

Chapter 3.3

Blogs as a Social Networking Tool to Build Community

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines blogging as a social networking tool to engage final year preservice teachers in reflective processes. Using a developed Web site, the students post their own blogs and comment upon those of others. The authors argue that opportunity to engage with this networking experience provides avenue for the students to consider their emerging professional identity as teachers. The blogging mechanism brought together the physical university context and virtual online environment as students identified, examined and reflected upon the intricacies of what it means to be a teacher. The authors hope that examining the findings that emerged from this

research will inform other educators as to the affordances of blogging as a social networking tool.

INTRODUCTION

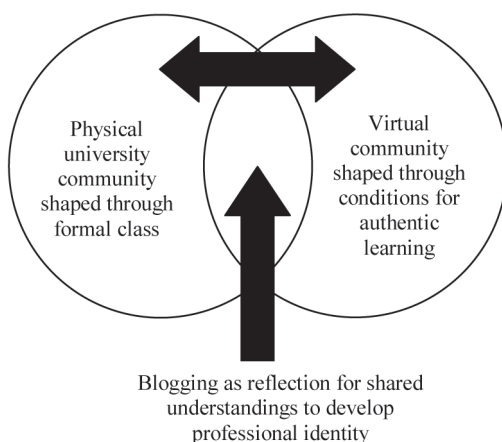
A recent US survey conducted by Pew Internet and American Life Project found that eight percent of internet users, or about 12 million American adults, keep a blog while thirty-nine percent of internet users, or about 57 million American adults, read blogs (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). This social networking phenomenon is not confined to the pursuit of leisure but is also seen as a strategy for professional learning through shared reflection on theory and practice. The professional identities of teachers and preservice teachers can potentially benefit from this experience.

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This chapter explores the use of blogging within the context of a final year university subject for teachers in the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Using authentic learning (Herrington & Oliver, 2000) as a theoretical framework, the 'Beginning and Establishing Successful Teachers' (BEST) Website was created. Blogging opportunities were incorporated within the Website design to foster and support social networking amongst site users.

The chapter describes how providing students with opportunities to interact within both the physical university and the virtual Website communities led to reflection, networking and identification of professional goals, all of which contributed to their identity as teachers. In particular we examine how blogging as a tool facilitated reflection for shared understandings as individuals moved between two spaces. The virtual community afforded students opportunities for articulation of their own understandings and engagement with the experiences of others. Supporting and enriching this was the physical context, where 'theory' and professional relationships were explored through the more structured environment of tutorial workshops. The interaction between the virtual and real contexts, captured through blogging activity, contributed to each individual's professional identity. This is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Blogging for professional identity



TEACHER AS REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

In describing teaching as a 'profession of conscience', where teachers are accountable to themselves, the students and their parents, Maarof (2007) identifies the practice of reflecting on one's teaching as important in allowing teachers to better understand their philosophy of learning and to identify strengths and limitations of the decisions they make. Teachers who are reflective in their approach to teaching can make meaningful change within their classrooms, schools and broader communities because they use a critical approach to questioning what it is they do in their classrooms, why they have made such decisions and how their practice might be improved (Bintz & Dillard, 2007).

Rather than a simple tool for thinking about teaching, reflection is defined as a complex and rigorous process that takes the practitioner in a 'forward moving spiral' linking theory with practice and practice with theory (Rodgers, 2002, p. 863). For teachers to be able to engage with such a cycle, they require sustained opportunities to explore both theory and practice within socially supported communities that deepen not only their professional identity, but also their understanding of the skills required for reflection (McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2004).

For preservice and early career teachers in particular, opportunities for reflection on their own learning and the ways that they achieve new understanding are valuable in fostering active learners whose interest resides in pursuing ongoing professional growth (Bransford, Derry, Berliner & Hammerness, 2005; McCormack et al., 2004). The period of transition from preservice to inservice teacher is identified in the literature as a time where support in developing the skills of reflection is crucial for the construction of professional knowledge (Griffin, 2003; Peters & LeCornu, 2006). It is through opportunities to 'practice and reflect on teaching while enrolled

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