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## **Weblogs as dynamic learning spaces**

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### **Abstract**

Blogs are firmly established as an online communication medium. People are talking about them. They are listed in Google searches. Mainstream media have mixed feelings about them. They are also powerful reflective learning spaces. Research on their potential within learning is still relatively scarce. They have however been associated with collaborative activities, knowledge sharing, reflection, debate, and facilitation of communities of practice.

Reflection has traditionally been undertaken in isolation, in private spaces such as journals. This no longer needs to be the case. Blogging affords us the opportunity to share our reflections with others globally. The ensuing conversations can lead to deeper learning and are found to be more interactive than other forms of online discussion. The learner's reflective thinking therefore becomes more constructive and meaningful.

This paper explores the connections between blogging, reflection, and learning and what this might mean for the distance learner and educator.

### **Introduction**

The integration of information and communication technologies, especially socially oriented Web based technologies, are providing new possibilities for both the processes and the content offered in distance education (Anderson, 2005; Dickey, 2004). The growth in flexible learning options enabled by electronic media has promulgated the concept of 'learning anywhere, anytime' associated with distance learning. Mejias (2005) believes this has reinforced the prioritisation of the individual over the social; the individual's time, goals and interests are considered the most important. Added to this is the fact that distance learning is perceived and experienced by many as a lonely way to learn (Anderson, 2005; Dickey,

2004). Addressing the social aspects of learning has persisted as a major challenge for those involved in the provision of distance education.

Dewey (1966) and Freire (1996) have both highlighted in their work that social experiences are a critical component of learning. This view is reinforced in social constructivist thinking which asserts that 'knowledge creation is a shared rather than an individual experience' and 'knowledge evolves through a process of negotiation within discourse communities' (Prawat & Floden, 1994, p.37). Mejias (2005, p.4) comments that: 'the benefits of a socialised learning experience can outweigh the benefits of an individualised learning experience, because it forces the learner to apply the knowledge through interaction with the world'.

The emergence of social software is providing new possibilities for social interactivity in the distance learning experience. Social software has been defined as not only a group of software which supports a variety of social functions online but also by the historical moment which saw its widespread adoption by users of the Web which is necessary for a network to function (Mejias, 2005). This emergence and acceptance of social software is enabling the inclusion of social interactivity to be more readily integrated into distance learning programmes, while still preserving some of the advantages of personalisation.

Social software is in a state of continuous development and improvement. This is driven by one of two things and both of these are directly relevant to distance education: (1) the ability to be able to handle 'larger networks of users in ways that allow the individual to still derive some meaningful social value from the experience', and (2) 'the challenges of providing more 'intimate' or authentic' (closer to everyday life) social experience' (Mejias, 2005, p.3)

Blogs, a commonly used contraction of weblogs, are one example of these new tools which fall under the category of social software. They have begun to capture the attention of educators as a learning tool which is understandable given their widespread popularity and acceptance as a web based communication tool (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Technorati, a real-time search engine which keeps track of the blogosphere - the world of blogs - reports that there are approximately 75,000 blogs created on a daily basis (*About Technorati*, n.d.). Bloggers, the people who write blogs, reportedly make 1.2 million posts daily, which equates to approximately 50,000 blog updates an hour (*About Technorati*, n.d.). These figures provide one snapshot of the reality of what is going on in the public domain of the blogosphere. They do not include those bloggers who choose to keep their blogs private. Nor do they include the increasing number of blogs being created within closed or password protected systems, such as intranets and learning management systems.

Published blog statistics are fraught with inconsistencies (Bialik, 2005). Yet, no matter which figures you refer to, the indicative trend is that the number of blogs being created and maintained is increasing at such a rate that Henning (2005) refers to this growth as a blogging geyser: 'This sudden growth was like a geyser: dramatic, unpredictable and trending vertical'. Unfortunately, there is not an equivalent growth in the research literature on the subject of blogs; either

generally, or on the topic of their potential in learning (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Research based empirical evidence on the advantages of blogs for learning is also minimal (Boddington & Cooper, 2005).

Blogs allow people to easily publish their ideas and thoughts on the Web. They engage people in a conversation because of their capacity for interactivity. As a result users of the Web are no longer passive consumers of information. Instead we are witnessing an upsurge of active participation and the development of an individual's unique voice. Educators and learners alike can take advantage of blogs as dynamic spaces for critical thinking and reflection. Traditionally, a person's reflections have been restricted to private spaces such as journals. This is where these thoughts usually remained unless they were assessed as part of a learning programme. Even then the reflections did not necessarily result in any kind of change or action.

