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## **Post-Secondary Students' Purposes for Blogging**

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### **Abstract**

The goal of the study was to explore post-secondary students' purposes for blogging with particular attention to the social and instructional purposes. The sample of blogs came from an all-women's college in the United Arab Emirates. Content analysis was conducted on eight blogs using previously tested instruments to identify social presence and knowledge construction. Authors of the blogs participated in a focus group discussion about the purposes for blogging. Findings revealed that the primary use of blogging was for social purposes. Self-disclosure was the most notable purpose for blogging, in addition to sharing emotional responses to learning. The lack of teaching presence may have influenced students' use of blogging for social rather than instructional purposes.

**Keywords:** Blogging; Post-secondary; teaching presence; social presence; knowledge construction

### **Introduction**

The goal of the study reported on in this paper was to explore post-secondary students' purposes for blogging with particular attention to social and instructional purposes. To achieve this goal, a content analysis was performed on eight blogs using previously tested instruments to identify social presence (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2001) and knowledge construction (Gunawardena, Lowe & Anderson, 1997). A focus group discussion with the authors of the blogs also explored students' purposes for blogging.

A blog can be defined as a "personalized webpage, kept by the author in reverse chronological diary form" (Du & Wagner, 2005, p. 2) or "a personal diary, kept on the web" (Fun & Wagner, 2005, p. 221). Blogs are also considered to be educational social software which can give students a social presence (Anderson, 2005). Social presence "is correlated with student satisfaction and higher scores on learning outcomes" (Anderson, 2005, p. 2) and has been defined as the ability to present oneself "to the other participants as real people" (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000, p. 89). Blogging functions as a means for students to pursue the individual activity of recording their experiences for the purpose of revisiting and reflecting upon those experiences (Xie & Sharma, 2005). Downes (2004) discussed how students use blogs to "get to know each other better by visiting and reading blogs from other students" (p. 18).

Case studies of blogging are concerned with issues including the degree to which blogging can promote constructivist learning methods (Freeman, Brett, Kostuch, MacKinnon, McPherson et al., 2006; Xie & Sharma, 2005). Some studies have found that blogging can provide a sense of ownership over work which seems to motivate students, not only to continue blogging but to make greater efforts in their studies (Dickey 2004; Du & Wagner, 2005).

In terms of individual purposes for blogging in an educational context, Brooks, Nichols and Priebe (2004) found that the majority of their students preferred to write journal style entries regardless of the course they were enrolled in. Betts and Glogoff (2004) also discuss how students tended to start posting about topics of interest regardless of their actual task. Furthermore, in a random sampling of personal blog usage, Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright (2004) discuss the fact that 70.4 percent of the blogs they sampled were journals. They also noted that the “flexible, hybrid nature of the blog format means that it can express a wide range of genres, in accordance with the communicative needs of its users” (p. 11). The flexible nature of the blogging medium suggests that there are a variety of possible purposes for blogging regardless of the context within which the activity is pursued.

In terms of blogging as compared to other social software, Xie and Sharma (2005) noted in their study that there is a need for future investigation into students’ perceptions of blogs compared to other online technologies and students’ interpreted purposes and motivations of using blogs. They commented that student perceptions of blogs are essential to understanding how students might interact with the blogging medium and for what purposes they might use blogging.

### Purposes for Blogging: A review of the literature

Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright (2004) noted that the “flexible, hybrid nature of the blog format means that it can express a wide range of genres, in accordance with the communicative needs of its users” (p. 11). The flexible nature of the medium suggests that there are a variety of possible purposes for blogging regardless of the context within which the activity is pursued. Some studies have found that blogging can provide a sense of ownership over work. The sense of ownership may motivate students, perhaps from a sense of pride, to continue blogging and to make greater efforts in their studies (Dickey, 2004; Du & Wagner, 2005). In the following table, we summarize the purposes of social software and blogging according to author.

