Developing sustainable learning communities through blogging

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Students have an uncanny ability to outpace faculty ability to master technology. Blogging, texting, flash video and other methods of electronic communication have supplanted more mundane methods of communication. In this paper, it is proposed that instituting a perpetual blog that encompasses a course taught by multiple faculty members will foster a sustainable community of learners with infinite possibilities of collaboration. A common blog effectively links multiple sections of a common course and will remain viable, useful and accessible long after an individual course has ended. Moreover, an effective blog can eliminate artificial barriers between different sections of the same course and provide a foundation for perpetual learning. Finally, the Socratic Method can be utilized as an effective teaching methodology in on-line blogging.

Keywords: blog, blogging, constructivist learning, Socratic method

INTRODUCTION

There are several shortcomings relating to the traditional delivery of undergraduate course curriculum. For example, most colleges and universities offer multiple sections of the same course. These courses are generally facilitated by full-time and adjunct faculty with little if any "linkage" between competing sections. The question, then, is whether it is possible to effectively link multiple sections of the same course offering in a manner that would benefit students. And if so, can this linkage be established by the institution of a common blog where the delivery of concepts, course material and student observations are shared between classes that share a common curriculum? Most importantly, it is not sufficient for students to complete a particular class and thereby deem their study in a particular area complete. The question, then, is whether it would be possible to create an environment that fosters a continuation of learning and exploration beyond the completion of a course or area of study. Further, would the linkage between different sections of a course offering further create a consistency and continuity among multiple faculty members?

What is a blog and why use one?

A blog may be defined as a website and is commonly maintained and moderated with entries including text, graphics and video (Blood, 2000). Faculty at the University of San Diego School of Business have instituted a blog in Business Law I and Business Law II (Custin). The basic format of the blog includes an ongoing discussion of class topics, frequent video, links to reference material, and class announcements. Common class offerings share a single blog. One significant benefit is that a blog provides quick reactions to current events (Johnson, 2006). Another benefit is that many students previously unwilling to actively participate in the classroom setting are more than willing to participate in the on-line setting (Vengrof, & Bourbeau, 2009).

A set percentage of the student's overall grade may be earned by general participation, which can be through in class participation and/or participation in the on-line blogging activity. While the initial plan was to require a set level of student participation in the blog, it was discovered that there was significant student dissatisfaction when the professor required a certain number of responses per student and/or mandatory responses to a specific discussion topic. Voluntary participation in the blog has led to substantive and meaningful discussions of course topics.

The blog also has significant incidental benefits to the class. Students are required to frequently *view* the blog for class announcements, discussion topics and video. The blog contains valuable resources, including an on-line law dictionary, statutory law, and material useful to students considering law school. Topical discussions that would ordinarily end at the close of class are continued as on-line discussions.

Developing a common nexus between different sections of the same course offering

Blogging has been described as a dynamic type of interaction that fosters desirable communication in the classroom (Lohnes, 2006). In a "traditional" class structure where there are multiple class offerings, students are by definition unable to benefit from classes other than the

class they are enrolled in. This lack of connection or nexus between competing class offerings results in a myopic view of course material. A joint blog shared by all sections of a common course will provide significant benefits to instructors and students. The intent is to intentionally blur the traditional but artificial lines between multiple course offerings.

By using a common blog, multiple course offerings can share resources such as video, research tools and relevant articles. All students and instructors share a common database including a weekly topic, articles, and ruminations on class discussions, reading and lectures.

The Socratic method in undergraduate education

Once a common blog is created, the issue remains as to what would be the optimal role for the administrator (i.e., the professor)? The role of the administrator in an academic blog can best be described as Socratic in nature. Perhaps unfortunately, memories of law school are often overridden by personal experience with the Socratic Method. The Socratic experience was popularized by Scott Turow's book, *One L* that introduced readers to the first year of study at Harvard Law School (Turow, 1977). A subsequent television series brought the Socratic Method to life in the persona of Professor Kingsfield, played by legendary actor John Houseman. As instructors, many purposely avoid the Socratic Method with the understanding that undergraduate students lack the experience and maturity to fully participate in the rigors imposed by the process of questions and answers (Lampe, 2006). Many professors use a kinder and gentler approach with undergraduate students by adopting in part a Socratic approach to teaching that more resembles a conversation and a prelude to class discussion.

It appears that a major obstacle to using the Socratic Method is the "intimidation factor" and a student's willingness and ability to respond to questions in person in an open forum. An unfortunate consequence of using Socrates as a role model is that this can reinforce the power imbalance between teacher and students (Morrell, 2004). Students often become self-conscious and are reluctant to express their opinions in class. The question is therefore presented: Whether the Socratic method can be adapted to an on-line discussion of issues that are ordinarily presented in an open classroom environment?

