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Using Weblogs to Enhance Student Learning
In a Personal Health Classroom

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Abstract: Twenty-first century students who belong to the net generation, are learning at an accelerated pace processing information much different than before. Web 2.0 tools used to enhance learning with the multi-process thinkers that need instantaneous feedback and constant stimulation. The purpose of this action research project is to develop and evaluate the use of an interactive blog to enhance the unit Surviving High School (SHS) in the ninth and tenth grade Personal Health Class at a large private high school. The incorporation of a blog, a Web 2.0 tool, allowed students to share their feelings and thoughts about class activities and videos. The target population of this study were ninth and tenth grade students at a large private school in Hawaii. Students were given prompts and questions to respond to in a discussion as well as respond to other classmates. Overall students were initially more motivated to complete discussions outside of class and seemed to take the classroom activities more seriously. Students seem to understand what it takes to survive high school.

Introduction

As we are in the midst of the twenty-first century, learning has taken a leap into a new world with technology and Web 2.0 tools. Students today are multi-process thinkers that need instant feedback. Without this they tend to lose interest quickly. Blogging, a term that has been defined as an online diary, is a personal chronological log of thoughts published on a web page and allows others to respond. Blogs are used in many classrooms around the world to enhance learning and feedback. The purpose of this action research project was to develop and evaluate the use of an interactive blog to enhance the unit Surviving High School (SHS) in the ninth and tenth grade Personal Health Class at large private high school. Educators need to expand the walls of the classroom to utilize the benefits of Web 2.0 tools and other opportunities that are available for students to facilitate global learning in the twenty-first century.

According to Sawmillier (2010), the twenty-first century student shows very few similarities to a student of the past. Students today have been exposed to technology from a very young age and are called digital natives. Our growing digital world has created an abundance of virtual spaces and tools for communication, expression, and information creation and acquisition (Mullen, 2008). Digital natives were born into a digital world with computers, iPods, digital cell phones, digital cameras, and electronic-readers. They
view technology as the foundation of a classroom and not as a tool. However, most educators do not share the thought processes of digital native thinkers. Many of us are inexperienced and afraid of the idea of technology. Research suggests that teachers lack the necessary skills to integrate technology into the classroom (Baylor & Ritchie, 2002; Ertmer & Druskocy, 1999; Eteokleous, 2008; Russell et al., 2003; Van Braak, 2001). Therefore, the gap between what our students do at home and during their spare time using technology is widening as educators don’t embrace technology into their teaching methods (Sawmiller, 2010). With the educational revolution of technology integration, the face of learning and giving a voice to the everyday student and teacher is necessary to close the digital divide (Mullen, 2008). It is our responsibility, as teachers, to properly prepare students for the technological world. According to NGLB all students should be technologically literate by the eighth grade. Schools must focus their efforts on bridging the gap between the traditional definition of literacy and technologies. Here in the twenty-first century, literacy no longer only involves being able to read and write but also includes being able to download, upload, rip, burn, chat, save, blogs, instant message, Skype, and share (Mullen, 2008).

The web has become an essential medium in the classroom because it supports synchronous and asynchronous communication, carries multimedia elements, and is easy to use. Experts in the field are developing applications that increase the flexibility of web technologies, encouraging users to share their thoughts in an informal way. Blogs originated as personal online journals, but have evolved into a fun and interactive tool that can facilitate collaboration on the web (Godwin-Jones, 2003). Web logs or blogs, what are they? According to Boling, et al. (2008) a blog is a web site that allows individuals to create personal webpages of text, pictures, graphics, videos, and other multimedia with the same ease as creating a word processing document. Blogs in the classroom are highly effective communication tools that create a variety of authentic writing experiences for students and teachers (Mullen, 2008). There are many resources on the World Wide Web to help create blogs such as Blogger, MyBlogSite, blogspot, edublogs and LearnerBlog. Most of these sites are free of charge, user friendly and provide video tutorials to help the user set up a site. In a classroom study, students found that blogs can be used to create limitless, unique, and meaningful writing opportunities for students worldwide (Mullen, 2008).

