

## Chapter 2

# Empowering Adult Learners through Blog: An Australian Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

*New Web 2.0 technologies have been eagerly adopted by educators both for on-line and for face to face teaching. These relatively simple technologies have been found to be extremely effective for supporting teaching, for cultivating student creativity and student interaction with their peers. This chapter explores a specific example of such adoption by an Australian academic both within his home university (Australian Catholic University) and with groups of disadvantaged students seeking alternative paths to university entrance. Within the context of an overview of the emergence of this technology during the last two decades, this chapter explores the successes of this particular adoption, but also identifies problem areas and suggests pathways for the future.*

### INTRODUCTION

There has been a rapid increase in the use of Web 2.0 technologies (web-based collaborationware) in recent years (Tepper, 2003). Blogs, podcasts and wikis have been adopted by many online professional and educational providers and services (Richardson, 2006). These new technologies are relatively easy to use and offer new levels of interactivity and varying modes of connectivity. These properties thus account for both their popularity

and proliferation. Because of this ease of use, these new technologies, if effectively deployed, offer new possibilities of learning and teaching (Williams and Jacobs, 2004).

Emerging in the late 1990s, blogs have become ubiquitous on the web (Barlow, 2007). They are web sites resembling personal journals that are regularly updated with individual entries/postings. They offer personal vignettes, can contain news items, photographs, audio and even video clips. More often than not they are used as a means to share opinions and views that the writer/blogger considers to be of interest. Research has emphasized its facility as

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a mode of publication and its attendant capacity for personal affirmation and empowerment, as well as its interactivity and scope for interpersonal sociability and collective bonding (Kaye, 2006). Not surprisingly, it has been claimed by some that blogging is a useful practice for the development of higher order learning skills, active learner-centred pedagogy, authentic learning and interactive learning communities (Oravec, 2003; Stiler & Philleo, 2003).

## **BACKGROUND**

In this paper, we present a study in which an English Literature and writing unit was constructed around blogging activity. This unit was offered as a community and adult education programme in conjunction with a non-governmental organisation for adult learners (Australian Catholic University in conjunction with Mission Australia- The Clemente/ Catalyst Program for the Homeless and Disadvantaged). Adult learners, it is argued learn differently from young people (Knowles, 1990). For Knowles, effective adult learning practices need to incorporate the following: self-directed learning as the preferred model, capitalising on adults' experiences as a rich course resource, a problem-based rather than subject-centred approach and the importance of a social context for learning. As such, any courses developed must be flexible, incorporate choice (as to materials and subjects for study), involve self-expression and integrate learning with their experiences (Mason, 2006).

With these principles in mind, students in small groups were encouraged to set up and maintain a blog as a portfolio of their work. In the paper, we discuss the role of blogs in providing a social mechanism for the student body and also as an outlet for classroom and practical examples. We show that students have utilized the blogs creatively and interwoven their blogs with their personal stories. These have proved to be an ex-

tremely useful and an effective tool for the adult learners (McDrury & Alterio, 2003). We also consider the limitations of blogs and argue that a supported and pedagogical approach to blogging environments is needed for them to be effective. The paper concludes by proposing the development of a Personal Development Planning process that we argue will enable further development and empowerment of adult learners.

The paper now continues as a personal statement of the unit writer and teacher Michael Griffith who describes the evolution of his teaching practice with the arrival of Blogging as a new technology. First he describes his experimentation with Blogging in his mainstream university literature units, and then he describes the transfer of these insights to his work with homeless students at Mission Australia

## **BLOGGING IN UNIVERSITY LITERATURE UNITS**

I am a teacher of traditional literature units (English, Australian, American) at Australian Catholic University (Sydney Campus) where I have been teaching since 1977. Since my early days as a teacher I have been trying to find ways of combining creative responses to literary texts with the more conservative critical approaches current in most contemporary universities. My own fascination with the ways in which the internet was providing a huge expansion of resources for literature students led me to experiment with blogging as a tool for stimulating students' writing. My choice of a particular provider for blogging was conditioned initially by the name *LiveJournal* which provided connotations of a Journal-like response to literature being taught and emphasized the idea of it being alive, current and available for others to see. Initially students were somewhat nervous about using this tool in a traditional academic university setting, but they soon discovered the enormous potential of this tool, both as a means of

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