CONNECTING DISTANCE LEARNERS AND THEIR MENTORS USING BLOGS
The MentorBlog Project

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In this article we describe the MentorBlog project, which facilitated the mentoring of trainee teachers in the postcompulsory education sector through the use of blogs. In an experimental design, the study compared their experiences with students who received traditional mentoring. Blogs were used by the trainees to communicate with their mentors over the course of a complete academic term. The article highlights the importance of mentoring in the teacher education process, and argues that blogging can be a useful and viable alternative when students are not able to meet face-to-face with their mentors on a regular basis. A number of key blogging affordances are identified, including reflexivity, permanency, and immediacy, which can either encourage or undermine successful mentorial dialogue. We also identify dissonance as a barrier to full dialogue in mentoring and show how it can be a problem due to the archiving features on most blogs. The article concludes with some recommendations for the future wider deployment of blogs as mentorial tools for distance learners, and proposes an extension of the project to include the use of mobile phones as a route to providing "any time, any place" mentor support for nomadic students.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of new web tools and services has created a number of previously unavailable possibilities for teachers and learners alike. The social web has rapidly developed and has delivered a vast array of media rich open content services such as social networking and blogging tools. The new web tools have opened up an entirely new online environment in which readers can also become writers, and where collaborative learning becomes more readily achievable. One of the most successful social web tools—the "blog"—is the focus of this study.

BLOGS

The blog has already enjoyed a short but successful history in education. It has been heralded as a transformational tool for teaching

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and learning (Anderson & Kanuka; Williams & Jacobs, 2004) and as a disruptive technology (Kop, 2007). Blogs have been used for a variety of purposes in teacher education, as a means of generating elements of work-based electronic portfolios (Chuang, 2008), and as a way of promoting peer support and peer learning (Hall & Davison, 2007). Their use has been evaluated favourably across a diverse range of educational settings, including clinical education (Kamel Boulos, Maramba, & Wheeler, 2006), postsecondary education (Leslie & Murphy, 2008), higher education in general (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) and in more informal learning settings (Stefanone & Jang, 2008). As an evolving form of social software, the functionality of the blog has gradually extended beyond simple online reflective diaries, offering readers the opportunity to interact with the writer through the posting of comments directly to the blog within a like-minded community (Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008). Blogs also have an archive feature where a history of posts is presented in reverse chronology, providing users access to a complete record of what has gone before. The hypertextual dimension of the blog should not go unmentioned. The ability to embed hyperlinks, hypermedia (such as video and audio), and images into the blog also serves to enrich the content generation options of the writer. Although blogs are generally used to reflect personal opinions, they have communication with others at the centre of their purpose (Kop, 2007) and are therefore potentially powerful dialogic tools. They promote learning through collaboration, and the sharing of knowledge and best practice (Hramiak, Boulton, & Irwin, 2009; Ojala, 2005). Finally, blogs encourage deep and continuous learning through regular reflection and also through knowledge management (O'Donnell, 2006). Reflective journal writing and peer feedback, both of which are achievable through blogging, may also enable teachers to detect barriers to good practice. Reflective writing helps them to change their teaching beliefs and so implement strategies that promote transformative teaching (Sock-

man & Sharma, 2008). Thus, reflection on practice can make change possible, and also provides practitioners with the information required to "develop guidelines for setting new needs, goals, and plans" (Yang, 2009, p. 11).

Several criticisms have been levelled against blogging as a learning tool, but in comparison to the benefits that are cited these could be considered significantly lower in magnitude. Kerr (2006), for example, suggests that reverse chronological ordering of entries can run counter to good scholarship. Berman (2006) warns that blogging can become obsessive and addictive for some students, distracting them from the real business of study, while Smith (2006) argues that the brevity of most blog posts precludes any real academic value from being found in their content. From an examination of the preceding review, such objections may appear trivial, and it appears that the benefits of blogging for student teachers outweigh any disadvantages that may be perceived. By far the most serious problem would seem to be the loss of interest and impetus experienced by many bloggers who start off with good intentions of posting regular entries, but whose enthusiasm tails off after a short while (Kamel Boulos et al., 2006). Evaluation would be incomplete without an examination of the affordances of the blog.

