



PRESERVICE TEACHERS USING BLOGS TO REFLECT ON FIELD EXPERIENCE

Zsuzsanna Szabo *

Marist College, Poughkeepsie NY, U.S.A.

Abstract

Using the theory of critical reflection, this paper describes the use of blogs as reflection tool by preservice teachers in a graduate level Classroom Management topics course. Description of course tasks involving reflections posted to blogs are presented. The results show that consistency in posting critical reflections on field experience by preservice teachers, posted to weekly blogs, are related to their course performance in other assignments. The benefit of reflections posted to blogs is also stressed by students in their end - semester feedback. The paper concludes with a discussion on lessons learned and offers several suggestions to be considered by instructors who wish to use blogs in relation to other course assignments.

Keywords: blogs, reflective journal, classroom management, teacher education

Use of Blogs in Education

Originally blogs started as individual web based journals, and recently their use has expanded to the educational field. Most of the users who keep blogs have in intention to serve their community with the information posted and shared on the blog. Blogs become more and more popular among K-12 school teachers and administrators, as well as university instructors (Colgan, 2005; Colombo & Colombo, 2007). In K-12 schools blogs are used to keep parents and community up to date on events and decisions in the schools. Also,

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to:

* Ph.D., Department of Teacher Education, Marist College, Poughkeepsie, NY, U.S.A. E-mail: zsuzsanna.szabo@marist.edu

to ask them for opinions on diverse hot topics related to school curriculum or administration (Colgan, 2005). University professors try to integrate the familiarity that their students already have with social media (West, Wright, Gabbitas, & Graham, 2006).

Martindale and Wiley (2006), described their teaching and scholarship experience with using blogs in university level courses. They mention that blogs give the instructor and students the freedom of collecting and sharing easily a large amount of information in an organized way. However, they also suggest to instructors that, when using blogs for classroom purposes, they need to decide between university hosted system or the open access version of blogging. The use of university owned blog systems (usually embedded in a learning management system such as Sakai, Blackboard, WebCT), or the open access blogs (i.e., www.blogger.com) can have at times conflicting advantages. One advantage of the open access public blogs is that information is posted immediately and available to anyone with an internet connection, which gives the opportunity to continue asynchronous classroom discussions without the need for another platform login. However, this advantage can also be a disadvantage since the material published is publicly available to anyone on the web. Mortensen and Walker (2002) draw our attention at the tension between private and public spheres in blogging. Using the blog features in a learning management system (LMS) gives more control and privacy to blog owners who otherwise might not like to have their comments posted to the world wide web. Another advantage is that, unlike paper pencil assignments, everyone can contribute to the community of learning, and learn from the information posted by others. Blogs provide a community of learning by sharing in the common knowledge that extends beyond the classroom. This sharing of information in the community of learning helps students reflect on the content they learn. Blogs provide an archiving space that allows restructuring and organization of thoughts, and encourage reflective thinking on the content posted. Halen-Faber (1997), defines reflection as being the type of thinking that serves to challenge notions of prior learning. Because blogs are a place to develop ideas and receive feedback, instructors believe that blogs can motivate students to write and reflect more (Clyde, 2005; Martindale & Wiley, 2006). Students could use blogs to post notes, group work projects, or digital portfolios among many other uses (Churchill, 2009; Huffaker, 2006; Quible, 2005; Richardson, 2006).

Public blog postings encourages responsibility and encourages ownership among students (Sun, 2010).

Sockman and Sharma (2008), show that reflective journal writing and reading could help teachers develop a deeper awareness of their teaching practices, and triggers positive changes. Regarding the successful use of blogs in reflective practice Stiler and Philleo (2003) report that reflection using postings on blogs benefits teachers to give and receive immediate and positive feedback from peers. Blogs offer teachers more opportunities for critical reflection upon their own teaching.

Reflective practice is a very important part of the professional development and growth for any teacher. For that reason preservice teachers are encouraged to reflect regularly on what they learn and observe in their field experience. In teacher education blogs are one of the emerging technologies offering opportunities for implementing student-centered pedagogical practice (Instone 2005). Since blogs are expanding at all levels of education it is also a good opportunity for preservice teachers to practice with their use. In this paper I present the use of blogs for reflecting on field experience in a preservice teacher education graduate level course at Marist College, in Northeastern United States.

