

Assessing Weblogs as Education Portals

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INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the key sectors that has benefited from the continuous developments and innovations in information and communication technology (ICT). Web-based facilities now provide a medium for learning and a vehicle for information dissemination and knowledge creation (Khine, 2003). Accordingly, developments in ICTs provide opportunities for educators to expand and refine frameworks for delivering courses in innovative and interactive ways that assist students achieve learning outcomes (Kamel & Wahba, 2003). However, the adoption of ICTs has also created tensions between traditional control and directiveness in teaching and student-centred learning, which relies on flexibility, connectivity, and interactivity of technology-rich environments.

This chapter examines the introduction of Web-based technologies within a media studies course. The objective was to establish a community of learning, which provides students with a portal or entranceway *into* a common work area and *out* to networks of media related organizations. So doing, a pilot study was conducted within the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University to blend *Weblog* facilities with a classroom setting to enhance students' interpersonal and content interaction, and build *citizenship* through participation and collaborative processes. Four key aims frame this study:

1. provide an accessible, interactive online environment in which students can participate with peers and engage with new media technologies within a learning community setting;
2. develop an instructional technology framework that enhances the learning experience and outcomes within online educative environments;
3. establish a *portal* or gateway for students to access media advocacy and special interest groups and enhance and diversify perspectives on global media; and
4. evaluate student-learning experiences facilitated through innovative online instructional technologies.

BACKGROUND

Early approaches to integrating ICTs into education environments emerged from conventional learning models, originat-

ing from the objectivist approach in which a reality exists and experts instruct individuals of that reality (Belanger & Slyke, 2000). However, such teacher-centric, information-based approaches failed to adequately prepare students to become independent learners. Responding to these limitations, educators embraced learner-centric approaches such as *constructivism*, which lent weight to the empowerment of individuals to take charge of their own learning environments. As Wilson (1996) suggests, the constructivist movement in instructional design emphasized the importance of providing meaningful, authentic activities that can help the learner to construct understandings and develop skills relevant to solving problems and not overloading them with too much information. Solis (1997) supports this position, suggesting that student-centred learning "... relies on groups of students being engaged in active exploration, construction, and learning through problem solving, rather than in passive consumption of textbook materials" (p. 393).

In spite of these favorable positions, Khine (2003) warns that creating such learning environments supported by ICTs can be intrinsically problematic. Accordingly, it is critically important that careful planning and design is employed at the early stages of instructional design to provide proper support and guidance, as well as rich resources and tools compatible to each context. When adequate consideration is given to new learning and teaching strategies that incorporate ICTs, real opportunities exist for educators to provide students with a dynamic environment to learn, to think critically, and to undertake productive discussions with their peers in supportive, constructive environments. Given the potential of such technology-rich learning environments, educators have the opportunity to make student learning more interesting and enriching, preparing them for the demands of the future workplace. Accordingly, instructional designers must consider matching the strengths of new technology (flexibility, connectivity, and interactivity) with traditional forms of education (control and directiveness) to inspire, motivate, and excite students in ways that maximize the individual's learning potential.

Achieving these goals requires the development of individual competencies in *problem solving*, *participation*, and *collaboration*, and communities of learning (Kernery, 2000; Khine, 2003; Wilson & Lowry, 2000). *Problem solving* provides ways for students to engage with authentic episodes, providing opportunities for students and educators to examine events and reflect on solutions. One way of maximizing

the benefits of problem solving is to support these through *collaborative processes*, which can be built around these “episodes” by focusing on the use of instructional methods to encourage students to work together as active participants on such tasks. Such efforts can be facilitated through structuring and organizing online interactions using computer-mediated communication, which provides the means to overcome limitations of time and place (Harasim, Calvert, & Groenboer, 1997). Based on the principles of the transformative paradigm, multiple perspectives, and flexible methods, it is possible for students to adapt, to process and to filter content into their own logical frameworks, resulting in outcomes that may not be thoroughly predictable (Bento & Schuster, 2003). As Morrison and Guenther (2000) note, such collaborative environments provide a forum for students to discuss issues, engage in dialogue, and share results. However, Bento et al. (2003) also warn that one of the main challenges in Web-based education is to achieve adequate participation. They offer a four-quadrant taxonomy of learner behaviours when participating in interpersonal and content interaction—missing-in-action, witness learners, social participants, and active learners—as a way of understanding this dynamic.

When building components of problem solving, participation, and collaboration around small group processes, or *learning communities*, it is critical that these dynamics have beneficial effects on student achievements and psychological well-being. As Khine (2003) suggests, building community imparts a common sense of purpose that assists members grow through meaningful relationships. Accordingly, learning communities can be “... characterized by associated groups of learners, sharing common values and a common understanding of purpose, acting within a context of curricular and co-curricular structures and functions that link traditional disciplines and these structures” (p. 23). Rickard (2000) equates the notion of common values to that of “campus citizen,” in which students not only engage in educative endeavour but also learn networking and become “life-long members of our communities” (p. 13).

Such communities though should not be limited to just participants within narrowly defined student groups or the domain of institutional environments. ICTs also provide opportunities for students to connect to other informative communities related to their area of discipline or study via the Web. So doing, the educator can build into the instructional design gateways or portals to direct participants of small learning communities to other relevant organizations, groups, and individuals to extend campus citizenry and enhance knowledge creation. Tatnall (2005) suggests that such portals can be seen:

... as a special Internet (or intranet) site designed to act as a gateway to give access to other sites. A portal aggregates information from multiple sources and makes that information available to various users In other words, a

portal offers centralised access to all relevant content and applications. (pp. 3-4)

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In accessing Tatnall’s (2005) notion of portals, it is possible to think of these starting points in diverse ways. While no definitive categorization of the types of portals exists, Davison et al. (2003) offer a list of possible alternatives: general portals, community portals, vertical industry portals, horizontal industry portals, enterprise information portals, e-marketplace portals, personal/mobile portals, information portals, and niche portals. However, it is important to point out that these categories are not mutually exclusive, highlighting the malleable nature of these gateways for educators to blend the strengths of one with advantages of others to achieve a more effective portal design.

Even though portals are conceptually difficult to categorize and define, there exist a number of important characteristics that assist in facilitating the objectives of gateways as access points to, and aggregators of, information from multiple sources. For example, Tatnall (2005) draws from a number of scholars to present a general guideline of beneficial characteristics employed to facilitate community collaboration amongst users and the rapid sharing of relevant content and information. For example, the characteristics of access, usability, and functionality, as well as *sticky* web features like chat rooms, e-mail, and calendar functions, have been used to assist in maintaining user interest, attention, and participation within a site.

Within the education sector, portals offer great potential to achieve the kinds of goals laid out so far. However, portal development in these learning environments present a number of challenges for universities as they continue to grapple with a variety of business, organizational, technical, and policy questions within the framework of a larger technology architecture. For example, Katz (2002) highlights the following challenges:

- build standards to create compelling and “sticky” Web environments that establish communities rather than attract surfers;
- create portal sites that remain compelling to different members of the community within the short-term and throughout student lives;
- create the technical and organizational infrastructure to foster “cradle-to-endowment” relationships via virtual environments; and
- integrate physical and virtual sites to foster social and intellectual interactions worthy of the university’s mission.

Within this framework of challenges, the emphasis continues to return to the realization that bringing education and ICTs together strategically relies less on technology per se than on the educator’s ability to design portals that are

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