BLOG AFFORDANCES

Reflexivity

In the context of human computer interaction, actions and possibilities perceived by the user within a technology or tool are called affordances (Norman, 1988). For the purposes of mentoring, by far the most important facet of blogging is its potential to promote reflexivity (Xie & Sharma, 2005). Reflective learning can be encouraged through the asynchronous nature of blogging, where conversation is developed over a period of time, but it can also be observed in the writer's careful drafting and redrafting of post compositions.

Reflective learning is a means of achieving normalized autonomy by validating personal experience, revealed through introspection. This process sits at the heart of teacher education programs today, with education embedded within a wider project of "personal growth," "critical reflexivity," "self appraisal," "reflection in practice," and "reflection on practice." Pre- and in-service trainee teachers are encouraged to reflect regularly, as reflexivity and reflection in and on action are recurring themes throughout the programme. Schön (1986, 1991) proposes a process of "reflection-in-practice" by which professionals engage in a continuing dialogue with the changing situation of their practice. In so doing, the relational interaction between the mentor and practitioner is able to draw on each interlocutor's "knowledge-in-practice" and "knowledge-of-practice" from their own and others' reflections on, and enquires into, practice.

Immediacy

Immediacy is another affordance of blogging we wish to identify. Immediacy is perceived by many students as the extent of tutor responsiveness through a mediating technology. The asynchronous nature of blogging would appear to preclude high levels of immediacy, but this would be erroneous, as it is not essentially time based. Immediacy is not about how quickly a response arrives, but the nature of the response. Terse or abrupt communication through e-mail can actually create negative impressions of reduced immediacy. Teacher immediacy, for example, can reduce the perceived distance between teacher and students (Andersen, 1979). Immediacy conveys warmth, suggests approachability and availability, and has been demonstrated to be an important feature of positive mediated tutor support. Blogs may tap into more personalized and warm responses than other electronic communication methods, due to the possibilities of reciprocal self-disclosure.

Persistence

Blogs provide a feature that enables readers to visit the entire posting history. Each entry is time- and date-stamped and displayed in reverse chronological order. Unlike face-to-face conversation where dialogue is fleeting and where verbatim records are not kept, the blog records in accurate detail all that has been written, including the exact time and date it was posted and responded to. While such recording and persistence of dialogue can be a daunting prospect for some, it should also be seen as a valuable affordance, for example, to track an individual's learning progress or to maintain a reflective record over a period of time.

Provisionality

Provisionality is a feature found in all text processing tools, where nothing is permanent and all content can be edited, copied, pasted, and remixed at any time (John & Wheeler, 2008). Generally, bloggers post only final versions of their narratives to their blog site. This is a form of impression management or text-based performance, where only the version the writer wishes to present is made public. Ostensibly, a great deal of editing is undertaken prior to publication of a blog post in most instances, requiring thoughtful authoring and reflective representation of this thought in textual form.

MENTORING SCHEMES

Mentoring has been traditionally conducted on a face-to-face basis. Student teachers are each assigned an experienced practitioner or "wise counsellor" who has the responsibility to support them as they engage in their professional practice. The role and functions of mentors are outlined in the literature and in government initiatives (DfES, 2004). The last 20 years has witnessed a spectacular growth in the use of mentoring internationally and across a range of contexts. Mentoring has become a central

element of initial training and professional development in business management, nursing (where it is known as "preceptorship"), teaching, career guidance, and many other spheres of professional practice (Colley, 2003). It is increasingly apparent that mentoring assumes an important role within policy solutions and practices in a wide range of contexts, and it is important that it is applied as a key feature of initial training in public service professions such as healthcare and teacher education (Long, 1997).

Long's (1997) research into the mentoring of in-service teachers confirms that a variety of misunderstandings and frictions can arise. Maguire, Ball, and Macrae (2001) reported that a substantial number of students in placement felt "bullied" by their school-based mentors. Long (1997) claimed that one common theme to emerge from the literature was that mentoring was a beneficial and desirable process that abounds with rewards, not only for the participants but for the organizations as well. In her critique, however, Long also recognized some of the "dark sides" to mentoring. She highlighted a number of concerns that were revealed from her investigations, some of which can be aligned to data presented and discussed in this study. She found, for example, that there are often tensions between student and mentor, resulting in the formation of a poor relationship.