Course and Participants

The graduate teacher education course “*Classroom management and field experience*” is part of the Masters of Education (M. Ed.) program which leads to initial teaching certificate for grades 7th to 12th. Starting with the Spring 2012 semester the graduate course sequence in the program curriculum was realigned. In the past this course was a teaching seminar taken by preservice teachers in their last semester in the program in combination with their teaching practicum. The content of this course covers topics of classroom management. Based on candidates’ feedback at the completion of the M. Ed. program and discussions among faculty teaching graduate education courses it was decided that preservice teachers would benefit more from this course if they complete it before entering in the classroom teaching practice. Preservice teachers in the M. Ed. program must also complete a minimum of 100 hours of field experience before entering the student teaching. Previously they had the opportunity to complete the requirements in five different courses in the

program. The main reason for the change was based on the need for candidates to learn classroom management content before they need to actually practice it, and also to observe and reflect on the classroom management issues before they have to handle them. Based on feedback, discussions, and requirements, the course sequence was moved to earlier semesters in the curriculum and candidates will now complete the classroom management course in preparation for their entrance in the teaching practicum. Candidates are also required to fulfill 75 hours of field experience in this course. Observation of classroom teaching, student tutoring, and participation in after-school programs at middle and high school level could count for field experience requirements.

Due to the curriculum realignment in the Spring 2012 semester twenty six students were registered in the course, out of them 16 were completing their *teaching practicum* in the same semester. The other ten students were completing this course before entering teaching practicum, and also fulfilling across the semester their 75 hours of required *field experience*.

Blogs Used for Reflection

In order to help preservice teachers relate the course content of classroom management to actual classroom experience (be it their own teaching or observing classroom teaching), all candidates in the course were required to keep a journal. Preservice teachers completing their teaching practicum were required to keep a daily journal based on their classroom teaching. Candidates in field experience recorded their classroom observations in a journal each time they completed field experience in middle and high schools.

All candidates in the course then were asked to post a weekly critical reflection blog based on their experience (classroom teaching or field experience). In the blog they were to present and discuss a real classroom example pertaining to the content of classroom management studied in that week, then bring arguments pro or contra how the respective classroom situation could be handled, and support their arguments with references. Across the semester a number of ten blog postings were required for a total of 30 percent of course grade.

Candidates' blogs were expected to have two main features:

1. *Observation description* - a narrative, presentation, description of events, behavior, activities, instructional methods, etc. which took place in the classroom taught or observed in the field experience
2. *Reflection, analysis, and evaluation* - critical analysis of what was observed and how the classroom issue was dealt with, and how it relates to the content studied through the weekly readings, arguments for a better approach, and support with resources.

For this particular course the blog feature of the iLearn LMS (version of Sakai) was used, because the postings were reflections of personal experience. The use of a secure platform was considered more appropriate where only class members have access to all blogs. All class members were also asked to share from their experience and post comments to each other. In the classroom discussions several of the best examples posted were discussed and analyzed. Students had the opportunity to discuss best methods to deal with the case regarding classroom management issues (participation in classroom discussions weighted 15 percent of course grade). Twice per semester candidates had to complete short reflection papers (3-4 pages each). For the reflection paper they were asked to read their own blogs across the weeks the assignment covered (usually five weeks), and chose one real life classroom management situation. They were to present it and demonstrate reflective and critical thinking, the ability to use, analyze, and evaluate the theory learned in the course as applied to the case they chose, and support their solutions with references. Each reflection paper represented 10 percent of the final grade. The final examination in this course was a workshop presentation and a final written comprehensive paper on classroom management topics (35 percent of course grade). Since this paper concerns only the use of blogs for reflective practice, below I will present results only from blogs related category of course assignments.

