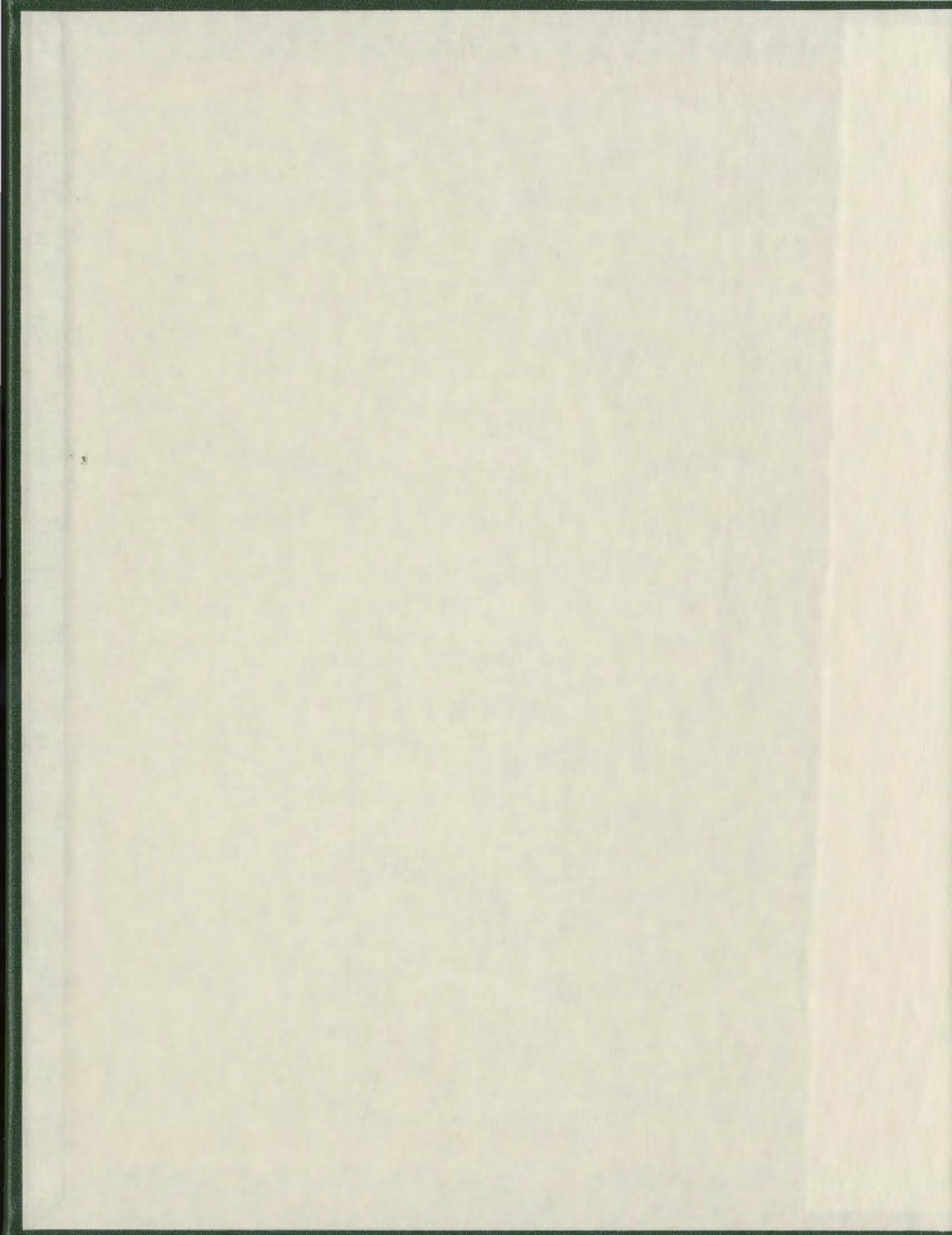# POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS' PURPOSES FOR
BLOGGING

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POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS' PURPOSES FOR BLOGGING

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A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

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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 resulted in students' use of blogging for social rather than instructional purposes.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Blogs are an educational technology that have the potential to enhance learning activities (Du & Wagner, 2005) by providing a "relatively convenient and easy mechanism" (Xie & Sharma, 2005, p. 840) with which to record and share observations and comments over the internet. A blog can be defined as a "personalized web page, 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).