**Table 1.** Summary of Purposes of Social Software and Blogging

Purposes	Author
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• supports group interaction</li> </ul>	Anderson, 2005
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• indicates user on-line presence; notification of new content; filtering of content; cooperative learning support; referring; modeling of interaction; help features; and documenting, storing and sharing of content</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• may facilitate social presence</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• offers a means to share knowledge and help others</li> </ul>	

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- can potentially facilitate social interactions
  - facilitates group communication Grant, 2006
  - enables simple interaction, feedback and networking Boyd, 2003
  - enables document sharing, control of communications, and limits access to the shared site.
  - transforms the learning process from a “personal activity to a social activity” Anderson & Kanuka, 1998
  - can potentially expose learners’ ideas and opinions more readily to an audience
  - can more readily expose learners to audience’s ideas
  - can record experiences for reflection Xie & Sharma, 2005
  - supports learning by providing different viewpoints
  - allows students to get to know each other Downes, 2004
  - allows social learning experience to flow from learner to group and from group to learner.
  - acts as a replacement for regular class web pages; links page; discussion forum; seminar hosting forum; forum for student writing; personal publishing tool for educators
  - can create an on-line community with a common focus
  - transforms the individual learning process into a social learning experience Garrison, 1995
  - supports community-centered instruction Gergen, 2002
  - can foster group learning situations where each individual contributes knowledge to the group Anderson & Kanuka, 1998
  - increases opportunities for social interaction Grant, 2006; Gergen, 2001
  - allows collaborative activities Du & Wagner, 2005
  - can provide a source of motivation through the “immediacy and frequency” of feedback
  - supports casual socialization Dickey, 2004
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- may help ease feelings of isolation and alienation
  - facilitates distinguishing between differing viewpoints, accepting different interpretations Jonassen, Carr & Hsiu-Ping, 1998
  - can provide a forum for knowledge-building activities Scardamalia & Bereiter 1999
  - can foster collaborative learning within an organized community Hakkinen & Jarvela, 2006
  - affords the chance to put thoughts “in the context of others” Oravec, 2002
  - allows students to outline their own perspectives
  - provides a sense of development over time
  - shifts the onus from the teacher to the educational group Educause  
*Horizon Report*,2005
  - allows students to share a wide range of generic knowledge Brooks, Nichols, & Priebe, 2004;  
Oravec, 2002
  - acknowledges the attributes of learners as individuals and as a group Glogoff, 2005
  - expresses the importance of social and peer interaction
  - highlights the importance of individual contributions
  - gives learners an opportunity to make themselves heard
  - enables students to assert their own perspectives and so make a greater effort
  - helps to motivate students Wang, Fix & Bock, 2004
  - provides a certain sense of empowerment Huffaker & Calvert, 2005
  - can provide a catalyst to face-to-face interactions Seitzinger, 2006
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From this summary of the literature related to social software, we identify two major themes. The first relates to social interaction and social presence, and suggests that one general purpose for blogging may be to support, facilitate, model, and increase opportunities for social, peer and group interaction, communication, presence, feedback, networking learning experiences, and getting to know each other.

The second theme relates to the social and collaborative construction of knowledge and suggests that an additional purpose for blogging may be to support, contribute to, and provide opportunities or means for collaborative, cooperative and community-centered sharing, building,

contributing, outlining and asserting knowledge, ideas, opinions, different viewpoints, interpretations, perspectives and common goals.

From this framework, we derived two purposes for blogging one being social and the other for knowledge construction. These are purposes that have been largely identified from a theoretical perspective rather than an empirical one. In this study, we frame our investigation in terms of these two purposes. We investigate the case of a group of post-secondary learners in relation to how they engaged in blogging for social and instructional purposes.

## **Methods**

### ***Context of the Study***

Our study was conducted in the Foundations Department of the Dubai Women's College where all students must purchase a wireless-enabled laptop. Blogging is an ancillary activity to an e-portfolio project, which runs from week eight to week 16 of a 20-week-long second semester. Faculty involved in the facilitation of the blogging activity included the principal investigator and the other two members of the Applied Computing faculty at the Dubai Women's College. The faculty introduced blogging to provide students a place to record and share their experiences in developing the e-portfolio. All Foundations students were required to create a blog using *Blogger* (Google, 2006). Faculty gave students a one-hour basic training session on how to make a blog entry, or post, and how to comment on others' posts.