Successful mentoring needs a professional context that enables sufficient generosity of spirit to find expression in the relationship. However, bureaucratic tensions may prevail to make this problematic. For instance, Hochschild (1983) highlights some of the difficulties of what she calls the "emotional labour" involved in the mentoring process, where the mentor should present an ideal role model of the employable worker, and of rational action within a normative framework dictated by the employers' needs. Long (1997) also acknowledges that the mentor role requires a great deal of dedication and imposes many demands upon the mentor, which may explain the rela-

tive scarcity of those willing to take on such additional professional commitments.

Previous assumptions about mentorial competence in teacher education may be unfounded. Additionally, Colley (2003) maintains that given the plethora of ways in which mentoring is defined as a practice, it remains essentially a contested concept and not always the ideal way to proceed. It was hoped, therefore, that this research might be able to highlight important alternative choices to the face-to-face scenario that could possibly ameliorate "unsuccessful matching" or compensate for the lack of a subject specialist.

RESEARCH METHOD

The MentorBlog project was conducted to enable students who worked at a distance from their mentors to engage regularly in dialogue using a two-person blog. The research team monitored and analyzed content as it was generated, but did not intervene directly at any stage of the mentoring process. This was to eliminate any observer effects and to ensure that any external influences over the mentor-mentee relationship would be minimized. Student teachers and mentors were recruited on a purely voluntary basis, and with no monetary reward or course credits. Recruiting was initially slow, with few students volunteering, possibly due to the unfamiliar nature of the blog as a communication tool for mature learners. The expectation for those students agreeing to participate was to regularly write down their reflections in either their reflective diary logs or in their online blog. Each participant student was then expected to make these available to his or her mentor to comment upon.

An experimental method was chosen to compare the experiences of the conventionally mentored students using logs (the control group), against those using shared blogs at a distance (the experimental group). Three students in the distance blogging group and three in the on-campus face-to-face group, together with their mentors ($n = 12$) participated in the

study for a period of at least one full term, and in most cases, for the entire academic year. A qualitative exploration of the reflective diaries and blogs was periodically conducted using content and thematic analysis. Upon completion of the first term, each student was interviewed and transcripts made, prior to further thematic analysis. Both lead researchers independently annotated the transcripts and then met to agree on emergent themes. Student and mentor names have been changed and assigned initials to protect identities, and all students and their mentors participated on the understanding that they could withdraw from the project at anytime without any penalty.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Some interesting findings emerged from analysis of the diary and blog entries, and interview data that are pertinent to the deployment of blogs as mentorial tools. First, it was observed that students who kept conventional logs were generally more consistent throughout their record keeping than those who communicated through the blogs. There are no specific clues from the data as to why this might be, but we can speculate that diary keeping is a more familiar means of record keeping, is more easily accessible, and therefore more spontaneous than blogging. Second, the data so far seem to indicate that mutual engagement of the face-to-face mentoring, if it is a positive relationship, may more effectively impart pedagogic phronesis (practical wisdom) than its blogging counterpart. However, this dissemination of wisdom simply confirms some of the previous research as discussed above, in that its success depends on the personalities (successful matching) and, crucially, the quality of the relationship.

There was a mixed response from the conventional students about the quality of mentoring. One student (SB) reported that having face-to-face contact with her mentor (LW), if only for 2 minutes, was far more valuable than an electronic communication method (e-mail-

ing). This "mentor effect" had some positive outcomes. SB said that her mentor supported her both emotionally "She has a calming manner," and practically "[She] can spontaneously supply a useful handout." SB claims that "the quality of contact is not at all effective in e-mails." In contrast, another student (LS) may have benefited from using a blog, as the proximal skills of her mentor were reported as occasionally lacking. In her diary log, LS wrote, "it is difficult to stay composed in such close proximity." She continued, "I can hear myself saying, hold on GB (the mentor), can't you say something positive?" There appeared to be considerable and prolonged tension between LS and her mentor GB, in that he would not allow her to teach without him being in the classroom. She said that *"I have accepted that my mentor prefers to be there"*… and continued by saying that "in many ways the observation days by university tutors can be a bit of relief for me because of the change… he actually wanted to stay in during the observations as well, and I think I explained that that was just a bit too much, I mean you can only take so much observation." Later, knowing there was no alternative mentor available, she said "I was conscious that there wasn't anywhere else to go." Yet another female student (CS) felt that the face-to-face style of her mentor was "suffocating and cloying." CS suggested that "constantly being evaluated … it gets too much. It's Big Brother watching you … it is too overbearing." Other than these comments, the data so far reveal mostly positive perceptions of face-to-face mentoring.