Blog posts are "primarily textual, but they may contain photos or other multimedia content. Most blogs provide hypertext links to other internet sites, and many allow for audience comments" (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 1). Blogs are also considered to be educational social software which can give students a social presence (Anderson, 2005), defined as the ability to "[present] themselves to the other participants as real people" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 89). Social presence "is correlated with student satisfaction and higher scores on learning outcomes" (Anderson, 2005, p. 2).

An example of the growing recognition of blogging as part of educational practice is evidenced by the University of British Columbia and their blogging service (University of British Columbia, 2006). Other universities also promote blogging on campus through free blogging services for their students and faculty (Berkman Center for Internet and Society, 2006). The Leeds Metropolitan University Vice Chancellor's office maintains a "VC Reflects" blog (Lee, 2006),

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and many educators now use blogging as a means of communicating information, administrative and otherwise, to their students (Downes, 2004).

Case studies of blogging are concerned with issues such as the degree to which blogging can promote constructivist learning methods (Freeman et al., 2006; Xie & Sharma, 2005). 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 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 discussed 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) presented the fact that 70.4% 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 that there is a need for future investigation into students' perceptions of blogs compared to other online technologies. They suggested that

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students' perceptions of blogs are essential to understanding how they might interact with the blogging medium and for what purposes they might use blogging.

The goal of the current study was to explore post-secondary students' purposes for blogging with particular attention to their 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.

Statement of the Problem

In terms of their value in educational contexts, Xie and Sharma (2005) stated 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. The "collective understanding" (Freeman et al., 2006, Introduction, para. 1) of a topic leads to a "collaborative constructivism" (Du & Wagner, 2005, p. 3). This allows students to solidify and improve their knowledge by interacting with others and "revisiting some of the materials ... from different conceptual perspectives" (Spiro, Feltovich, Jacobson, & Coulson, 1996, Cognitive Flexibility Theory, para. 2).

Blogging provides opportunities for self-expression, and is an activity that, as Efimova and de Moor (2005) stated, "[empowers] individual expression" (p. 1).

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Jonassen and Reeves (1996) argued that self-expression is a powerful learning tool because "some of the best thinking results when students try to represent what they know" (p. 695). Blogging also gives students ownership of the information they are sharing, providing a source of motivation (Downes, 2003). When blogging technology is used "as knowledge construction tools that students learn with, not from" (Jonassen, Carr & Hsiu-Ping, 1998, Introduction, para. 1), three facets of a constructivist approach to education are fulfilled: active knowledge construction, incremental improvement, and self-directed learning (Du & Wagner, 2005, p. 3).

Students find that knowing other people are viewing their blog entries "may help ease feelings of isolation and alienation" (Dickey, 2004, p. 289). They also believe that revealing their thoughts in a public context gives them a sense of "empowerment" (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005) and that reading others' entries "supports their learning by providing different viewpoints" (Xie & Sharma, 2005, p. 842). Jonassen et al. (1998) reaffirmed the value of providing different viewpoints by commenting that "learners are able to comprehend a variety of interpretations and to use each in constructing personal knowledge" (Knowledge Construction, Not Reproduction, para. 1). By reading others' blogs, students can view different interpretations of the same learning experience and potentially be exposed to perspectives outside their own experience.

Case studies that have investigated the use of blogs in education have produced mixed results. The authors of some studies have claimed a variety of positive results (e.g., Betts & Glogoff, 2004; Dickey, 2004; Du & Wagner, 2005),

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highlighting benefits such as a feeling of community (Dickey, 2004) and a sense of empowerment (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). Yet, in other studies there were student reports of negative experiences as well. In their study, Freeman et al. (2006) concluded that participants supported blogs "conceptually" (Outcomes of Keeping a Weblog, para. 1), yet, in practice not all students participated regularly.