### ***Participant and Blog Selection***

Participants were recruited from the 2005-2006 cohort of Foundation year students. This cohort included 309 students, all of whom created a blog to which they made at least one posting. All students are Emirati citizens, female, and between 17 and 20 years old. Of the 309 blogs created at the outset of the project, 43 were deleted and were no longer available on the Internet, leaving a total of 266 blogs and potential participants for inclusion in the study.

To be selected for inclusion in the study, blogs had to demonstrate evidence of both social presence and interaction and knowledge construction. Rourke et al. (2001) presented a set of indicators used for assessing social presence which was adopted for the blogging analysis. The authors identified three categories of responses indicative of social presence: affective, interactive, and cohesive. We examined the 266 blogs for interactive responses. To have interactive responses, each blog had to have at least one comment from another student. Of the 266 available blogs, 77 contained comments from other students. These blogs were then analyzed for evidence of the other two categories of responses. This analysis reduced the sample to 47 blogs.

The second criteria is evidence that social software and blogging supports, contributes to, and provides opportunities for: collaborative, cooperative and community-centered sharing, building, contributing, outlining and asserting knowledge, ideas, opinions, different viewpoints, interpretations and perspectives, and common goals. These purposes outline the concept of the social construction of knowledge as facilitated through computer-mediated communication. Gunawardena et al. (1997) described a process of knowledge construction through computer-mediated communication and developed an interaction analysis model to "explain the process by which construction of knowledge occurred" (p. 412).

The 47 blogs that contained evidence of social presence as indicated by Rourke et al. (2001) were then analyzed for evidence of social construction of knowledge as outlined by Gunawardena et al. (1997). To meet these criteria, blogs had to demonstrate evidence from at least one phase. This analysis reduced the number of sample blogs to nine.

### ***Focus group***

The nine students were contacted by email and asked if they would be willing to participate in a focus group discussion. Eight students responded positively to the request. A focus group can be defined as a “guided group discussion of selected topics” (Ruane, 2005, p. 157) with a limited number of people. Participants for focus groups are selected because “they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 4).

Each focus group took approximately 45 minutes. At the time of the interviews, the students were no longer in a student-teacher relationship with the interviewer. We asked a predetermined set of questions. Some examples are as follows: Why did you select the pictures and images or fonts colours? Why did you select the pictures and images or fonts colours? What motivated you to post? What motivated you to comment on others' blogs? How useful or not useful were others comments to you? An Arabic speaking colleague was asked to accompany the interviewer to provide students with suggestions for English vocabulary and terminology. The focus group discussions were digitally recorded and a complete transcript was prepared.

## **Analysis**

We examined each blog using the instruments to identify social presence and social construction of knowledge, and then compiled a profile of each blog. The profiles included a general overview of the blog based on the quantitative data, a description of the social presence established by the student, and a description of the evidence found for knowledge construction. For the focus groups, we followed an inductive approach, looking for repeated keywords and ideas. As categories were identified, the focus group data were reviewed in light of these emerging categories. Repeating ideas were organized according to criteria including positive or negative comments, vague or specific, tone, and similarity to other comments (Krueger & Casey, 2003; Litoselliti, 2003). Once we organized the focus group data according to main ideas or concepts, we added these data to the profile of each blog.

## **Presentation and Discussion of Findings**

### ***Social presence***

The most obvious indicators of social presence are interactive responses (Rourke et al., 2001), which can be found simply by opening blogs and looking for comments at the bottom of each post. The blogs included other types of interactive responses, such as compliments on each others' blog design, or on achievements noted in the posts, and statements of agreement with others' comments or posts. Students also replied to comments on their blogs with expressions of gratitude towards the visitors. Rourke et al. (2001) noted that these types of interactions, “express a willingness to maintain and prolong contact” (Interactive Responses, ¶1). There were few comments or replies, however, from visitors that tried to continue a conversational thread, indicating that these interactive responses were somewhat superficial and that their role was

limited to encouraging and prolonging contact. There was little effort from any of the students to actually continue a conversation through the comments.

