Blogs as an E Learning Strategy in Supporting Economics Education Students during Teaching Practice

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ABSTRACT Advances in technology, changing funding regimes and student profiles, and developments in learning theories, among other things, result in more and more higher education institutions embracing blended approaches to teaching and learning. In this changing landscape, many traditional assumptions and beliefs regarding teaching and learning are being questioned. Conducting and sharing research assists in redefining and re-imagining open distance learning (ODL) teaching and learning in the 21st century. Over the past few years, greater attention has been paid to the new generation of social media, especially Web 2.0 technologies. Recently, blogs have facilitated the formation of online communities and have thus come to fulfil more extensive functions in education. This paper explores the use of blogs as a Web 2.0 e-learning strategy in supporting postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) students who were learning to teach economics and management science education in ODL teaching practice ecologies. Data was collected through student teachers' (n=474) completion of five surveys on ODL teaching practice experiences. The findings revealed that blogs assisted students with reflective practice and reasoning, and added value to their learning experiences. Strategies were formulated for strengthening ODL teaching practice education.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century drastically changes the pedagogical assumptions of how our digital natives are taught. Schooling must provide more for students than a homogeneously assessed, predetermined, one-size-fits-all model, or it will fall short of the expectations of the contemporary classroom. What this means is that educators must find ways to create a curriculum that is driven by genuine student engagement in activities that have meaning to them and which are perceived by them as being valuable. The emergence of educational technologies and e-learning has introduced substantial improvements in the way courses are taught and delivered, making this new channel of education widely accepted. Today's college students spend lots of time on the internet and engaged in instant messaging, blogging, using Facebook or Twitter, downloading audio and video files, and online games in their daily lives. The challenge for institutions of higher learning is to make provision for a technology-integrated teaching and learning mode other than the conventional face-to-face method to accommodate the digital natives and empowering the digital immigrants. We cannot teach today as we were trained during the 1980s as there are huge differences when one compares the training we received to the current student profile, most of which students were born during the 1990s. Indeed, the internet and mobile technologies have questioned our assumptions about how learning and teaching are constituted.

This paper explores the reflections of economics and management science education student teachers during their ODL teaching practice. The focus of the paper was to gain a deeper understanding of how blogging supports reflective practice and learning experience during ODL teaching practice. Therefore, an interesting question guiding the paper was whether blogs have the capacity to support and strengthen reflective practice among economics and management science education student teachers. Following a review of relevant literature, the researcher provides an overview of the social networking theory for this paper, a discussion of the use of blogs in educational settings, the context of the study and explains methodological considerations, provide findings and make concluding remarks.

Literature Review

Social Networking Theory as a Construct

According to social network theorists, people tend to think of social media and networking

as relatively new phenomena. These theorists believe that many popular social media tools are built on concepts within social network theory, a pre-eminent research field within social constructivism, sociology and organisational behaviour (Yang 2009; Van Wyk 2013). Social network theorists examine specific dynamics within webs of interrelationships among people and firms. These interactions and interconnections are "social connections in a virtual globalised world" (Siemens 2005; Boyd and Ellison 2007; Panda 2010). In this paper, the researcher explores the concepts of social network theory that underlie the power and popularity of social media such as blogs as an e-learning facilitation strategy in an ODL context. Lecturers, educators or facilitators often see new technologies as a threat to their scholarly authority, precisely because these technologies require a rethinking of roles. However, this threat is realised only if people stay locked in a binary framework of lecturer versus student (in this case, student teacher). Moreover, Churchill (2009) is of the opinion that the concept of co-creation, by contrast, allows people to rethink and re-imagine the educational context as a "space" where lecturers and student teachers participate as members of a "community of co-creators, co-constructors and innovators of knowledge". Additionally, Glass (2008) argues that Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, which the researcher used in the study reported on here. In this study in particular, both student teachers and the lecturer potentially brought different technological pedagogical content knowledge and skills to the ODL platform, and therefore together set out on a collaborative community of practice learning journey.