Hernandez-Ramos (2004) reported that, while there was an "intuition" (p. 10) among students that blogs were a worthwhile activity to promote reflective writing, students also felt threatened by blogging activities. He suggested that the students' feelings of anxiety may have resulted from the complexity of his study, which involved the use of both discussion boards and blogs. Du and Wagner's (2005) study of "Learning with Weblogs" sought to investigate the following: the impact of blogs on the overall learning outcome; the continuous effect of blogs on cognitive learning; and their impact on the performance of different learner levels. While the study produced statistical data supporting their initial hypotheses, the researchers concluded that "we cannot at this time determine whether blogs motivate comprehensive learning" (p. 8).

A majority of studies of blogging have been conducted with graduate students (e.g., Betts & Glogoff, 2004; Freeman et al., 2006; Hernandez-Ramos, 2004), doctoral students (e.g., Xie & Sharma, 2005), or professionals in the information technology field (e.g., Efimova & de Moor, 2005). Only a small number of studies have focused on the experiences of undergraduate students (e.g., Du & Wagner, 2005; Dickey, 2004). Dickey (2004) and Betts and Glogoff (2004) conducted studies with blogs as a component in distance courses

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involving graduate students and teachers. Dickey reported that all students had positive experiences with blogs (p. 286). However, in both studies the focus was on blogs as a technology for distance courses as opposed to face-to-face courses.

Blogging, as an activity in itself, apart from directed goals or specific course requirements, can be a motivating activity (Betts & Glogoff, 2004; Glogoff, 2005; Wang, Fix & Bock, 2005). Nevertheless, Freeman et al. (2006) noted that in their study not all students participated regularly (Outcomes of Keeping a Weblog, para. 2). Betts and Glogoff (2004) also commented that "far too many students lurked rather than participated, even though participation was required" (p. 5). These observations suggest that, despite the intrinsic motivation associated with blogging, students may still need external motivation to engage in the medium.

In terms of blogging as compared to other social software, Xie and Sharma (2005) stated 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 for using blogs. They commented that students' perceptions of blogs are essential to understanding how students might interact with the blogging medium and for what purposes they might use blogging. Dickey (2004) found that the use of other social software, including emailing lists and discussion boards, did not elicit a sense of community. She hoped that "perhaps the personal nature of blogs and blogging would foster more interpersonal communication" (p. 282).

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Despite the benefits that have been attributed to blogging, Du and Wagner (2005) observed that much of the literature on blogging is anecdotal. Freeman et al. (2006) argued that the literature is based on individual commentary and that, despite the growing use of blogs in education, "the technology is recent enough that there is little published research out there" (Introduction, para. 3). Others have similarly noted that little empirical research has been completed on blogging (e.g., Hernandez-Ramos, 2004; Mishne & de Rijke, 2006; Xie & Sharma, 2005).

The lack of empirical studies, their limitations in terms of the audiences targeted, as well as their mixed findings, point to a need to further investigate the use of blogging in different educational contexts. Two studies (Freeman et al., 2006; Xie & Sharma, 2005) acknowledged these limitations. One examined the experiences of graduate students who used blogs to "document some of the early reactions of novices to such an environment and to thus ground future introductions of this technology in a more informed base of student experience" (Freeman et al., 2006, Introduction, para. 3). Similarly, the other study documented how "graduate students engaged in course-specific blogging activities describe their experiences of reflecting on the blogs" (Xie & Sharma, 2005, p. 840). However, these studies were concerned with masters students (Freeman et al., 2006) and doctoral students (Xie & Sharma, 2005) only.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (1999) discussed the concept of "authentic knowledge-building" (p. 276) as the process of constructing knowledge through community knowledge-building activities. Blogging demonstrates its value in promoting cognitive presence and supporting authentic knowledge building by

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highlighting the importance of individuals in making sustained cognitive contributions to the community. Blogging can provide a forum within which to perform these activities. However, given that blogs constitute 'social' software, what is their potential for supporting learning within an instructional setting? Do students use blogging for social purposes or instructional purposes?