Evidence of social presence can also be found in the social greeting conventions, or cohesive responses, used. Rourke et al. (2001) described three main types of cohesive responses: phatics, e.g., inquiries about health or family; salutations and greetings; and vocatives, e.g., the use of names and inclusive pronouns (Cohesive Responses, ¶1). The more prolific writers seemed to be those who made the widest use of these social conventions. A number of students, however, did not use any cohesive devices.

Since few postings actually developed into an extended exchange of content or ideas, perhaps the medium of blogging is such that students need time to develop a strategy to create more meaningful exchanges. Perhaps the new blogging medium gave students the feeling that normal social conventions are not required. It is also possible that the physical proximity of students to each other may have inhibited the development of deeper relationships through blogging. For example, one student noted that when she received comments from students she did not know, she emailed these students to follow-up with them rather than reply through the blog.

In the focus group, students discussed the importance of attracting attention from others and suggested that getting comments “was a competition”. They also said that they had to “fight to get comments”. Other students said that they were compelled to attract comments because “comments make you feel proud”. One student went so far as to claim that receiving no comments was like “life without water”. Other studies have also noted the importance students attach to receiving comments on a blog. Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht (2004) stated that bloggers “reported that they gained momentum when they realized others were actually reading their posts” (p. 3). They also found, however, that “the relationship between blogger and reader was markedly asymmetrical. Bloggers wanted readers but they did not necessarily want to hear a lot from those readers” (p. 7).

## **Self Disclosure**

The most notable similarity between the blogs is found in the affective response of self-disclosure. Joinson (2001) described self-disclosure as the “act of revealing personal information to others” (Self-disclosure and CMC, ¶1). Although students were directed to record their experiences with the e-portfolio project, the content analysis of the blogs revealed that all of the study’s participants disclosed personal information concerning either their private life or their public, college life. Additionally, in the focus group, respondents referred to “posting about [their] lives”, “sharing happiness”, and “used as a diary” when articulating their purposes for blogging. Students commented that they found sharing personal information much more compelling than sharing factual information.

Students who disclosed the most personal information were also those who generated the most content in terms of posts and word counts. These students also received the highest number of comments from other students. It is possible that self-disclosure by one student may invite other students to comment and interact with them. It is possible as well, judging by the students’ positive reaction to comments on their blogs, that this form of interaction motivated the students to disclose more personal information, which, in turn, invited more comments from other students. Harper and Harper (2006) noted that in their study some students commented that seeing other students share personal information inspired them to also disclose information. Ma,

Li and Clark (2006) suggested that self-disclosure is a result of “the fundamental social need” (p. 6) to connect with other people.

A number of students shared descriptive information concerning diverse topics, such as how they spent their weekend, presents they received for their birthday, or their favorite brand of chocolate. In most instances, students noted that they wanted their friends and classmates to know what they thought about these different topics and they also wanted to read their friends' opinions on these topics.

Several students commented that they posted personal information on their blog to provide a diary for themselves. The value of blogging as a forum for personal reflection or journal writing has been noted in other studies (Du & Wagner, 2005; Freeman et al., 2006; Hernandez-Ramos, 2004). Aside from educational purposes, other studies have found that one of the predominant styles of personal blogging was a personal journal (Herring et al., 2004; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004).

One student who wrote several posts in a diary format claimed that she felt inspired to write more posts in this style when she realized students enjoyed reading her diary and were leaving comments. She noted her surprise that other people were actually interested to read about her personal activities. Despite the fact that students made diary-style entries, however, as Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004) noted, “most bloggers are acutely aware of their readers, even in confessional blogs, calibrating what they should and should not reveal” (p. 42). All students also engaged in evaluative self-disclosure (Harper & Harper, 2006). In one instance, a student asked for opinions on her new mobile phone and asked for comments on other brands of phones. In another, a student shared her affection for a particular brand of chocolate.