Other than blogs, educators have access to several other discussion tools, such as listservs, discussion forums, and discussion boards. Discussion boards that are embedded in a course management system (e.g., Blackboard or WebCT) facilitate computer-mediated communication. Content that students contribute to a class discussion board is private and becomes inaccessible when the class is finished. In contrast, the content on blogs can be accessed by every Internet user. This produces privacy and security challenges, but also opens the discussion to anyone interested. Blog participants may write for readers beyond the classroom, an opportunity that is not possible on discussion boards (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

Adolescents make up a large part of the community of bloggers, often referred to as the blogosphere. Perseus Development Corporation, for instance, finds 51.5% of all blogs
are being developed and maintained by ages 13–19 (Henning, 2003). A similar study finds that 40.4% of blog authors are under age 20 (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004). Because blogs seem so popular with youth, it is difficult to ignore the implications and applications within education, especially in high-school classrooms.

In this twenty-first century ever-changing technological world educators must rise to the challenge of closing the growing digital divide in education. The resources are available and the information is at our fingertips (Mullen, 2008). In an interview with National Education Association Today (2008), MIT professor Henry Jenkins responded to a question about the impact of the participation gap on students saying:

> Today, the ability to navigate social networks, play games, or participate in online conversations affects the way young people present themselves to the world. There’s an informal learning that takes place as they interact with the digital media, which gives way to certain skills, competencies and literacies.

Schools must become a place in which students can acquire the necessary skills for technological success to be able to collaborate globally. Digital fluency is important to develop along with verbal literacy. Implementing blogs in the classroom is a way to integrate the continuing development of both skills (Huffaker, 2005).

**Background**

In my teaching experience in Hawaii, writing is a difficult task for most teenagers as they tend to write as if they are speaking. I reviewed the literature on the implementation of blogging in the classroom and it was evident that writing skills improve when blogging is utilized. “Popular technologies offer new and exciting ways to capitalize on the strengths of authentic writing, the power of the writing process, and the engagement of collaborative writing” (Bolling et al., 2008). Weblogs provide a space where students can write thoughts and opinions on various topics as well as respond to others. The practice students receive when writing responses to other posts as well as writing out their thoughts is invaluable.

The majority of the students have had prior experience using interactive blogs. At the large private high school a one-to-one laptop program has been in effect in the middle school for the last four years and in the high school for the last year. A one-to-one laptop program is a program in which each student is assigned a MacBook laptop to use for their studies. Each student is responsible for the computer while in their possession.

Personal health is a core-curriculum requirement for ninth and tenth graders at the high school I teach at. I have been teaching this class since August 2001. I graduated in May of 2001 with a Masters degree in Teaching with a specialization in Health. I began developing my curriculum for high school health in graduate school, and have continuously updated, changed, integrated, and revised the curriculum since its original form. These updates and changes have often been spurred by changes in the educational...
climate, new research findings, and technology.

The purpose of this action research project is to develop and evaluate the use of an interactive blog to enhance the unit Surviving High School in the ninth and tenth grade Personal Health Class at a large private high school. It was my goal to investigate the impact of the incorporation of a blog, a Web 2.0 tool, to see how students share their feelings and thoughts about class activities and videos. I was interested in whether or not a blog would motivate students to participate in class discussions on what it takes to survive high school.

Research Questions

As a result of my review of the current literature, there are three research questions that I would like to address with my action research project. First, does the implementation of blogs in the unit Surviving High School increase the frequency of participation by all students online? Second, will students respond to each other with greater frequency online? Lastly, will the quality of students’ responses to one another increase on the blog compared to the classroom?

Methods

Participants

I created and implemented an interactive blog using my school’s blog space assigned to faculty members. I developed the blog to enhance the unit Surviving High School in the ninth and tenth grade Personal Health Classes at large private high school in Honolulu, Hawaii.

The action research study included a class of 18 students comprised of 11 males and 7 females. Their mean age is 14.7 (sd = .3) and ranged from 13 to 16. To be eligible for this study, students must be either a freshman or sophomore and enrolled in my personal health class during the spring semester of the 2010 and 2011 school year. Students were also required to return a signed permission slip from their parents allowing them to participate in this study.