This paper will investigate the options offered by blogs as reflective learning spaces for both educators and learners as networked learning becomes ever more prevalent, especially in a distance learning context.

## **What is a blog?**

There are many definitions of blogs available online and in the literature. At the most basic level a blog is defined by its format – a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order with the most recent posting appearing first (Blood, 2002; Walker, 2003).

Blogging purists claim that blogging began in 1992 along with the first web site (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). These 'blogs' did not resemble our current understanding of a blog. Early bloggers were required to at least have a basic level of HTML – hyper text markup language - coding skills, and most of them were computer programmers and web designers (Blood, 2002). The emergence of easy to use free blogging tools altered everything. The most notable of these tools was Pyra Lab's *Blogger.com* which first appeared in August 1999 and in 2003 was purchased by Google (Gillmor, 2003). For the first time anyone was able to create and maintain a blog without requiring any programming knowledge or skills, as long as they had an Internet connection.

The events of September 11, 2001 have been considered by many writers to have been a defining moment in drawing the public's attention to the potential of blogs as a communication tool (Downes, 2004). Blogs have led to a shift in focus from the Web itself, to the Web as a two-way medium enabling the creation of social networks and the publication of information. Blood (2002) points out that:

The power of the weblog is in its form, not in the tool used to create it. But many of the people now making weblogs would be unable to exploit the form if it weren't for the tools that are now available. Just as email has made us all writers, weblogs have made all of us publishers.(p.x)

One of the unique characteristics of blogs is that they are native to the Web. Blogs are not the digital version of something that is already in existence in another medium. They were entirely born of the Web – their format, their reliance on links, their immediacy, and their connections to each other (Blood, 2002). This new form of personal publishing reflects the personality of their owners who give them life (Downes, 2004).

Scoble and Israel (2006) propose that there are six major differences between blogs and any other form of communication. Namely, blogs are:

1. Publishable by anyone. Minimal expense is required and there is no limitation on how often a blogger can post to their blog. Each posting is instantly available worldwide via the Web.
2. Findable through search engines. Each blog post is assigned a permanent hyperlink (permalink) making it possible to search for all their postings through the blog's archiving facility.
3. Social. Geographic borders become non-existent and the blogosphere has developed into one big conversation on topics as diverse as their creators. The *Comments* feature on blogs plays a role in this process.
4. Viral because information often spread faster through blogs than through the more traditional methods. An example of this is reflected in the comments of Cooper (2001) in relation to the events of September 11:  
If you were scouring the Internet for news and context during those first terrible hours, you could have done a lot worse than eavesdropping on the free-wheeling mini-universe of Web logs chockablock with first-hand info and spirited commentary about what was going on ... the information was fresh and real and unmediated by any intervening institutions ... bloggers far and wide merit serious praise. Because they help tell the story.
5. Syndicable. The ability to be able to subscribe to blogs through RSS (Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary) feeds means the information comes directly to the reader instead of them having to search for it.
6. Linkable. Hyperlinking to others is a vital component of the networking functionality of blogs.

There are no specific rules or guidelines on the practice of blogging - blogs are as diverse as the writers themselves. However, writing for what is termed the *Living Web* – 'the part of the web that is always changing' – does provide certain challenges as pointed out by Bernstein (2002):

Every revision requires new writing, new words that become the essence of the site. Living sites are only as good as today's update. If the words are dull, nobody will read them, and nobody will come back. If the words are wrong, people will be misled, disappointed, infuriated. If the words aren't there, people will shake their heads and lament your untimely demise.

In reality some blog posts are short, others are longer. The majority use hyperlinks to external sources and some bloggers link to previous posts they themselves have written. The process of ascribing a URL (Uniform Resource Locator) to each post within a blog helps with the management of the content created. There are some things you expect to see but then there are often surprises as well. New media are consistently being added into the milieu – for example, video, photos, audio – thereby creating rich interactive learning experiences.

## **Blogs as learning spaces**

Personal online journals also emerged during the late 1990s. Even though they were developed independently of blogs there is considerable confusion over the differences between them (Downes, 2004). All too often blogs are inaccurately described as online journals akin to the traditional concept of a diary which contains a daily record of a person's life.

