Chapter 6

Using Social Networks in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education:
An Australian Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Realising the potential for web-based communication in learning and teaching is challenging for educators. In this paper, the authors examine students' attitudes toward active learning when using an unrestricted blog in an academic context and whether this can be used to support reflective and critical discussion, leading to knowledge construction. The authors collected data using an online survey with questions on student perceptions of the type, frequency and effectiveness of their strategy. Analysis of the data was conducted using Bloom's revised taxonomy. The research indicates that students must have prior familiarity with this form of communication technology to construct knowledge in an academic context. The authors conclude that effective learning will only emerge if informed by the student experience and perspective.

1. INTRODUCTION

The traditional notion of space and time in which learning and teaching takes place is being redefined partly as a result of the use of new technology (Tinio, 2003). The generation born, regardless of where, at the turn of the last century has not only accommodated to but influenced the development of information and communication technology (ICT) which surrounds it. They are familiar and entirely at ease with the design of these technologies, unafraid of experimenting with them, and take for granted and get on with doing all that they

allow – talking, messaging, playing online games, sharing images, finding things out – often simultaneously. Moreover, most of their learning about it, and how to use it, comes from their peers. ICT and the Social Web especially, is their medium and their metier. It is integral to the world they know and that world is the only one they have known. There is no going back from this position. Indeed, it can only become more firmly established as the norm by subsequent generations, and not just in the UK but worldwide (Melville, para. 91, 2009)

Web 2.0 technologies, sometimes collectively known as the Social Web, are a significant part of this milieu. They have had a dramatic impact on the lifestyles of the current generation of students entering higher education and are already widely incorporated into teaching and learning. Questions have been raised about whether academics are sufficiently adept in their use (Georgina & Olson, 2008; Selwyn, 2007) to be able to provide what some believe could be richer and more pertinent educational experiences as a result of them (Melville, 2009). This paper adds to the growing research in this field by presenting material extrapolated from the student experience in the form a case study.

Blogs provide an environment that potentially supports an active process of thinking and learning (Goh, Dexter, & Murphy, 2007). They allow interactivity and, through the expression and discussion of individual ideas, a forum for learning (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). They can provide a record of conversation and evidence of collaboration that can be used by group members as a basis for thoughtful dialogue (Hanlin-Rowney, et al., 2006) allowing for the development of common meaning to be constructed from multiple perspectives (Marshall, 1995). Blogging is essentially constructivist in nature. It offers students an opportunity to engage in collaborative learning that helps them to solve complex problems in a real life context. It involves negotiation, an appreciation of different perspectives, multiple modes of presentation, nurtures reflectivity and puts the

student at the centre of learning. It also readily aligns with Constructionism (a reformulation of constructivism by Papert and colleagues) which, whilst acknowledging the social nature of the learning process, also recognises the importance of person experience in creating knowledge artifacts. (O'Donnell, 2006)

The central question examined in this paper is whether an unrestricted blog space supports reflective and critical discussion leading to the construction of knowledge. An unrestricted blog is one where students are tasked as a group to independently solve a problem through online interaction. It is unrestricted in the sense that there is no input or oversight by a tutor during the discussion process, nor are participants given roles or provided with writing frames. They are responsible for deciding how and when they will interact with each other in the blog environment. In other words, they are required to become active learners, employing a range of behavioural and cognitive strategies to describe, organise and process information through an online discussion. Of course, even within an unrestricted blog there are still definite boundaries determined by the context in which students operate, their understanding of the task, the peer group and teacher expectations. The idea of using an 'unrestricted' space was attractive because it required a learning environment in which students had to personally construct meaning rather than being herded or constrained (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Haag, 1995). This method was chosen deliberately because the apparent absence of formalised structure mimics to a certain extent how students engage with messaging and networking sites. This allowed us to explore how experience of virtual personal and group space, with its linguistic shorthand and associations with leisure and informality, supports academic exchange which requires precision and decision making based on evidence. Our role was limited to observing and formally describing how the students made sense of working in this context.

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