The Use of Blogs as a Technology-Integrated e-Learning Facilitation Strategy

Halic et al. (2010) define blogs as a social media tool for communicative purposes only. In the context of this paper, they served as a technology-integrated e-learning facilitated teaching strategy to enhance and support economics and management science education student teachers through school-based learning in a creative and innovative way. Moreover, Van Wyk (2014) argues that blogs as a Web 2.0 e-learning strategy support economics education student teachers during teaching practice placements. Boyd and Ellison (2007) strongly agreed that

social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook are part of a larger suite of recent internet technologies that collectively fall under the heading Web 2.0, along with Twitter, blogs and wikis. Several scholars indicated that these social network sites could be used to support and embrace the Generation Y or digital natives (Prensky 2001; Siemens 2005). Furthermore, Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) raised a number of important questions about social network sites and their educational potential. Research studies have been conducted on the use of social network systems such as blogs and wikis in educational settings (Huffaker 2005; Divitini et al. 2005; Lin and Yuan 2006; Glogoff 2007). In other contexts, however, traditional computer-mediated communication (CMC) applications (for example, e-mail) are still used to enhance student communication and collaboration (Young 2003; Van Wyk 2014), and there were few attempts to compare blogs and traditional CMC applications. As a result, thus far research has failed to provide evidence of why blogs should be used in preference to traditional CMC tools. In addition, positive results emerged from several studies that blogs successfully contribute to students' online engagement (Anderson 2007; Glogoff 2007; Top 2012; Van Wyk 2013). Today's students spend a great deal of time on the internet, they engage in instant messaging and blogging, they use Facebook and Twitter, they download audio and video files, and they play online games, as they have grown up with these tools (Roberts et al. 2005). In the literature these students are termed "digital natives" or the "virtual generation" (Ajjan and Hartshorne 2008).

Blogs as a Web 2.0 Technology Application Tool in Teaching

The blog (short for "web log") is one of the most appealing Web 2.0 tools. It allows users to create personal journals and resource sites to share with their community (Makri and Kynigos 2007; Van Wyk 2014). Since their emergence alongside other online social media, blogs have become increasingly popular (Makri and Kynigos 2007; Charleston Observatory 2010) and are to be encountered in a variety of fields, including business, travel, sport and education. Educational applications of blogs include writing, researching, interpreting, interacting, reflecting, problem-solving, cooperating, sharing ideas and

expressing individual or group voice (Brescia and Miller 2006; Van Wyk 2013). For example, educators and students can use blogs in order to publish news and information about the course; collect learning resources; share ideas and experiences; interact in an online forum; improve researching and writing skills while preparing individual assignments; and develop collaboration and social skills in discussions of group assignments and projects (Churchill 2009; Van Wyk 2014). However, without suitable content, scaffolding and strategies in the learning environment, the use of blogs will not improve learning (Ellison and Wu 2008; Panda 2010; Top et al. 2010; Van Wyk 2013).

Blogs enable users to archive articles and comments contributed by the community, and to share these resources and findings with people outside the community who are interested in the topic. These features provide educators with further opportunities to use blogs in the classroom. Although many users adopted blogs as an individual reflective tool, little research has been conducted on how blogs can facilitate collaboration. Because blogging enables users to exchange ideas and to share experiences, blogs can be an ideal forum for social constructivist teaching (Van Wyk 2013). According to social constructivist theory, knowledge is generated through social intercourse and through this interaction people gradually interact on the blog to stimulate cognitive conflict among participants and provide participants with opportunities to express different perspectives. This approach suggests that learning may be more meaningful when students are able to exchange ideas and negotiate meanings with their peers in a social learning environment (Jonassen and Reeves 1996; Charleston Observatory 2010). Moreover, some researchers (Meyer 2003; Park et al. 2011; Van Wyk 2014) point out that this process can be more powerful when communication among participants is in written form, because it gives participants more time to reflect on and to better articulate their ideas. There are several tools that enable educators to begin the process of social interaction online in written form, and one of these is the blog.