One of the major differences between these two writing forms is the concept in blogging of hyperlinking to other people's sites and useful resources. The intention of a blog is to share with others and to draw them into a conversation about what the blogger has written. In essence they are inviting feedback on their thoughts, ideas, and reflections. In contrast online journals tend to remain private to their owner. Most online journals are merely an electronic version of the type of writing which would have taken place within the confines of a bound book.

The impact of blogging in the process of learning takes time to develop and this will be discussed in more detail later in the paper. Initially, the blogger just views the blog as a form of publishing, but over time this view changes as it begins to resemble a conversation (Downes, 2004). One of the key criteria for these developing conversations to be successful is that they have a clear purpose and they need to remain unconstrained.

Richardson (2004) writes that blogging is a new genre of writing in learning, which has:

... great value in terms of developing all sorts of critical thinking skills, writing skills and information literacy among other things. Blogging, however, offers students a chance to a) reflect on what they are writing and thinking as they write and think it, b) carry on writing about a topic over a sustained period of time, maybe a lifetime, c) engage readers and audience in a sustained conversation that then leads to further writing and thinking and d) synthesize disparate learning experiences and understand their collective relationship and relevance. This just seems to me to be closer to the way we learn outside of school, and I see those things sorely lacking anywhere in traditional education.

Richardson highlights a concern expressed by many educators on the way these new technologies are being adopted into learning environments. There is a tendency to want to use new technology in old ways rather than rethinking our practice and adapting it accordingly. This is one of the reasons why to date the full potential of transforming the learning process using multimedia and e-learning has not been realised in any significant way (Mejias, 2005). Unfortunately, the transmission model is still dominating education (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

## **The blogger's brain**

A widely accepted viewpoint is that we learn from our experiences. In the 1980s Kolb published his four stage experiential learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (McDrury & Alterio, 2002). The standard application of this cycle is for the learner to be asked to reflect on an experience, to generalise the experience to other situations, to work out how they will convert these thoughts into action, and then finally to evaluate the outcome of that action. Zull (2002) has linked Kolb's experiential learning to biology: "the concrete experience comes through the sensory cortex, reflective observation involves the integrative cortex at the back, creating new abstract concepts occurs in the frontal integrative cortex, and active testing involves the motor brain ... the learning cycle arises naturally from the structure of the brain" (pp. 18-19).

The world inside the brain and the world outside the brain must be connected in order for learning to occur (Zull, 2002):

We learn by both getting information from the outside through our concrete experience and by putting information back to the outside by our actions. We learn from the outside in, and from the inside out. (p. 209)

Drs Fernet and Brock Eide questioned the effect blogging was having on the brains of bloggers from a neuroscience perspective (Eide, 2005). In their paper *The Brain of the Blogger*, published on their Eide Neurolearning Blog, they highlight the fact that our mental activities cause changes to the structures of our brains; not just what we think but also how we think. After surveying the range of materials presented in the blogosphere they concluded that:

1. Blogs can promote critical and analytical thinking
2. Blogging can be a powerful promoter of creative, intuitive, and associational thinking
3. Blogs promote analogical thinking
4. Blogging is a powerful medium for increasing access and exposure to information
5. Blogging combines the best of solitary reflection and social interaction

This last point links directly to the underpinning belief that blogging actively promotes the development of learning communities. From an educational

perspective Garrison and Anderson (2003) believe that a community of learners 'is composed of teachers and students transacting with the specific purposes of facilitating, constructing, and validating understanding, and of developing capabilities that will lead to further learning' (p. 23). This type of community encourages cognitive independence and social interdependence simultaneously. Ultimately the learning community becomes 'a fusion of individual (subjective) and shared (objective) worlds'.

Blogs enable such a learning community to develop and are supportive of the process and practice of reflection (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003; Farmer, 2004). A study by Dickey (2004) investigated whether or not blogs could help distance learners with the issue of feeling isolated in their learning. She found that blogs supported the emergence of community by affording the opportunity for learners to "socialise, interact and enter into dialogue, seek support and assistance, and express feelings and emotions" (Dickey, 2004, p.288). Being able to express emotions is an important motivating factor in reflection and blogging (McDrury & Alterio, 2002), as is the emergence of an individual's voice (Oravec, 2002). The feeling of connectedness is reinforced through the increased communication that takes place with other bloggers (Boddington & Cooper, 2005).