None of the studies reviewed for this thesis specifically looked for evidence of knowledge construction within blogging. Additionally, none of the studies examined the social roles served by blogging within the context of an educational activity. In terms of the educational purposes for blogging, Downes (2004) offered five ways that blogs are currently being used for educational purposes, but did not discuss social purposes. The current study aims to contribute to the literature by investigating students' purposes for blogging. Through a combination of content analysis as well as focus group discussions, the current study will examine how students use blogging within an instructional setting. The current study will focus on students' use of blogging for establishing social presence and for engaging in knowledge construction.

Significance of the Study

Freeman et al. (2006) asked graduate students what purpose they found for blogging. Brooks et al. (2004) noted the various uses that students found for blogging and commented on the ease with which students engaged in various genres of writing. The current study will present a profile of the purposes that students find for blogging in an educational context, to further clarify the range of

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possibilities for blogging as a student activity. It will add to the limited amount of empirical literature that is currently available on this topic.

The current study also focuses on the blogging activities of less mature students. Only one study uncovered in the literature review involved students of similar age to those in the current study. Other studies (e.g., Freeman et al., 2006; Xie & Sharma, 2005) examined graduate-level students and their perceptions and experiences of blogging. Since student perceptions of blogging have been noted as a factor in the outcomes of blogging, students' maturity level may impact on their perception of the blogging medium. The students in the current study are younger than the participants of most other studies reviewed. Additionally, they are Arabic-speaking, although they blogged in English, and the entire group is comprised of females. Thus, the current study will expand on the range and level of students that have been studied in relation to blogging.

Many studies of social software and education have not specifically focused on blogging, but rather on discussion boards or other forms of computer-mediated communication. In terms of social presence and communities of inquiry, defined by Rourke et al. (2001), none of the studies uncovered in the review of the literature examined blogging directly in relation to social presence. In the current study, one of the criteria used to select sample blogs is evidence of social presence. As such, the current study will add to the empirical literature on social presence and contextualize it in relation to blogging.

Similarly, much of the literature on knowledge construction and social software is not specifically concerned with blogging. Only one study (Du &

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Wagner, 2005) reviewed has investigated the usefulness of blogs as a knowledge-sharing medium. However, none of the studies reviewed specifically looked for evidence of knowledge construction. The current study involves a content analysis of blogs to look for evidence of knowledge construction using a tool designed by Gunawardena et al. (1997). Hence, the current study will contribute to the literature on knowledge construction in a context of blogging.

A limited number of studies (e.g., Betts & Glogoff, 2004; Hernandez-Ramos, 2004) commented on non-educational purposes that students found for their blogs, but none of these studies examined the social roles served by blogging within the context of an educational activity. Thus, the current study will contribute to the literature on the use of blogs for social purposes within an educational activity.

Finally, the results of the current study may be of use to instructors interested in using blogging within a context of learning. While the current study is limited to a small number of participants and focuses only on female, Arabic speakers, it presents one use of blogging that instructors or instructional designers may draw upon in order to inform decisions about how blogging might be incorporated into a context of learning.

Limitations of the Study

The current case study involves blogging as part of an e-portfolio project conducted with first-year college students at an all-women's college in the United Arab Emirates. The project was carried out over eight weeks during the latter part

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of the second semester, 2006, in the students' first year of study. The relatively short period of inquiry may have limited the ability of students to fully understand and engage in the blogging activity. The fact that all participants were women might have also influenced their purposes for blogging. Thus, the results may not be relevant in contexts where both females and males are engaged in blogging.

The student participants form a homogenous group of Emirati women. Certain issues arising from their cultural background such as privacy, anonymity and the role or voice of women in their society may have adversely affected their acceptance and frequency of engagement with the blogging activity. In addition, the participants were all native Arabic speakers who were studying in English as their second language. If this language was a barrier, it may have affected students' purposes for blogging.