Procedure

I introduced the students to the blog in the fourth week of the spring semester. The students watched the video Surviving High School and followed up with reflections on the blog. The students responded and reflected on various questions about teen issues and what it takes to survive high school. See Table 1 for the specific questions that I asked the students to respond to.

The goal of the first lesson was to familiarize students with the blog site and teach basic skills on blogging etiquette. To do this I had students find a blog online and post a thought or opinion to that blog. Students were free to choose any blog in cyberspace, to
practice posting to blogs, and read what previous visitors to the blog had posted. Following the quick post students had a chance to verbally discuss and share what type of blog they visited and one thing interesting about it or what other visitors posted to the blog they chose. The homework assignment for the first lesson was to post a response to the prompts I provided them in Blog #1 about what it takes to survive high school.

The goal of the second lesson was to have students be aware and learn that they are more similar to their peers than different. Students participated in an activity titled Crossing the Line. Students were instructed to cross the line if the statement applied to them. Following the activity we had a short class discussion about the activity and why the activity was important to do as part of this lesson. The students then watched the first thirty minutes of the video. For homework they responded to the prompts I provided them for Blog #2.

The goal of the third lesson was to bring awareness to stereotyping and labels that exist on our campus. Students participated in an activity in which a label was placed on their forehead that had nothing to do with their personal identity. Next students were asked to interact with each other and engage in behavior that portrayed the labels on their peers’ foreheads. Following the activity we had a short discussion. The next activity involved the music video What’s Going On? We discussed the music video and how it relates to the labels activity. For the remainder of the class period students watched the video Surviving High School. For homework students responded to the prompts I provided them for Blog #3.

The final lesson of the Surviving High School unit included an episode of the Music Television (MTV) Series “If you really knew me…featuring the Denver School of the Arts.” Students then completed the homework assignment if you really knew me… See Figure 2 for a complete description of the assignment. Students had the choice to write an essay or create a video journal for this assignment. The students responded to the prompts I provided them for Blog #4 in response to the final video and homework assignment.

**Measures**

I measured the frequency students responded to each blog, the type of response given, and the quality of the response. To evaluate the quality of responses, I scored the students’ blog responses on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) based on completeness, thoughtfulness, and insightfulness.

**Results**

To investigate my first and second research questions I examined the frequency of participation across all students in the online blog environment. Students posted 166 total responses of all types across all blogs. Specifically, students posted 73 responses to Blog #1. 15 were original ideas, 50 were responses to previous posts and 8 were a combination of original ideas and responses to previous students’ posts. On average, students responded 4.05 times to Blog #1. Students posted 51 responses to Blog #2. 14 were
original ideas, 33 were responses to previous posts, and 4 were a combination of original ideas and responses to previous students’ posts. On average, students responded 2.83 times to Blog #2. Students posted 42 responses to Blog #3. 12 were original ideas, 21 were responses to previous posts, and 9 were a combination of original ideas and responses to previous students’ posts. On average, students responded 2.33 times to Blog #3.

To investigate my final question I calculated the mean and standard deviation of students’ blog scores on each individual blog assignment. On average, students received higher quality of response scores on Blog #1 ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.70$) than they did on Blog #2 ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.61$) or Blog #3 ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.37$). It is important to note that across all blogs, the median and the mode quality of response score was 5.

Discussion

I implemented the blog activity to increase motivation among students to participate in class discussions about what it takes to survive high school. I thought that not only would students’ frequency of response increase as a result of the blog, but I thought that the quality of response would increase also.

The results indicate that students were not motivated by the introduction of technology to participate in the assignments posted on a blog. The majority of the students completed the first blog post and number of students who completed Blog #2 decreased, and the number of students who completed Blog #3 decreased further still. I conclude that while introducing the blog to the Surviving High School unit in my personal health class may have increased student participation on the first blog, participation steadily declined for the second and third blogs.