## **Learning, reflection and blogging**

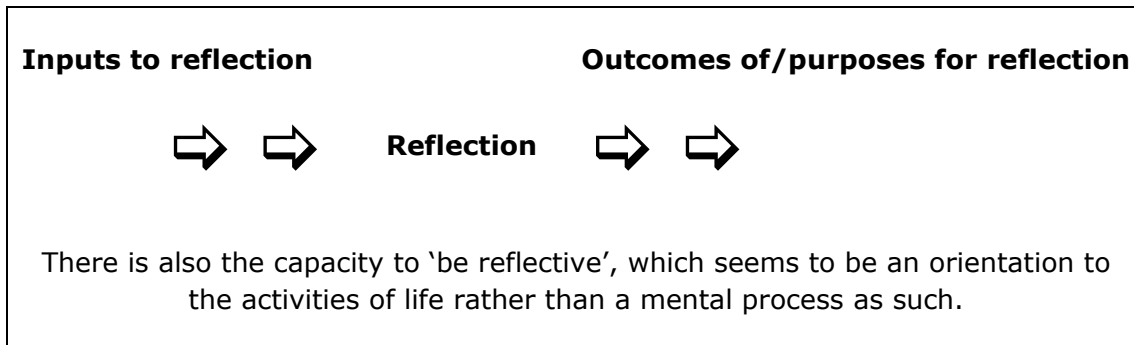
Reflection and learning share a symbiotic relationship  
(Andrusyszyn & Davie, 1997).

A worldwide reawakening is in progress regarding the role of reflection in learning. Educators and learners alike are questioning and exploring the options new technologies can offer to expedite the process of learning. In particular, educators from a variety of disciplines are actively encouraging their learners to 'learn about themselves and their areas of study by engaging in reflective activities' (McDrury & Alterio, 2002, p.19). The aim is to provide learners with opportunities which are rich and relevant so that they are better able to make meaningful links between theory and practice; contextualising is of primary importance to today's learner.

On the other hand, many people have an inability to express or share that which they know within; the person themselves may not even be aware of this intuitive or tacit knowledge they possess. Argyris and Schön (1974) believe it is important to reveal to oneself the inconsistencies that exist between our 'espoused theories', what we think is happening and why, and 'theories in use', the reality of what we are actually doing.

Moon (2004) expresses concerns over the disparity between the understanding of the role of reflection in the learning process and its application which she believes is often guided by assumptions or guesswork. By developing an input-outcome model of reflection Moon has firmly linked reflection to the process of learning. Simply put (refer Figure 1), this model takes 'what we know' (inputs) and through the reflection "we create a series of outcomes that then represent the purpose for

which we would reflect” (Moon, 2004, p. 100). Some examples of outcomes from this model of reflection include: learning and the material for further reflection, action or other representation of learning, reflection on the process of learning, critical review, the building of theory, and self development.



**Figure 1.** An input-outcome model of reflection (Moon 2004, p.100)

Every time we express ourselves we are giving form to our experiences. Retrospective reflection provides an opportunity to return to the experience to recapture it in as much detail as possible, focus on feelings associated with the experience, and to re-evaluate the experience in order to link new learning to old and therefore consolidate the learning from experience. This is when deep learning occurs (Boud, 1993; Boud, 2001; Moon, 2004; Rosie, 2000).

Traditional journal writing has been used extensively to enhance reflection, especially in educational contexts. Journal writing can be used to enhance what we do and how we do it in our professional practice, and in all aspects of formal and informal learning (Boud, 2001). However, many learners find the reflective observation stage of the experiential learning cycle challenging (McDrury & Alterio, 2002). Journaling tools in are now incorporated as core components of many Learning Management Systems (LMSs) such as Moodle and Blackboard. However, in all these instances the journals are written for a limited audience – usually for the individual learner, or as a dialogue between the learner and their teacher (Andrusyszyn & Davie, 1997).

Blogs have the ability to transform the way we reflect and the outcomes of that reflection. Through the process of blogging we can now share our thoughts very easily with a global audience. The ensuing conversations can lead to deeper learning and are found to be more interactive than other forms of online discussion. An individual’s reflective thinking therefore becomes more constructive and meaningful. Here are a few examples of comments from researchers and bloggers (refer to Appendix 1 for further examples):

Weblogging enables reflection both individually and collectively in systematic ways that allows individuals, colleagues, and others to tap into a network that gives something back, something more than the good feeling of simply articulating what’s in our brain in writing (Sessums, 2006c).