Context of the Study

At the College of Education (CoE), the Teaching Practice (TP) office, which is a division of the School for Teacher Education, is responsible for the placement of student teachers. The TP unit is responsible for organising and supervising student teachers in the teacher education programmes. All students registered for the PGCE and bachelor of education (BEd) programmes are expected to devote 25% of their time to teaching practice (for BEd students this is 12 weeks and for PGCE students 10 weeks per module; a module is a year in duration). The CoE currently produces 55% of the teachers who enter the South African education system (Unisa 2012). At present, student teacher enrolment is approximately 22 000, and this poses an enormous challenge to the administration and learning management systems of the TP unit. School visits for on-site assessment are arranged, but are insufficient, and other means must be developed to support students during their teaching practice. For the purposes of the study, all registered PGCE (Senior and FET phase) economics and management science education (LADEMSJ) students were linked to the LADEMSJ subject didactics module on myUnisa during the ODL teaching practice placements. Only registered LADEMSJ students (n=474) completed five online surveys, accessed via myUnisa (http://www.unisa.ac.za/myUnisa/LADEMSJ/Blogs).

Emanating from the context of this study, the purpose of this paper explores the use of blogs as a Web 2.0 e-learning strategy in supporting PGCE students who were learning to teach Economics and Management Science in ODL teaching practice ecologies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Design

A constructivist-interpretive research paradigm was employed for the study, which explored the use of blogs by Economics and Management education students during ODL teaching practice placements. Therefore, the focus of this study is to gain deeper understanding of students' views of how blogs supported them during their teaching practice placements.

Sampling

All registered PGCE students (N=1345) were linked to modules on myUnisa during the ten-week ODL teaching practice placements. Only

LADEMSJ students (n=474) completed surveys accessible to registered students by module on myUnisa.

Data Collection Instruments

Four hundred and twenty-four (n=474) PGCE LADEMSJ student teachers completed the on-line surveys accessible to students registered for this module on myUnisa. The instruments for this study were the *Benefits of Instructional Blogging Scale* (BIBS), *Classroom Community Survey* (CCS), *Course Satisfaction Survey* (CSS), and *Perceived Learning Scale* (PLS). The BIBS (Brescia and Miller 2006) was adapted for this study; the CCS (Rovai 2002) was used to measure students' sense of community; the CSS, developed by Ellison and Wu (2008), was employed to measure students' course satisfaction; and the PLS (Rovai 2002) was used to measure students' perceived learning through the use of blogs on the myUnisa web page during ODL teaching practice.

Data Analysis of Surveys

The data collected from the online surveys was analysed by descriptive means (internal re-liability test, mean and standard deviation scores and Pearson correlations) to examine student teachers' sense of the perceived benefits of blogspace, social and learning community, course satisfaction, and perceived learning in ODL teaching practice ecologies which incorporated blogs on myUnisa.

Ethical Considerations

An application was submitted to the ethical committee of the College to conduct the research. Before the commencement of the study, the students' consent (n=474) was obtained. Also, the purpose of the study and the value attributed to confidentiality were explained. The blog was accessible only to registered (n=474) student teachers; the fact that it was a closed system gave participants a sense of security and allowed them to feel comfortable in engaging with others regarding teaching practice issues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Data was analysed and presented in terms of mean scores, standard deviations, reliability and correlations between survey results.

Table 1: The characteristics of blogs: mean and standard deviations (n=474)

Identified educational characteristics of blogging	Mean	SD
Blogging has its greatest instructional potential for those who maintain a blog throughout their college careers, using it as a knowledge log and personal content management system	3.66	2.39
It provides opportunities to take what is learned in the classroom and express it to those in the public eye – just as they will have to do in the real world	3.07	1.23
It assists in overcoming the fear of expressing yourself outside of the "safe" environment of the classroom	2.19	0.89
It leverages teaching to outside class hours	2.62	1.52
Students can "blow off steam"	2.11	3.10
Students' free writing allows a clearing of the mind to do more formal writing	2.89	2.39
Blog interactivity: students can comment and ask questions	3.01	0,85
Joint, decentered, authorship: students can be tasked to provide content	1.81	1.22
Blogs are easy to use	2.10	1.17
Blogging is perhaps the easiest way to get students writing online in an electronic space that is outside of courseware	3.22	1.28
Blogging has the potential to support a number of goals for writing classes as well as content classes	2.77	2.31
Blogs have reasonable potential to support "extra-curricular composition"	2.66	2.17
Blogs have the ability to link to other documents	1.76	0.92
Blogs can be used to demonstrate the complexity inherent in the internet/website	3.18	1.09
Blogs can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of a site – how long people spend on each page, what proportion complete their "transaction," etc.	3.26	2.49
Blogs can be used to track individual behaviours to learn about how people use a site	3.56	1.20

