

Chapter 9

Using Blogs to Journal, Document, and Create Community

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter describes a case where learning and assessment were centered on the use of an online blog for sharing ideas; logging progressive details of an emerging artwork; providing supportive comments and advice from both teacher and fellow students; as well as, unexpectedly, creating a very strong community of practice. The case study discusses the reasons for choosing the blog tool, the features of the chosen blog tool, the elements of the assessment task, the outcomes of the learning activity, the supporting materials required for the successful execution of the task, and the responses to the task from the students through student surveys. Other issues this case study addresses are considering assessment tasks for the specific needs of students and assisting students who are reluctant about using technology. The chapter presents a positive argument for using a blog tool for reflective practice and students chronically documenting a progressive task.

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“I am loving this subject so much, I am surprised with myself. When I reflect on myself I used to think that I’m not creative and put myself down. But I have found out that I am creative from the comments I am getting on the blog, at work and from parents in the Service I am running” (Student Communication, 1/4/2010).

SETTING THE STAGE

Charles Sturt University (CSU), in Australia, has several campuses in regional New South Wales where it conducts its on-campus teaching, but has more than 21,000 distance students studying from all around the world. CSU has embraced the open-source Sakai online learning environment in its move to online learning. This has enabled some innovative thought regarding the transference of former processes of learning into the electronic media of Web 2.0 technologies, such as “blogs, wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds etc., which facilitate a more socially connected Web where everyone is able to add to and edit the information space” (Anderson, 2007, p. 5). In its 2007-2011 Strategy (CSU, 2007) CSU focused on establishing itself as a leader in flexible learning, and all subjects are fully supported online.

Over the past decade, CSU has incrementally increased its suite of online applications and tools. These are encased in a Sakai environment, which the University calls Interact. Many of the Sakai tools are tested and approved for use, but there are also ‘home-grown’ versions of discussion forums and administration tools that are synthesized, along with other purchased applications into the Interact virtual spaces. Two recent examples of these purchased products are PebblePad, an ePortfolio environment and suite of tools, and WIMBA, a synchronous virtual classroom environment. The gradual accumulation and the early scarcity of tools led to innovative thought and use in the transference of processes of learning into the electronic media of Web 2.0 technologies.

In their study analyzing the evolution of trends in technology through seven years of the Horizon Report, Martin et al. (2011) highlight the authentic learning change that is possible with the evolution and use of blogs and other Web 2.0 tools in education. The user, or student, becomes the center of the process. The creation of content is through the personal ideas and interests of the student in each case, allowing them to create, communicate and collaborate. This turnabout in the creation of content makes education more exciting, innovative, and flexible. The academic educator may guide and suggest, but the emphasis on teaching with a narrow emphasis has become outmoded in areas of learning where creativity and new combinations of ideas are highly valued. In a self-regulated space like a blog, learners can be self-directed as well as influenced socially and emotionally by fellow students. They can plan their own work and set their own goals in order to complete the task (Robertson, 2011).

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