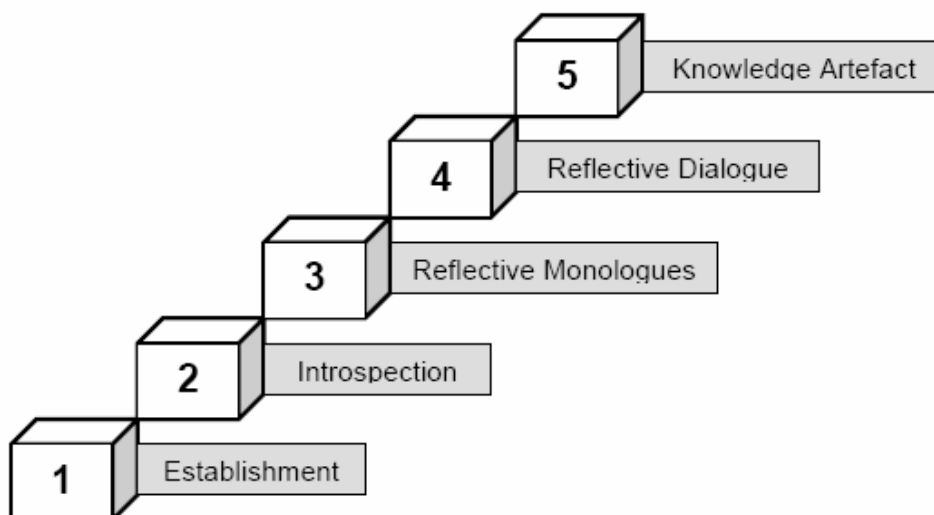
Blogging serves many of us as both *action* and *reflection*. It becomes a process for sorting out thoughts and creating identity. It reflects back an image of who I am and who I want to be. It is a thinking, feeling, and organizing experience. When I blog I create my own *rules*. And yet these rules require that I take responsibility for them. If I am feeling spontaneous and share something shallow and baseless, then I must accept the consequences of my remarks. In this sense, blogging is an externalization, of my inner life (Sessums, 2006d).

Online reflection has the potential to significantly alter the students' perceptions of themselves as education professionals and perceptions about the power and validity of their ideas (Hernandez-Ramos, 2004, p.5).

### **Blogs and the reflective learner**

If reflective learning is an intentional process which leads to deeper learning, how could blogs be used to develop a reflective learner?

Bartlett-Bragg (2003) has been using blogs in her teaching practice. She has developed a five stage blogging process (refer Figure 2) based on her experiences which she believes describes the process of enhancing reflective learning through blogging: stage one – establishment; stage two – introspection; stage three – reflective monologues; stage four – reflective dialogue; and stage five – knowledge artefacts. The learner progressively takes more control of the blogging process and associated with this is a movement from surface learning through to deep reflective learning (refer to Table 1).



**Figure 2.** The five stage blogging process (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003)

There are similarities between this process and Salmon's (2003) e-Moderation model of teaching and learning online which was developed from her action research on the use of asynchronous communication technologies. Blogs are also asynchronous. This form of communication naturally lends itself to a number of advantages for learning at a distance: for example, you can respond at any time of the day or night, and you can spend as much time as you need formulating your responses (Boddington & Cooper, 2005).

**Table 1.** Using blogs with learners: the five stage blogging process (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003)