Note: The instrument made use of a 1-to-4 Likert-type scale where 1=Strongly disagree with the statement, 2=Disagree with the statement, 3=Agree with the statement, and 4=Strongly agree with the statement.

With reference to Table 1, several identified educational characteristics of blogging are presented. Respondents rated the impact of blogging on instructional quality on a Likert scale. The three characteristics of blogs selected as having the greatest impact on teaching and learning in ODL teaching practice course were as follows: blogging has the greatest instructional potential for those who maintain a blog throughout their college careers, using it as a knowledge log and personal content management system (mean 3.66); blogs can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of a site – how long people spend on each page, what proportion complete their "transaction" (mean 3.26); and blogs can be used to track individual behaviours to learn about how people use a site (mean 3.56). These findings revealed that students who used blogs as a social media tool felt that blogging was an opportunity for self-expression and self-reflection as a means to achieve professional development to be the greatest benefit. The observation that students can "blow off steam", for instance, shows that students are given the opportunity to take in new material, ideas and thoughts, process these, and then provide some form of feedback on or synthesis of this new thinking. Reflection is an important component of effective instruction, and blogging has a dual benefit in this regard, as it allows for a higher level of application than might be afforded by other, more traditional forms of instruction that are bound by specified meeting times. A number of research studies focused on the use of blogs as e-learning journals in various courses in higher learning environments (Williams and Jacobs 2004; Huffaker 2005; Lin and Yuan 2006; Kirkup 2010; Top et al. 2010). According to Yang (2009), users participate more actively when using Web 2.0 technologies than when using the previous social web-based environments. More-

over, Top et al. (2010) and Van Wyk (2013) are of the opinion that these technologies, which include blogs, e-learning journals and wikis, help both teachers and students to create, communicate and publish online content more easily. Owing to their ease of use, functionality and flexibility, they have become much more commonplace throughout the online environments. These attributes of Web 2.0 technologies make them well suited for use as social teaching and learning media in higher education (Ajjan and Hartshorne 2008; Ellison and Wu 2008; Churchill 2009). In a similar way, blogging may be an excellent resource to support what was termed by Wenger (1998) communities of practice.

As can be seen from Table 2, Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient was higher when compared to the original scales on all five of the surveys used in this study. All five data collection instruments were validated for the purpose of this study. Students considered blogs to be more beneficial for social community use (M=3.69, SD=0.43) than for learning community use (M=3.49, SD=.89). Evaluation of students' perceptions of the beneficial usage of blogs during teaching practice indicated that blogging promotes learning through an ODL community of practice (M=3.69, SD=0.73) and that their perceptions of learning were moderate (M=3.05, SD=0.48). However, with regard to social community in the course (M=3.49, SD=0.89) and students' course satisfaction (M=3.41, SD=0.58), perceptions were moderate. Top (2012) conducted a similar study on the use of blogs as a social medium in undergraduate courses. The results indicated that the pre-service teachers who participated had positive feelings about the collaborative learning and perceived learning, but had moderate feelings relating to a sense of community in the classes, which incorporated blogs. In order to investigate whether any cor-

Table 2: Internal reliability, correlations, means and standard deviation (n=474)