Students also reported that they used the design features of the blogging software in part to reflect their personality and display emotions. In fact, one of the most visible similarities between the blogs is the level of personalization achieved by varying the design of the posts including font styles, and the incorporation of photos and images in the posts of all but one blog. Many students mentioned that the personality or design of the various blogs inspired them to either make a new post on their own blog or comment on others' blogs. Fun and Wagner (2005) also noted in their study that students used technical features of the blogging software to personalize the look of their blogs.

Rourke et al. (2001) discussed self-disclosure as one of the primary affective means of establishing social presence. Furthermore, in a study of self-disclosure in online communications, Joinson (2001) stated that, “. . . people disclose more information about themselves [online] compared to [face-to-face]” (General Discussion, ¶1). Other studies of blogging have also reported that students have used their blogs to share personal information (Brooks et al., 2004; Dickey, 2004).

## **Emotional Responses to Learning**

Students spent considerable time disclosing emotional responses to both their social and educational experiences. Wosnitza and Volet (2005) commented on the “impact of students' emotions on their motivation and further engagement in the learning process” (p. 461). Many of the blogs were used to express fear or anxiety regarding difficulty learning the new software or meeting deadlines. Students were able to invite supportive responses from other students and, in a few instances, students made offers of help in response to these posts.



The act of sharing these anxieties may allow others to gain some confidence from the realization that they are not the only one who is anxious about their college project. Several students commented that they found reading emotional responses, “motivating”, perhaps because the posts gave them encouragement that they too could complete a difficult task. Boud and Walker (1991) noted that, “by being aware of the emotional tone of our involvement, we can acknowledge feelings that will deepen or inhibit our involvement” (p. 19). Huffaker and Calvert (2005) offered another explanation for sharing anxieties, suggesting that, “perhaps there is a certain sense of empowerment in revealing thoughts and feelings without hiding behind a public mask” (Disclosure of Personal Information in Blogs, ¶2).

Fun and Wagner (2005) discussed ownership and freedom and note that, in blog-based virtual communities, tasks tend to be based on an individual’s needs and desires. The fact that all students edited the layout and general look of their blog, and posted on a wide variety of topics, is an indication of the control students exerted over their blogs. This sense of ownership may have provided students an outlet for their self-expression that they did not have in their regular educational activities. As Efimova and de Moor (2005) stated, weblogs “[empower] individual expression” (p. 1).

The quantity of affective responses found in the study and students’ apparent enthusiasm for blogging as described during the focus group discussions support the importance of emotional responses to learning. Lehman (2006) argued that “emotions are central to the manner in which we perceive, experience, and learn” (Emotion as Indispensable to the Perception of Reality, ¶7). Wosnitza and Volet (2005) also commented that “the importance of research on emotion arousal in general and online learning in particular is widely acknowledged” (p. 462). The importance of emotional expression in relation to learning, however, has only recently begun to be considered more seriously (Cleveland-Innes & Ally, 2004; Lehman, 2006).

## **Blogging for Instructional Purposes**

Students’ unfamiliarity with the medium of blogging may have limited most of their reflective posts to sharing what may be considered surface statements about their learning. In their posts, students noted specific tasks with which they were engaged or which software applications they used. Most posts, however, contained few details of a particular task, but rather simply noted the level of completion, or perhaps included a list of current tasks. These entries may be a result of both the students’ interpretation of the instructions they were given and the fact that they were not given further, or more specific, directions over the project timeline.

In sharing even these limited statements about their learning, students were offering a level of support to other members of the course. By providing a timeline of their activities in the journal-style entries, they offered other students an opportunity to gauge their own progress with the project by providing a guide, or a benchmark against which they could measure their work. Students commented that they felt they had benefited by writing and reading such posts, stating in the focus group discussions that the “content was very educational”, and that they had, “gained more knowledge” from blogging. Xie and Sharma (2005) concluded that blogging allows students to revise “the interpretation of an experience” (p. 839) and not only share their insights with others, but benefit from others’ insights. Such peer acknowledgement may also provide the students with confidence that their work is meeting an external standard set by the other students.