Overall, the distance group were more mixed in their responses to the use of blogs. Six months into the project, one blog student (TB) and his mentor failed to initiate a mentoring relationship, possibly due to unfamiliarity with the system, time limitations, or perhaps due to perceptions that the blog is more impersonal or removed from the face-to-face mentoring experience (Farmer, Yue, & Brooks, 2007). Another factor may have been that blog mentors need to be proactive in seeking out their students' posts online by making the

effort to switch on their computers and log in, whilst face-to-face mentors simply respond to their students' reflections spontaneously within the meetings.

By contrast, another student (JR) posted regularly to his blogs from the start of the project, and engaged at length with his mentor through mutual commentary on postings. Significantly, the majority of comments on this blog were written by the mentor, and most posts by the student. Recently, during a quiet and inactive period, when asked how he found the blog, JR said: "I find the blog extremely useful," and reported that he appreciated the ability to revisit his postings as a recorded archive, a reference to the affordance of permanency of blog content. JR reported there was one occasion he was too busy to write to the blog for a few weeks. He expressed a strong desire to continue communicating with his mentor using this method and, after a short break, his blog postings recommenced.

However, it emerged that the blog mentorial relationship was not completely equitable. JR noted that his mentor's responses were often "stock answers … he had to have a 'company line' and respond appropriately to what the company would say … and the appropriate policy." Later JR confided that he had contributed a blog post in which he wished to discuss the subject of "crossing the line"—on how appropriate relationships could be managed between teachers and their students. However, after a period of time, no response had been received from his mentor. It could be argued that the mentor formality of quoting policy may have been because the mentor was "a kind of boss" resulting in some tension between the dual roles he performed and also because of the greater conspicuousness of a published blog compared to spoken, transient dialogue. It could be argued that there was potential for the mentor's position to be compromised—that there might be dissonance—between the roles of "boss" and "mentor."

Long's (1997) findings that mentoring of in-service teachers fomented misunderstandings and frictions were echoed in some diary comments. CS, a student teacher in this study, said her mentor gave her too much feedback: "it got too overbearing … it becomes too much." This may be partly due to unsuccessful initial matching, but a more pragmatic, alternative explanation might be found in the dearth of available specialist mentors. Moreover, Long's research revealed that students frequently reproduce their mentors' work and styles of professional engagement very closely—as another student, LS, revealed: "My mentor's style of teaching wasn't what I could do, or necessarily wanted to do." There are similarities here to Foucault's discussion on "objectification of the self," which suggests that it can become a "technology of the self" engendering "docility" (Foucault, 1988), which can hamper the trainee's idiosyncratic practice style.

Schön discusses the notion of "rigour versus relevance," where decisions are often made in the "swampy lowlands" in which government policies and resulting mission statements are subject to "interpretation" by practitioners. As a face-to-face mentoring relationship develops it could be argued that some informal discussions ensue where unofficial practices are discussed in the guise of policy interpretation. This did not happen with JR, who, for example, was quoted "policy and stock answers," which may have been why he later felt the need to "seek advice, checking, checking, that things were what I thought they were." The mentor may have been aware of some of these informal practices but his role as "boss" (superordinate) was in tension (incongruent) with his role as mentor, occasionally engaging in self disclosure, which created inner conflict and stress that required resolution.

Such lack of congruence is echoed in Festinger's concept of "dissonance," which is exhibited as an emotional or cognitive imbalance, where two conflicting cognitions arouse strong emotions that fail to harmonize (Hewstone, Stroebe, Codel, & Stephenson, 1994, p. 7). The mentor chose to adopt a formal mode of dialogue due to his conflicting

dual roles. Had some mentor training been initiated, as happens with both full- and part-time teacher training (Placement and Work Based policy documents 2008-9) to include clear guidance on expectations of the mentor role and an ethical protocol for sensitive issues in translating the "ideal" into the "real," the mentor could have used informal text and JR may have received more than just "stock answers." However, JR said at one point in relation to the blogging experience that "my mentor let me down a little bit, I thought he had lost interest." With physical proximity in face-to-face engagement, the mentor is often present whether or not he or she wishes to be, which by its very nature can facilitate further social interaction.