There are many possible explanations for the decrease in the frequency of responses by the students. One possible explanation could be that the blog topic being discussed was not interesting to the students and they thought of it as just another assignment. Another explanation could be that the novelty of the blog wore off toward the end of the assignment. Also, students may have been too busy to respond because of their workload in other classes. Most importantly, I believe the results highlighted the possibility of a confounding variable, student contentiousness. The results supported the conclusion that the conscientious students completed all of the blog discussions and would have done so whether it was a written assignment, a classroom participation assignment, or as part of a blog. Conscientious students would have completed the assignment on time, thoroughly, and thoughtfully, no matter what medium the assignment encompassed.

With respect to the quality of students’ responses, there was a similar pattern to the frequency of responses. The results support the conclusion that the first blog assignment was novel, increasing the quality of students’ responses, but the quality declined in the second and third blog post assignments. Though contraindicated by the results, it was my experience that allowing the students to ponder the classroom activities, prior to posting their responses on the blog, resulted in more thoughtful, insightful, and emotional blog
posts. If we would have participated in the activities, then immediately following engage in discussion, the students would not have had as much time to reflect upon their experiences and fully develop their emotions.

If I were to use blogs in the classroom setting more in the future, there are a few things I would do differently. First, I would do more research on the blogs that our students visit most often, to try to understand what makes them so appealing. I would take what I learned from those blogs and try and simulate that in my blog. Next, I would ask for student input when creating the blog, even going so far as to allow the students to create the blog. This would increase the students’ level of interest, which has a large influence on participation. I may also choose a blog that is more similar to social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace, to allow students to create a profile with a picture, a screen name, and provide some background information. This may also increase student participation, because their responses will be more personal and they may feel more ownership of the blog.

Ideally, I would like to allow students the autonomy to create and discuss the issues they feel are important about what it takes to survive high school. My role as a teacher would transform to more of a facilitator allowing students to post topics they would like to talk about, responding to these topics, as well as their peers. I would strictly facilitate the discussion and moderate the forum to insure topics and posts were appropriate and not inflammatory.

The implications for future research include research to refine the *Surviving High School* unit to meet the needs of the digital natives through focus groups of students and surveys. Also, I could employ different methodologies and pedagogy for implementing technology in different classrooms of personal health, and compare and contrast the results. Specifically, I could implement a blog in one classroom and use traditional written assignments in another classroom for the same unit. Lastly, it may be helpful to have the students take a survey about what type of learning methods they would be most motivated to participate in. To find out why they like blogs like Tumblr and what makes them so interested in it. I also think it would be important to investigate further, how to keep students’ interest in the blog once the novelty of the blog has worn off. Specifically I would focus my investigation on how to keep the frequency of student responses high during the second, third, and other subsequent blog assignments.

**Conclusion**

In sum, adding the Web 2.0 tool, a blog, to my personal health unit *Surviving High School* seemed to increase student motivation to participate in discussion initially. It also seemed to increase the quality of the responses in respect to thoughtfulness, insightfulness, and emotional expression. There are several changes I would implement if I were to continue to use a blog in this unit, centered on allowing students to provide feedback about the blog, or to create the blogs themselves. Future directions include investigating what is appealing to students about blogs, and how to keep their interest in the blogs once the novelty wears off.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Homework</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lesson: Navigation of the Blog page and blogging etiquette</td>
<td>Blog Discussion #1: “What does it take to survive HS?” Please share three thoughts that you believe are important to get through HS. Give an example or experience for each. Due at the start of the next class period. Respond to at least one classmate in one paragraph letting them know if you agree or disagree and your thoughts about it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Activity: Crossing the line… Watch the first 40 minutes of the Video</td>
<td>Blog Discussion #2: How did it feel as you crossed the line? Every time you cross the line you are stepping into a group with less privilege, less power, who can sometimes be abused simply for being who they are.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Activity: Labels Finish the Video</td>
<td>Blog Discussion #3: What was the purpose of the labels Activity? DO we have groupings here at KS? How are the different groups treated? Are students here at KS more alike or different? Why do you think I showed this movie?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Show MTV: “If you really knew me…”</td>
<td>Homework: Written Assignment. If you really knew me… What would I know? Be specific and tell me things that I wouldn’t know by looking at you. Blog Discussion #4: How did you relate to the students in this video? Do you have the same kinds of problems and struggle’s that these students have?</td>
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Figure 1. Blackboard assignment: If you really knew me…
References