Five surveys on student learning	Originalá = 0.7	New á= 0.7	1	2	3	4	5
1 Benefits of blogspace	0.79	0.82	1				
2 Social community	0.78	0.82	0.56*	1			
3 Learning community	0.78	0.90	0.24	0.48*	1		
4 Course satisfaction	0.77	0.79	0.33	0.23	0.26	1	
5 Perceived learning	0.83	0.89	0.22	0.19	0.38*	0.51*	1
Mean		3.69	3.49	3.41	3.05	3.15	
SD		0.73	0.89	0.58	0.48	0.68	

* p<0.01

relation existed between the perceived benefits of blogspace, social and learning community, course satisfaction, and perceived learning in ODL teaching practice ecologies, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed. The identified benefits of blogspace had statistically significant correlations with social community (r(474)=.56, p<.01) and learning community (r(474)=.48, p<.01). Course learning community (r(474)=.38, p<.01) and perceived learning (r(474)=.51, p<.01) were found to have a positive and statistically significant correlation with student teachers' ODL teaching practice learning.

In the current changing landscape, many of the traditional assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning are being questioned. Therefore, researchers need to have a clear idea of how they are conducting and sharing research and innovation that may help them to redefine and re-imagine ODL teaching and learning in the 21st century. Over the past few years there has been an increasing interest in the new generation of social media, especially Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 technologies (Powell et al. 2012). There has been a connectivity movement towards the use of information and communication technologies in ODL educational environments. These technology-integrated teaching strategies, especially social media networked technologies, support the teaching and learning environment and offer new opportunities for both students and e-facilitators. In particular, Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 technologies such as blogs, YouTube, wikis, and Facebook, have been found both to be beneficial tools for education and to provide social interactive communities of practice environments (Brescia and Miller 2006; Ajjan and Hartshorne 2008; Top et al. 2010; Van Wyk 2014). Furthermore, there is evidence of a growing need to integrate social media into the e-learning classroom (Ellison and Wu 2008; Top et al. 2010). Therefore, this study was designed to examine student teachers' sense of the perceived benefits of blogspace, social and learning community, course satisfaction, and perceived learning in ODL teaching practice ecologies which incorporated blogs (the LADEMSJ module). Blogs as e-learning tool during the ODL teaching practice placements made several positive contributions to the students' perceived learning, sense of community, course satisfaction and collaborative learning. This particular finding echoes those of a number of scholarly works on blogs

as a supportive e-tool (Churchill 2009; Halic et al. 2010; Cakir 2013; Van Wyk 2013). In the study reported on in this paper, the student teachers had positive feelings about collaborative learning and perceived learning; also, they had moderate feelings concerning a sense of community in the classes which incorporated blogs. For example, the student teachers mostly agreed that these social media helped them to share their knowledge and experience, and allowed them to discuss the course topics with their peers outside the classroom. These results were consistent with the findings in the literature on student blog experiences in class (Williams and Jacobs 2004; Goktas 2009; Halic et al. 2010; Enriquez 2012; Cakir 2013). In addition, students exchanged ideas and felt part of a learning community through blogging in the class. They were generally satisfied with collaborative learning experiences, although they valued the face-to-face learning environment. Table 2 displays the correlations between the selected student teacher characteristics and perceived learning in the economics and management science education course. Research cited in the literature revealed that one of the best predictors of perceived learning appears to be the sense of community in a classroom, which incorporated blogs (Petersen et al. 2006; Yang 2009; Halic et al. 2010; Enriquez 2012). Moreover, Halic et al. (2010) report that blogs as a supportive tool enhanced students' perceived learning as a predictor for successful learning in a community of practice. The study reported on here echoes the aforementioned studies in that sense of community and computer knowledge levels were identified as significant predictors of perceived learning. According to Killeavy and Moloney (2010), arguably the most important skills that student teachers in this case demonstrated were the ability to express themselves appropriately and the ability to differentiate between modes of communication, to make appropriate judgements about available information, and the ability to elicit relevant information from fellow economics and management science education student teachers. As Zimmerman and Trekles-Milligan (2007) argue,

Students must develop critical thinking skills and literacy in online communication, since those who possess well-developed communication skills across platforms, along with problem-solving skills and technological ca-

pability, will be the ones who excel in today's digital world – and tomorrow's. It is our task as educators to help our students gain those skills. (p.10)

To take this a step further, strategies to strengthen ODL teaching practice education, in the case of economics and management science education student teachers in particular, are a matter of urgency. Below this study identifies and reports on a number of such strategies.