Exploring differences of opinion might lead to the “collective understanding” (Freeman et al., 2006, Introduction, ¶1) of a topic by allowing students to interact with others and “[revisit] some

of the materials . . . from different conceptual perspectives” (Spiro, Feltovich, Jacobson & Coulson, 1996). Only in a few instances, however, did students offer additional information, or question a particular statement and ask for further clarification. Furthermore, in only one instance did a student write a comment wherein she openly disagreed with a particular issue raised.

The finding that students seldom challenged ideas in their blogs is consistent with another study of online social interchange. Anderson and Kanuka (1998) also noted that “inconsistencies were left unchallenged” (Results, ¶15). Their explanation for this behavior was that “it is much easier to ignore or not respond to online messages that are incompatible with existing knowledge than it is in a face-to-face environment” (Discussion, ¶4). Writing responses and comments that demonstrate dissonance or disagreement with another person involves a certain level of risk and potential loss of face on the part of both participants. Students stated in the focus group that in certain cases they contacted other students directly to discuss something they saw in their blog rather than leave a comment. An additional factor accounting for the lack of statements of dissonance may be the fact that the students were working in a second language. Some may have lacked the linguistic ability to explain their position, and thus limited their replies to thanking each other for the posts and comments.

Anderson and Kanuka (1998) suggested that “it may also be possible that the construction of knowledge is not an observable activity” (Discussion, ¶5). One potential source for learning arises when students read others’ posts and compare them with their own experiences. The actual act of knowledge construction becomes an internal one where the students note differences and similarities between their thoughts and those of other students and then resolve such differences on their own. Garrison et al. (2000) note that when viewing the content of an online community or interaction, “observers view only that subset of cognitive presence that the participants choose to make visible” (p. 7).

The fact that students did not move beyond information sharing and did not engage in knowledge construction could also be related to the lack of teaching presence. In their community of inquiry model, Garrison et al. (2000) refer to teaching presence, which may be divided into three abilities: 1) the design of the educational experience, 2) the facilitation of that experience, and 3) subject matter expertise (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison, 2006). Part of the intention of the blogging activity within the e-portfolio project was to simply let the students pursue the activity with minimal direction and see how they reacted. Students were given only limited direction and guidance in class time, and there was little teacher interaction in individual blogs. Other studies (Freeman et al., 2006; Hernandez-Ramos, 2004) also noted, in order to exploit blogs more fully, students may need to be supported with explicit requirements.

Anderson et al. (2001) suggested that a teacher is ideally a “subject matter expert who knows a great deal more than most learners and is thus in a position to ‘scaffold’ learning experiences by providing direct instruction” (p. 2). The instructors involved with the blogging activity did not provide direct instruction, or the subject matter expertise through the online community. Despite arguments that teaching presence can be provided by students as well as teachers, “interaction with instructors seemed to have a much larger effect on satisfaction and perceived learning than interaction with peers” (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005, p. 136).

## Conclusions

This study found that while students did use blogging for instructional purposes, their primary use of blogging was for social purposes. This study also confirms the conclusions of other studies (Lehman, 2006; Wosnitza & Volet, 2005), which have noted the importance of emotions in learning, particularly in contributing to the learner's ability to continue a task (Boud & Walker, 1991). Additionally, all students shared varying amounts of project-related information through blogging, which is the first step towards the social construction of knowledge. The authors hypothesize, however, that due to the lack of a strong teaching presence, there was only limited progression towards the discovery of dissonance, knowledge construction, and the establishment of a cognitive presence.

The participants willingly engaged in the blogging medium for the purpose of interacting with other students, as evidenced by efforts they made to express a social presence, including self-disclosure. In fact, self-disclosure was one of the most notable purposes for blogging in this study. Joinson and Paine (*in press*, p. 29) also note that: "Self-disclosure is one of the few widely replicated and noted media effects of online interaction." Joinson (2001) has also noted that self-disclosure is higher in online forums than in face-to-face situations.

Students also shared emotional responses to learning. They indicated in the focus group discussions that they were motivated to share their emotions because doing so provided them an outlet for frustrations. They also found motivation in the knowledge that they were not the only ones experiencing difficulties with the project.