Quantitative Results

As instructor of the course, I monitored the blogs weekly and left short comments directing candidates' performance or pointing out important information that they could use in their reflection papers. Aside of the comments posted to blogs, in the classroom often I was referring to examples from students' blogs; this helped students understand that their blogs were

important part of classroom activities. I also encouraged them to read each other's blogs and post comments on colleagues' blogs. One student had some technology issues and was not able to login into her iLearn account. However the student did not complete the weekly journal assignment despite the instruction of completing it on paper.

Right after students started posting their weekly blogs, as I was reading their postings, it was obvious that reading each posting and following 25 individual blogs is a time consuming activity. Since these blogs were part of the iLearn (college bound LMS) system, blogs are shown as a list of individual hyperlinks, and in order to see new postings one needs to open each individual link. Blogs being part of the iLearn, I could not use RSS feeds (Real Simple Syndication) tracking system to access only the latest posts. This was possible and very helpful several years ago when in another course I required students to post their final projects to blogs using Blogger as a platform (www.blogger.com), and the class used Bloglines.com to follow up on latest postings and comments.

As the semester progressed, results show (see Appendix A, Table 1) that some of the students posted only up to *Mid semester* on their blogs (18% completing teaching practicum, 11% completing field experience). After mid-semester despite the repeated reminders and classroom announcements they ceased to post their weekly reflections claiming lack of effective time to login and post. There were some (18% candidates in teaching practicum, 11% in field experience) that completed all their blog postings only at the *End semester* (see Appendix A, Table 1). Unfortunately, there were others (18% preservice teachers in their teaching practicum) who completed the blog journal assignment only after the last day of classes *Past end semester*. However, even with missed blog postings everyone in the class completed the two required reflection papers except one student who stated login problems, but did not submit the assignment in another format either.

Is not a surprise that there was a strong correlation between the number, time, and the quality of blog postings, and the scores on the two reflection papers. Overall those candidates who posted only through mid semester, or posted only at end of semester, or past end semester, received significantly lower scores on the reflection papers (there was a difference of 20 to 50 points lower score, of 100 possible), when compared to those who posted their blogs

All semester (see Appendix A, Table 1), disregard of the group (teaching practicum or field experience).

Very few students posted comments to each other, and the reason might have been because there were no scores related to posting comments to blogs. As it can be seen from results (Appendix A, Table 1), less preservice teachers in their teaching practicum (around 44%), as compared to the ones participating in field experience (88%), kept the weekly blog reflective journals all across the semester.

Qualitative Analysis

From end-semester interviews with students I learned that students did not use the comments feature of their blog because they did not receive separate scores for that task. They mentioned that it was much easier to share their experience in person, and they did not post comments because of time constraints. In fact all across the semester preservice teachers completing practicum complained often of the lack of time to prepare for their teaching practicum (lesson plans, materials, assessment etc.), and too short time left for anything else. Candidates mentioned that given the classroom discussions, sharing of ideas and giving feedback was much faster in a face to face environment than on blog, where they would have to login, search, and read what colleagues posted, then only reply. Overall, candidates completing their field experience posted all the required blog entries, consistently posting each week across the semester, with the exception of the person having login difficulties, and another candidate who had a full time position and could not complete field experience in schools till later in the semester when she was able to accommodate her schedule. The third person had exactly the opposite situation while a full time position allowed attending field experience only in the first part of the semester. This is not uncommon since often graduate education students hold full-time or part-time positions while completing their Masters degree.

Since most of the preservice teachers completing their teaching practicum (16 out of the 26) were from the same cohort, they took many courses together and they found more efficient to discuss in class than give feedback on the blog. One other reason why students did not post comments

was that in the classroom students had enough opportunities to share and discuss their personal experiences in student teaching, or observation experiences, which otherwise was much faster and effective than posting comments. Besides, they received points for classroom discussions participation, and were motivated to share from their experience.

Regarding the quality of blog postings there was a large variety of styles. The weekly blogs were expected to be short reflections on field observations or teaching experience. Despite instructions that the reflective journal blogs are not observation logs, some students posted detailed descriptions of their classroom example. The details and development of postings varied also from brief examples with the theoretical topic only mentioned, to longer, well written, and developed postings. Some students stated in the end semester interview that they did not write very much detail on their blogs because they felt they did not know enough about the topic, and they felt the posting is not polished enough to have colleagues read it.