The academic setting within which the participants were studying was in a fully wireless 'laptop college' where all students and faculty have their own laptop and access to the internet anywhere on campus. Thus, students have the ability to access a blog web site, whether to read or to write, at any time and location while on campus. When compared to a regular campus where students may have to go to a computer lab or other areas where there is an internet connection, this increased access may have allowed blogging to play a more prominent role in course work and may, therefore, have affected the purposes for which students used blogging.

Overview of the Study

Chapter two provides a theoretical framework which examines blogging in particular and social software more generally in a context of teaching and learning. It outlines why and how social presence and knowledge construction were chosen as the two perspectives from which to analyze the purposes for blogging. Chapter three provides a review of the literature on studies of blogging that relate to the current study. Chapter four contains an outline of the research methods used, including participant selection, the approach to content analysis and the focus group discussion.

Chapter five presents the findings of the current study, first by profiling each of the eight blogs in terms of social presence and evidence of knowledge construction. The content analysis for each blog is followed by summaries of the focus group responses for each author. Chapter six presents a discussion of the findings of the current study in relation to the literature and includes conclusions, limitations and implications.

Summary

A blog can be defined as a "personalized web page, 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). Many educators now use blogging as a means of communicating with their students (Downes, 2004). Some of the roles that blogging serve include empowering "individual expression" (Efimova & de Moor, 2005, p. 1), allowing students to revise "the interpretation of

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an experience" (Xie & Sharma, 2005, p. 839), and giving students ownership of the information they are sharing (Downes, 2003).

However, since blogging is a relatively new medium, there are few studies concerned with blogging in an educational context. Despite the benefits that have been associated with blogging, much of the literature on blogging is anecdotal. Some researchers have noted that little empirical research has been completed on blogging (e.g., Hernandez-Ramos, 2004; Mishne & de Rijke, 2006; Xie & Sharma, 2005). Case studies that have investigated the use of blogs in education have produced mixed results. Only a small number of studies have focused on the experiences of undergraduate students (e.g., Du & Wagner, 2005; Dickey, 2004), indicating the need for further investigation of the use of blogs in educational contexts.

The medium of blogging is flexible, allowing for different uses. There is a need for studies to examine the purposes for which students may use blogging in an educational context. There is also a need for studies to examine student purposes for blogging in relation to social and instructional purposes. The goal of the current study was to explore post-secondary students' purposes for blogging with particular attention to the social and instructional purposes.

In terms of the current study's significance, its participants are relatively young, compared to the graduate students whose blogging activities have been studied previously. Additionally, only a few studies examine social presence within blogging, the usefulness of blogging in relation to social construction of knowledge, or the use of blogs for social purposes within an educational activity.

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The current study may contribute a greater understanding of these uses for blogging.

Limitations of the current study include the relatively short time frame of the project within which the blogging activity occurred and the fact that participants are all non-native, English speaking Emirati women. The ubiquitous internet access and use of personal laptops might also affect the results of the current study.

The chapter ends with an overview of the current study. Chapter two presents a theoretical framework. Chapter three presents the literature on blogging and chapter four outlines the methods of the study. Chapter five presents the findings and chapter six focuses on a discussion of the findings and conclusions.

CHAPTER 2

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This chapter presents an examination of the literature related to social

software and social constructivism. The chapter begins with a definition of social

software and focuses on the theories of social constructivism, critical

constructivism and collaborative constructivism in relation to blogging. These

definitions are followed by a discussion of models of interaction and communities

of inquiry. Next, social software is discussed within the context of this community

to highlight how it can support their aims. Blogging as a student activity is then

discussed with an emphasis on its potential to facilitate the construction of

knowledge. Within this section, blogging is also examined in relation to the

following: learner motivation, social interaction, responsibility for learning, the

possibilities of blogging for distance education, face-to-face settings, the effects

of a public audience on student reflection, and the development of knowledge

over time. This chapter ends with a summary of the potential purposes of

blogging.