The study also found that the distinction between social and instructional purposes is often not clearly defined. In many cases, students used blogging for social purposes, but since these purposes were highly motivating in terms of continuing to blog, there is a considerable overlap between social and instructional purposes.

In this study, only a limited teaching presence was established and the online community did not progress from a social purpose to a more instructional purpose. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) argue that for a community of inquiry to be viable, a strong teaching presence must first be established. It is this component of a community of inquiry that "provides the structure (design) and leadership (facilitation/ direction) to establish social and cognitive presence" (p. 144). This study confirms the argument that a teaching presence is an integral part of a community of inquiry, and must be established along with social presence before a cognitive presence can emerge.

Nevertheless, the students in this study were able to establish a social presence with only a limited teaching presence. While it is true that the students had varying degrees of success in establishing a social presence, all eight study participants did in fact do so, and in some instances, according to the criteria set by Rourke et al. (2001), students established social presence in their blogs.

## Implications

Fun and Wagner (2005) recommended that curriculum design incorporating blogs must be considered from the needs of the student rather than the institution. Our findings support this argument in part, in terms of the desire for students to express themselves socially and attract

attention to themselves. Students may also benefit from sharing their emotional responses to learning activities. Wosnitza and Volet (2005) commented on the “impact of students' emotions on their motivation and further engagement in the learning process” (p. 461). The degree of ownership students have over their blogs may provide them with an arena within which to share their emotional responses to their studies. Thus, it may also be suggested that blogging activities allow or encourage students to share such emotional responses, which potentially may increase their involvement in wider educational activities.

Self-disclosure and the establishment of a social presence was one of the primary uses of blogging for the eight students. Other studies have also found that self-disclosure is one of the most common forms of online communication (Joinson, 2001; Joinson & Paine, *in press*). Students showed that they are naturally inclined to disclose personal information, and found that this aspect of social presence encouraged greater involvement in the online community. Further research may reveal improved strategies for incorporating acts of self-disclosure into online community activities.

Students made considerable efforts to attract attention to their blogs. Although it is unclear what purpose the attention may serve in an educational context, there may be a connection between the issue of attracting attention and ownership. Anderson (2005) stated that the greatest benefit of the internet is the control it allows students over their learning. The ability of students to demonstrate ownership of their learning through their blogs is an area that might merit further investigation as it relates to blogging and learning.

Another possible explanation for the efforts students made with their blogs may be found in the concept of social capital, defined as the resources accumulated through interactions with other people (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). These resources may include a sense of reciprocity and trustworthiness between members of a social community (Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Zin & Reese, 2005). Further studies involving blogging in educational settings may want to consider how to obtain the greatest benefit from students' social purposes for blogging and enable students to “mobilize their social networks through technology when they need help” (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman & Rainie, 2006, p. v).

## Limitations

It is unclear how having mixed-gender classes might have affected the social presence and knowledge construction in which students engaged. The cultural setting of the study prevents most students from socializing outside of their college campus. This restriction may also have affected their purposes for blogging. The focus groups were conducted by a male. Given that all the students were female, cultural inhibitions may have also limited the amount and nature of information divulged by the students. The blogs were located on the open Internet. While the blogging software used in the study allowed students to control who could comment on their blogs, they could not control who viewed their blogs. This may have affected their purposes for blogging.

It is possible that working in a second language may also have affected their purposes for blogging. Since the focus group discussions were conducted in English, the students' second language, students may have been limited in their ability to express themselves. Interacting with others through blogging is not like interacting through discussion boards. Currently, interaction with others through blogging software is more cumbersome. Choosing another software package

such as a discussion board, or more flexible blogging software, may have provided different results.

Our study was conducted with post-secondary, first year college students, compared to many other studies which are conducted with graduate students (Betts & Glogoff, 2004; Efimova & de Moor, 2005; Freeman et al., 2006; Hernandez-Ramos, 2004; Xie & Sharma, 2005). The purposes for blogging and the emphasis on the social and instructional purposes may have been different if the group was in their second or third year. Although there were 266 blogs in the initial sample, only eight students met all of the criteria required for inclusion in the study. A larger sample would have provided a wider range of data and thus may have resulted in the identification of different purposes.

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