<b>Stage 1</b>	<b>Establishment</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blogs are set up</li> <li>• Practice of recalling and recording learning events initiated</li> <li>• Structured questions are provided as a guide</li> <li>• Learners encouraged to share their blog URL with others</li> <li>• Lecturer makes clear she will not read the blogs on a regular basis</li> <li>• Entries are clearly intended for the lecturer to read</li> <li>• Postings express sentiments not expressed in the contact classroom</li> </ul>	
<b>Stage 2</b>	<b>Introspection</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraged to continue recording learning events</li> <li>• Starting to pay attention to their emotions and evaluation of the experience</li> <li>• 15 minutes allocated at the beginning of the classroom session</li> <li>• Structured questions provided</li> <li>• Focus on introspection</li> <li>• A shift away from consciously writing for the lecturer</li> <li>• A growing awareness that blog can be read by anyone</li> </ul>	
<b>Stage 3</b>	<b>Reflective monologues</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflective process beginning to happen</li> <li>• 15 minutes still allocated at the beginning of the classroom session</li> <li>• More responsibility handed to learners for their posts - only topic suggestions are given</li> <li>• Most learners are making more frequent postings and spending allocated time in class to summarise these</li> <li>• Surface learners display resistance towards reflective deeper learning and express their feelings about this in their blogs</li> <li>• Emotions are expressed relating to their learning and are not directed towards the intended reader</li> <li>• Evidence of well thought out short paragraphs and development of questioning techniques in blog posts</li> <li>• Writing appears to be for themselves</li> </ul>	

#### **Stage 4 Reflective dialogue**

- Encouraged towards a deeper reflective process
- Asked to consider their style of expression, intended audience, and publication of their thoughts
- No classroom time allocated for blogging
- Intentional push towards self-directed blogging and learner takes full responsibility for content
- Some learners stop contributing to their blogs. These learners may require more time in Stage 3.
- Learners acquire their 'own voice'
- Learners are personal knowledge publishing in a more considered writing style
- The learners are constructing a type of learning conversation or dialogue

#### **Stage 5 Knowledge artefacts**

- Learners are reflecting on the knowledge learned and they are providing guidance to readers
- Learners are reading each others blogs and they are commenting in them by sharing their experiences and opinions
- Learners are totally aware of the blogosphere as both writers and readers of blogs
- Evidence of critical thinking and deep reflective qualities of learning in their blog posts

Bartlett- Bragg (2005) is undertaking further research on this model. At this stage she is unable to report on any significant findings. Nonetheless, learners have reported greater understanding of their subjects through publicly writing, researching, and participating with others through their blogs. One of the most valuable aspects of the blogging experience has been having access to experts and other professionals beyond the boundaries of the classroom. One other positive aspect identified by learners has been the ability to categorise and manage the learning content in a personalised manner. The negative features include having difficulty learning how to use the technology effectively, working out how to identify and establish networks, being unsure about having their writing publicly available, and a lack of motivation to post regularly.

As blogging slowly makes its presence felt in the learning context educators are beginning to share their experiences and provide suggestions as to how this new communication tool can be used. The majority of this is being reported in the blogosphere itself.

## **Blogs and educational research**

Mortensen and Walker (2002) wrote about their personal experiences of using blogs for research purposes. This is a good example of the role of blogging in a reflective learning context. Both women were undertaking their PhDs and a considerable amount of their research was done online. They began to blog as a way of focusing while online but 'they soon developed beyond digital ethnographers' journals and into a hybrid between journal, academic publishing, storage space for links, and a site for academic discourse' (Mortensen & Walker, 2002, p.250). They found that their blogs became tools which they utilised to think about their research, its values, connections, and links to other aspects of the world. Blogging influenced Mortensen and Walker's approach to online communication and it also influenced the way in which they each wrote up their dissertations.

Walker (2005) comments:

I rapidly found that the daily writing was helping me become more confident about my research, and that I was developing a clearer voice of my own that carried through into my dissertation writing. As colleagues began to blog, I developed a research network at least as important to me in my everyday research as my local colleagues were (p.113).

Since blogs can be published instantly there is more spontaneity and informality in the writing style. Researchers are able to blog about 'half-thought, naked ideas' and share these with others just as you would if you were having a face to face conversation (Mortensen & Walker, 2002). This can help the researcher to formulate their ideas and it also records them somewhere, because all too often these thoughts get lost.

## **Challenges (or opportunities)**

As with the introduction and use of any new technology there are challenges on a number of different fronts when implementing blogging in a learning context: technological, organisation, pedagogical, and personal. These would need to be considered from both the perspective of the learner and the educator.

Farmer and Bartlett-Bragg (2005) identified that 'educators have struggled with participation, getting learners to extend themselves in the environment, conducting collaborative tasks using blogs, and the challenges of renegotiating *private* reflective tasks into the public arena' (p.198). Sessums (2006e) attempted to use blogging as a component of a professional development programme. He found a number of issues arose from this experience for the participants: time management, fear of the Internet, and information overload.

