regulated learners, this study refutes previous findings. Nevertheless, the findings also shows that those who have achieved high level proficiency in their SPM English have better percentages for critical thinking regardless bloggers or non-bloggers.

4.2 Academic performance

ANOVA

CGPA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.536	1	1.536	2.414	.123
Within Groups	68.727	108	.636		
Total	70.264	109			

The results for academic performance where the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) was compared for bloggers and non-bloggers were a Null-hypothesis as the results were conclusively insignificant with a significance ratio of 0.123 > 0.05 significant level, which means CGPA score have no significant impact towards bloggers or non-bloggers.

5. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to ascertain whether blogging enhances critical thinking and also to prove whether bloggers are better in academic performance. This research found that there was no significant indication that bloggers were critical thinkers. However those with better English results in their SPM demonstrated high percentages for critical thinking. As for academic performance, there was no significant difference between bloggers and non-bloggers. Hence, the findings contradicted the ideas that bloggers were critical thinkers and performed better academically. In this light it appears irrelevant to incorporate blogging into the curriculum. However, teachers may include blogging as a means of varying their teaching styles at the higher learning institutions.

6. Acknowledgement

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