Students reported that the blogs were indeed useful since they were the springboard for the two reflection papers that they completed across the semester. Evidence that indeed the reflection blogs were helpful in developing the two reflection papers are the significant differences in scores (from 20 to 50 points), between those candidates who posted regularly their weekly reflection blogs, compared to those who were sporadic in their use of blogs to reflect on their classroom teaching or observation experience. More than that, especially preservice teachers in their teaching practicum mentioned that they wish they also would take the classroom management course before they entered student teaching. All students (even the ones who did not complete all blog postings) reported that they see the usefulness of blogs for reflective journals and as teachers they can use blogs to post information for students, parents, and community. Students also suggested maintaining the weekly blog journal course requirement. Especially one of our graduates who landed a new teaching job after the graduation, in a personal account mentioned that he liked so much the idea of weekly blogs that in Fall 2012 he will use it in his teaching.

Based on discussions among faculty, the results from course assignments, and students' end semester feedback, the change in curriculum was very welcomed and predicted as being more successful than the old version of the curriculum.

Lessons Learned and Educational Implications

When any program curriculum changes are made it is advised to look at the effects following the change. This case study based in a graduate level classroom management course showed support for our logical decision regarding curriculum changes in the M. Ed. teacher education program. Preservice teachers need to learn and experience classroom management situations, and how to manage the respective issues, before they enter student teaching practicum. Completing their field experience and reflecting weekly on what they observe, helps preservice teachers better understand the content they learn and prepare them with essential classroom management skills.

Using blogs as a tool for posting reflective journaling on field experience is a very convenient teaching strategy method. To make blogs effective compared to paper-pencil journals, the instructor needs to plan carefully before the beginning of semester. First, the instructor needs to decide what exactly the primary purpose for the blogs is, and design appropriate assignments. If the blog purpose is only for individual reflection then the comments from colleagues are not important. Secondly, instead of general instructions and requirements concerning the blog reflections, it is important to prepare a better structured assignment. Specifically, instead of asking students to give examples and analyze them in the light of appropriate topics discussed that week, it would be more efficient to provide students with more structure. For example, the instructor could ask students to 1) present shortly the target theoretical background; 2) post one observed example pertinent to the classroom management theory; 3) analyze the example, and 4) draw conclusions that could be used in teaching practicum.

If weekly reflection blog journals are an important part of the reflection papers, then there should be a cause-effect relationship between the blog posting and reflection papers. For example, a certain number of postings need to be on the blog, before the student would be allowed to submit the reflection paper. Last but not least, the instructor needs to decide what type of blogs will be used. LMS imbedded blogs are more private, but not as accessible, and not suited for RSS feeds. They require extra login, however are more private than the open access ones. In any case, instructors need to be prepared for the amount of grading and feedback they will need to provide weekly to students, especially when the class size is not small.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Frequencies of blog postings by group and time posted

Preservice teachers ID# (16)	Number of postings	Time of posting	Field experience completers ID# (10)	Number of postings	Time of posting
5	10	All semester	3	9	All semester
14	10	All semester	6	9	All semester
15	10	All semester	9	10	All semester
17	9	All semester	10	10	All semester
18	10	All semester	11	10	All semester
24	10	All semester	16	10	All semester
26	9	All semester	23	9	All semester
1*	7	Mid semester	22*	6	Mid semester
2*	8	Mid semester	20*	10	End semester
7*	4	Mid semester	(13)*	(1)	<i>Not using blog</i>
12*	8	End semester			
19	10	End semester			
21*	8	End semester			
4*	10	Past end semester			
8*	8	Past end semester			
25*	8	Past end semester			
Average per individual	8.6	-	Average per individual	9.2	-
Posting all Semester	43.75%	7/16	Posting all Semester	88%	8/9
Posting mid semester	18.75%	3/16	Posting mid semester	11%	1/9
Posting at end semester	18.75%	3/16	Posting at end semester	11%	1/9
Posting past end semester	18.75%	3/16	Posting past end semester	-	-

Note: * low scores on one or both reflection papers