There are numerous other challenges which have not even been touched on here such as computer and network literacy skills, ethical issues, and intellectual property concerns.

There is no magic answer to any of this. There are many questions that have yet to be asked, let alone answered. The blog world is however slowly tackling many of these issues in a direct way – through their blogging. The challenges can be turned into opportunities if we want them to be. They will help us to move beyond old paradigms of teaching and learning but this will all take time.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has briefly explored the connection between blogging and learning. The use of blogs as a communication tool is still in its infancy, yet there is already evidence that they offer many opportunities for learners and educators involved in distance education.

Blogs and other social software are enabling us to integrate learning as a natural part of everyday life. The boundary between formal and informal learning is slowly becoming blurred as a result. The literature that is beginning to emerge on the use of blogs as dynamic learning spaces in formal learning is demonstrating the need for educators to work with learners in a holistic way so that deep learning which has a lifelong impact can occur.

However, a note of warning - there is a danger to become consumed by the tool. The power of this new communication technology is not the tool itself but those of us that choose to use it and participate in the wider community of users.

It is the people who make learning happen, not the technology.  
Mejias (2005, p.4)

The best way to learn about the possibilities afforded by blogs and blogging to learning is to become actively involved yourself. Go and create your own dynamic learning space by becoming a blogger!

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## **Appendix 1: Thoughts from bloggers**

### **Rebecca Blood (2000)**

Shortly after I began producing Rebecca's Pocket I noticed two side effects I had not expected. First, I discovered my own interests. I thought I knew what I was interested in, but after linking stories for a few months I could see that I was much more interested in science, archaeology, and issues of injustice than I had realized. More importantly, I began to value more highly my own point of view. In composing my link text every day I carefully considered my own opinions and ideas, and I began to feel that my perspective was unique and important.

### **Anne Davis (n.d.)**

I think I'm a better writing teacher now than when I previously taught it in my classroom. I was bound within 4 walls and had been taught to work at getting a good final product. I was not a writer myself. That's the most important part I was missing. Blogging myself shows my students that I value writing and I realize the hard work it requires. I also have learned how the larger community can be a powerful motivator. I want my students to know that feeling. The other missing piece in my writing classroom was a truly authentic audience for my students. I have found that blogs help us move away from thinking of writing as a 5 paragraph essay or a set of steps to move students through. Blogs give us an avenue to teach writing (blogging) as a cluster of complex thinking and writing behaviours that provide ownership to the student and the possibility of getting a multitude of responses from others. We have to orchestrate that. Yes, it takes time but we can truly model this process through our own blogs and provide the type of environment to support young writers and give them the challenges necessary to foster writing development. What a joy!

### **Christopher D. Sessums (2006a)**

For me, blogging is a social act. I like connecting with others. I like to share my thoughts and receive feedback from others. Blogging is a way for me to test my ideas out. As a future professor, writing and publishing determines whether or not I will be retained by a college. Professors are supposed to be contributing to the larger body of knowledge that exists in their area of expertise and blogging is an easy way to do that (it's almost as if the blogosphere were a perpetual conference). Blogging affords me the opportunity to contribute to the larger conversation and network with others of like and unlike minds. I think what I love best about blogging is that it allows me to peer into the thought processes of others.

### **George Siemens (2006b)**

I personally blog to learn. The few minutes spent reflecting on an article or concept creates a deeper level of learning than is typically associated with skimming and reading. Additionally, it allows me to move into a dialogue with peers. This dialogue is not always direct - i.e. we aren't talking to each other or commenting on each other's blogs. Instead, we have parallel conversations where we read and reflect on ideas and formulate our own responses. For me, blogging

is my primary tool for making sense of what is happening in the educational and technological spaces.

**Derek Wenmoth (2004)**

The discussion got me thinking about the ways in which Blogs are used, and the connection with Gladwell's thoughts about connectors and mavins in his book *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell defines "connectors" as people who have a much wider social circle of friends than most others, while "Mavins" are those who have the unique ability to gather information from a variety of sources and piece it together in a way that others can access and understand. Both of these sorts of people, Gladwell claims, have what he terms "social power" (as distinct from economic or political power) - and it is this power that is likely to be a dominant determinant of change in the future.

My musings are around what an ideal tool a blog provides for these sorts of people - and how the tool itself, might encourage these attributes in many others! Truly an instrument of social empowerment and social change!