Experience with the blogs suggests that undergraduate students are much more willing to respond to a Socratic approach in an on-line format (Whiteley, 2006). Today's student is extremely comfortable with a myriad of on-line communication tools including email, texting and blogging. The traditional and time tested Socratic Method will stimulate on-line discussion as well as effectively moderate student participation and thoughtful contributions within the learning community. An on-line application of this technique provides a less threatening environment more conducive to undergraduate study. (See Appendix A, an actual thread from a business law blog).

Another way to approach the comfort issue is by selecting a student from each class to be a co-moderator. The instructor as moderator takes a Socratic approach on the blog by stimulating discussion by asking questions that in turn are met by student responses. Questions by the co-moderator (student) are often followed by answers and potentially more relevant questioning.

Developing a community of perpetual learners

When students complete a course of study within a major they often deem their study completed.   It is not unusual to hear students comment that they are done with business law after completing an established course or sequence of courses. This artificial compartmentalization may be detrimental to overall learning. For example, legal issues often arise in marketing and accounting. Economics has a business law overlay. Management requires a comprehensive understanding of law relating legal issues to hiring, termination and potential actions considered discriminatory under state and federal law. A discussion of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 might be appropriate in Business Law, Law & Society or Human Resource Management courses. Ultimately, the goal is for a university to produce well-rounded students who understand the nuances and connections between disciplines. Academic blogs are pedagogical step in the right direction (Williams, & Jacobs, 2004).

THE BLOG AS A CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING TOOL

E-learning in the form of blogs helps promote constructivist learning. What is constructivist learning? According to report on Learning Management System for the Technology School of the Future (Seitzinger, 2006):

[C]onstructivist learning should engage students in meaningful learning . . . and the critical features in that learning should be . . .
*Active and manipulative, engaging students in interactions and explorations with learning materials and provid[ing] opportunities for them to observe the results of their manipulations
*Constructive and reflective, enabling students to integrate new ideas with prior knowledge to make meaning and enable learning through reflection
*Intentional, providing opportunities for students to articulate their learning goals and monitor their progress in achieving them
*Authentic, challenging and real-world (or simulated), facilitating better understanding and transfer of learning to new situations
*Cooperative, collaborative, and conversational, providing students with opportunities to interact with each other to clarify and share ideas, to seek assistance, to negotiate problems, and discuss solutions (Seitzinger, 2006, pp.4-5).

How can constructivist pedagogy be facilitated through a blog? Will Richardson, the man behind Weblogg-ed.com, a widely read blog about edublogging (using Weblogs in education), equates blogging with learning (Richardson, 2006). Richardson quit his job to pursue the possibilities of blogging in education. He writes: "there is energy and a potential in this tool . . . and in these connections that for me, at least, is incredibly intriguing . . . We need to get everyone, and I mean everyone access to the knowledge and people and ideas that now make up the Web. Educators need to be part of this evolution, and maybe the revolution, too" (Richardson, 2006). Posting blogs publically on the Web can lend a measure of authenticity to learning tasks (Seitzinger, 2006). Students are forced to think carefully when articulating their opinions on the blog (Seitzinger, 2006). Moreover, the blog and its comments can evolve into a community of learners. Konrad Glogowski, a PhD student researching the use of blogs in primary education, deprived his class of their blogs for a few weeks while transferring platforms. Based on student reactions, he observed that: "This experience has confirmed my belief that

blogging is about creating communities . . . What they missed was *situated writing*, a cognitive activity situated within a specific space that fosters cognitive engagement. They missed interactions, interactions with texts and each other *through* texts" (Glogowski, 2005).

One key characteristic of constructivist e-learning pedagogy is that it be "active and manipulative." According to Jackie Meirs' research report, one way this may be accomplished is by integrating links to websites into the blog (Meirs, 2005). In the early years, simply clicking buttons to navigate a site was considered "interactive." Interactivity now stands for active engagement with course elements. These elements can be the computer environment, the student's own learning process, the learning materials, other learners, or the facilitator (Meirs, 2005). Weblinks facilitate intuitive navigation between activities and resources that guide the student, yet enable learner control (Meirs, 2005).