Strategies for Strengthening ODL Teaching Practice Education

With regard to the use of blogs as an e-learning strategy, student teachers in particular require specific technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPCK) in addition to basic computer literacy and internet skills if they are to be effective e-facilitators in an online approach. Economics and management science education student teachers who participated in this study discovered the value of ongoing reflective practice as a critical component of professional development and lifelong learning. Furthermore, it is important to support and train student teachers as competent e-facilitators of blogs as an e-learning tool for effective classroom teaching. The ODL teaching practice office needs to educate student teachers in the application of computer literacy skills, information communication technology skills, and collaboration skills for specific educational and professional purposes. Student teachers requested formal training to acquire these skills so as to be able to use Web 2.0 tools effectively in their learning and in future as digital librarians. In particular, Aharony (2009) emphasises the importance of IT training for students, the future information professionals, to equip them adequately to navigate the ever-changing information landscape. This was precisely what this exploratory study revealed in terms of how blogs as social media for ODL teaching practice enhanced students' teaching competencies. Aharony (2009) and Van Wyk (2014) indicated that Web 2.0 tools are vital for supporting students during their studies. A case study carried out by Glass (2008) provides an example of the inclusion of Web 2.0 tools in information and communication learning programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and Al-Daihani (2010) confirms that students need more training to acquire the nec-

essary skills for the optimal use of Web 2.0 tools. The results of the current study are supported by several research studies on the advantages of including Web 2.0 tools such as blogs in curricula. ODL lecturers need to be aware of several related issues, including effective ways to facilitate and guide blogging activities, connect in-class discussion to online discussion, protect participants' privacy, and encourage participants to voice their views on the blog. In fact, any discipline in which reflective practice is an integral part of professional development may look towards blogging and ICT as e-learning strategies for learning.

CONCLUSION

This paper reported that blogs as Web 2.0 technology strategy positively supported and assisted students with reflective practice and reasoning, and added value to their ODL teaching practice learning experiences. In this case blogs were used as an e-learning teaching strategy to engage student teachers as participants in evaluating their perceptions of blogs by critically reflecting on their lessons during teaching practice placements. Student teachers indicated that blogs have the greatest instructional potential for those who maintain a blog throughout their college careers. They believed that blogs can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of blogspace, and to track individual behaviours to learn about how fellow student teachers use a site. Student teachers' perceptions of the benefits of blogspace had statistically significant correlations with social community and learning community. Course learning community and perceived learning were found to have a positive and statistically significant correlation with student teachers' ODL teaching practice learning. It is evident that blogs are a popular form of social media that have enormous potential and have recently come to be used to a significant extent in higher education. These findings revealed that students who used blogs as a social media tool identified the opportunity for self-expression and self-reflection as a means for professional development to be the most significant benefit of blogging. The findings further revealed that blogs as an educational tool empowered and supported PGCE student teachers who were learning to teach economics and management science in ODL environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The renewed interest in heutagogy (self-determined learning) is partially due to the ubiquitousness of Web 2.0, and the possibilities offered by technology-integrated learning provided an extended research opportunity in an ODL environment. More research is needed to explore student teachers' different blogging behaviours in an online ODL course context.

The present study was subject to certain limitations. The first of these concerns was the sample size: only a small number of student teachers (n=474) participated in the study. In future research, an effort to include a more diverse and representative sample of student teachers will be necessary. The second limitation was the time factor. This study was conducted over a period of just three months; a longer investigation period would perhaps yield different results. The third limitation was the accessibility of and connectivity to internet services in certain areas during teaching practice placements. This was a serious concern for some student teachers, as was limited or lack of technological pedagogical content knowledge regarding the use of blogs as an effective e-learning tool.

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