Dissonance may not be restricted to the dialogic process in mentorial relationships. It may also emerge as an artefact of the affordance of permanency in blog archives. In most blogs, all posts are stored and presented in reverse chronological order. Mentors who are aware of this feature may be reluctant to post certain comments or entries to the blog because, unlike a spoken dialogue, every written exchange can be preserved for both parties to revisit and scrutinies. Blog post archives, of course, are generally a positive utility for both student and mentor, but they can also militate against self-disclosure and honest discussion if either side is reticent about committing their thoughts to permanency. This issue may be more widespread in the information age, as it may also be present in a number of other electronic communication methods such as texting and e-mail.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The MentorBlog project has already yielded some useful findings that will inform future deployment of blogs in professional training contexts. The project is still embryonic, and we expect further useful data to emerge as it develops. One plan is to extend this project into the next academic year to include more students across the postcompulsory teacher education sector. There is also an option to include students who are training as teachers in the compulsory sectors of education, but this has been less expedient, as most students are co-located with their mentors within their placement schools. Face-to-face and blogging methods of mentoring both have their advantages and disadvantages, but both appear to equally fulfill their aims within their specific contexts. Where blogging is implemented as a formalized mentoring tool, it must be presented as a nonthreatening option (Ojala, 2005), not imposed upon students by lecturing staff (Farmer, Yue, & Brooks, 2007), and as having authentic pedagogical purpose and outcomes (Kop, 2007). Ultimately, students should be given control over what is written and the blog should be made fully accessible to the mentor for it to be successfully implemented. The mentor's responsibility is then to respond with appropriate comments of a supportive and instructive manner and in a timely fashion.

The mentor should be responsible for initiating the first blog posting to include an introduction to his or her role, outlining any ethical protocols, and a contract of learning, which the student is then asked to respond to. The second posting, again from the mentor, could include a short personal narrative to include self disclosure, such as hobbies and interests, to encourage formal and informal dialogue. It would be anticipated that the student might respond in a similar fashion thereafter.

There is a need also for additional activities to be built into the system of mentor blogging, with rewards to maintain the interest of both participants. This might include the posting of links to interesting articles, mentor examples of lesson plans, or pertinent images that mimic the copresent experiences enjoyed by face-to-face mentors and mentees. Rewards should cover both the professional aspects and the personal (hobbies, etc). These extra curricula activities could be in addition to the weekly postings laid down in the contract and should

be encouraged irregularly to reinforce and reward checking behavior. Initially, this might be initiated by the mentor to model a behavior pattern. "Modelling" is a term attributed to "social learning theory," notably in the work of Bandura (1977). If the mentor models this type of behavior pattern and the mentee follows, then both are rewarded with feedback from the extra curricula activities, which reinforces and conditions checking behavior. Within a reciprocal face-to-face relationship this often occurs naturally—for example, derived from departmental gossip or through individual self disclosure. Extending these benefits to distance relationships is the significant challenge.

Blogs are learning tools in their own right, and should not be seen as simply a way of providing information online (Hall & Davison, 2007). However, they are very useful as shared spaces for reflection and dialogue where participants are separated by distance. Ultimately, as has been indicated in previous studies, blogging will only be successful if students have the choice to participate, and can see a utility in its use, and where no other method is available or possible (Farmer et al., 2007; Kamel Boulos et al., 2006).

Future plans will extend MentorBlog to include nomadic students, such as military personnel, health workers (e.g., nurses and health visitors), and those working in the prison service (prison officers and trainers), who tend to study on the move or in multiple contexts and locations (Wheeler, Yeomans, & Wheeler, 2008). These students will be able to post to their blogs by text and read comments from their mentors using mobile devices such as cell phones. There are plans to test mobile blogging or "moblogging," for its reliability, usability and utility to ascertain whether it can be a viable means of communication for nomadic teaching students and their mentors. Any significant findings on extensions to MentorBlog will be reported in future articles.

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