Constructivist learning should also be "constructive and reflective" (Meirs, 2005). The blog accomplishes this by providing a forum to share and discuss prior knowledge, to reflect on learning, and to receive feedback (e.g., from the professor, student moderator, and/or other students). According to one teacher:

> Some of our best classroom discussions emerge from comments. We share together. We talk about ones that make us soar, ones that make us pause and rethink, and we just enjoy sharing those delightful morsels of learning that occur. You can construct lessons around them. You get a chance to foster higher level thinking on the blogs. They read a comment. Then they may read a comment that comments on the comment. They get many short quick practices with writing that is directed to them and is therefore highly relevant. Then they have to construct a combined meaning that comes about from thinking about what has been written to them in response to what they wrote (Davis, 2006).

Experience indicates that students also value the learning experience of the blog. When Konrad Glogowski's class temporary lost their blog, learning ground to a halt (Glogowski, 2005). According to Glogowski, one student asked "Are we gonna do any work until it's fixed" (Glogowski, 2005)? The absence of social presence found in their blogs appears to have diminished the students' capacities for learning (Glogowski, 2005).

Constructivist learning also requires that the learning be intentional. In order to meet this requirement, Meirs' research suggests inserting online self-assessment surveys or quizzes that permit students to evaluate and reflect on learning (Meirs, 2005). This can be accomplished by the instructor creating a Survey Monkey link directly related to the class discussion ("Survey monkey"). Alternatively, there are many links to online surveys that could be incorporated into the blog. For example, one survey asks "What is your political ideology" ("What is Your,")?

The fourth challenge of constructivist learning is to be "authentic, challenging and real-world (or simulated), facilitating better understanding and transfer of learning to new situations" (Meirs, 2005). These activities should be problem-solving, task-based activities in which learners are actively engaged in dealing with open-ended questions (Meirs, 2005). Exhibit A at the end of this paper is an excerpt from a business law blog in which the professor poses a business law question: What is the rationale behind allowing minors to disaffirm a contract under certain circumstances?" This is precisely the type of open-ended questions that facilitates real-world understanding. Moreover, the learning is transferred to new situation. In the excerpt, one student (Anthony Vieira) creates a new hypothetical to illustrate his opinion.

Finally, constructivist learning should be "cooperative, collaborative, and conversational, providing students with opportunities to interact with each other to clarify and share ideas, to

seek assistance, to negotiate problems, and discuss solutions" (Meirs, 2005). This is practically the definition of a blog. Used properly, a blog becomes a place where a student wants to participate. It is a safe place to ask questions and discuss solutions. A community outside the classroom is created – a community with no space or time limitations.

CONCLUSION

Today's students are comfortable with methods of electronic communication including blogging. A perpetual blog creates an online community for students to actively participate in the presentation and discussion of course material. The blog further facilitates effective collaboration among multiple faculty teaching a common course. While the Socratic Method has a limited use in undergraduate education, this method is effective in an on-line application. The possibilities for blogging are unlimited. Blogs facilitate discussion, provide access to current events and constitute a searchable database for student research. Blogging satisfies the requirement that learning be cooperative, collaborative and conversational.

EXHIBIT A (from Business Law I Blog)

Minor contracts

What is the rationale behind allowing minors to disaffirm contacts under certain circumstances?
Posted by CustinBusinessLaw@USD at 8:31 AM
11 comments:

Tiffany Owen said...
> The idea is that they are not completely able to comprehend what they are getting themselves into. In England, a minor is legally bound to a contract he can be shown to have fully understood. They are dealt with in a case by case basis in a way that a sharp fourteen year old may be responsible but a daft sixteen year old may not be.
> December 9, 2009 8:37 AM

Anthony Vieira said...
> Sometimes, a minor may be more involved in a contract related to them, thus meaning they may actually understand the contract better than a parent or adult may understand it. A 16-year old, for example, is allowed to work for pay in a job, meaning he is trusted to do many important tasks throughout a day. If a contract relates to his work, he would probably be trusted more to understand it than a parent would.
> December 9, 2009 8:37 AM

CustinBusinessLaw@USD said...
> What exceptions would you propose to a minor's right to disaffirm a contract? Tiffany mentions that a minor might be legally bound to a contract if she "fully understood" the contract.
> December 9, 2009 8:41 AM

Tiffany Owen said...

> While it may be unduly burdensome to the courts to shift to a case by case basis, I definitely believe that instead of one all encompassing age of maturity, if a contract is understood by a minor, it should be enforceable. If our children are not expected to act or think like an adults, how do we automatically pull the rug out from under them on their 18th birthday?
> December 9, 2009 8:44 AM 🗑

Anthony Vieira said...

> One exception would be when a minor enters into a contract without actually planning to ever start or fully complete the contract. Although they may fully understand it, they may not actually think that it is enforceable for them to entirely complete it.
> December 9, 2009 8:46 AM 🗑

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