Social Software

Social software has been defined as software that "facilitates group

communication" (Grant, 2006, p. 1). Shirky (2003) stated that social software is

"software that supports group interactions" (para. 1). Anderson (2005) provided a

more specific definition. He argued that social software involves "networked tools

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that support and encourage individuals to learn together while retaining individual control over their time, space, presence, activity, identity and relationship" (p. 4). Boyd (2003) restricted social software to that which enables not only simple interaction, but also feedback and networking by allowing more than two people to interact together. Bryant (2003) explained that, in general, determining how software is used despite its original intent "is fundamentally a social issue" (Software becoming bigger, more stupid, para. 5). This viewpoint allows usage, rather than design, to determine the definition of the software.

Boyd (2003) discussed software that helps groups to function by enabling document sharing, control of communications, and limiting access to group sites. He termed this type of software "groupware" (Social Software: Bottom Up, para. 1), and added that it is a top-down oriented software that restricts interaction rather than enhancing it. Social software should work from the bottom up, whereby learners or users register to a site or install software by choice. Users can then act on their "desire to be pulled into groups to achieve their personal goals" (Social Software: Bottom Up, para. 2).

Anderson (2005) provided a comprehensive list of features that enable software to fulfill a social function. These features include the following: indicating user online presence; notification of new content; filtering of content; cooperative learning support; referring; modeling of interaction; help features; and documenting, storing and sharing of content. Wikis are considered to be social software, as they provide combinations of these features. Wikis have been described as "simple websites that allow their users to create and edit content"

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(Grant, p. 2). One very common example of a wiki is Wikipedia (n.d.). Another example of social software that allows people to interact with each other, albeit in a limited way, is MSN Messenger (Microsoft, n.d.). This common software allows people to chat in real time with each other and allows groups of people to communicate. Logs of the communication are generated by the software for future reference.

Social software can help learners to share their experiences with others, thereby transforming the learning process from a "personal activity to a social activity" (Anderson & Kanuka, 1998, Conclusion, para. 1). By interacting through social software, learners' ideas and opinions can potentially be more readily exposed to an audience of other learners. Conversely, learners can also be more readily exposed to the ideas of their audience.

Blogs are considered a form of social software (Anderson, 2005; Downes, 2004). They demonstrate their value by functioning 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). Through blogging, the social learning experience can flow not only from the learner to the group, but from the group to the learner. Such social interactions are not merely two-way interactions but multi-directional between all the members of the learning community.

In terms of the educational purposes for blogging, Downes (2004) offered five ways that blogs are currently being used: as a replacement for regular class web pages to provide administrative information; as a source of links to other educational content; as a discussion forum; as a seminar hosting forum; and as a forum for student writing. Similarly, blogs can be used as a personal publishing tool for educators who want to share their writing (Downes, n.d.).

<center>*Social Software and Constructivism*</center>

Garrison (1995) commented that all "cognitive meaning must involve two or more persons" (p. 723). By facilitating interaction between learners, social software can potentially help transform the individual learning process into a social learning experience. Knowledge is not only based on what learners experience as a result of interaction with the outside, physical world, but also on interaction with other individuals and their ideas. Blogging is one way that social interaction can be encouraged and social experiences managed.

In his discussion of Piaget, Daniels (2001) commented that "human knowledge is essentially collective and social life constitutes an essential factor" (p. 38) in the development of individual knowledge. Hung (2001) argued that all knowledge is socially constructed and so "the interpretation of knowledge must be dependent on the cultural and social context through which the knowledge was constructed" (p. 283). Under the umbrella of constructivism, more specific terms have been defined including social constructivism, critical constructivism, and collaborative constructivism (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Anderson & Kanuka,

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1998; Daniels, 2001; Du & Wagner, 2005; Grant, 2006; Glogoff, 2005; Hung, 2001; Hunt, 1997; Oravec, 2002; Spiro et al., 1996). Constructivism, as the most general term, posits that knowledge is constructed by individuals through interaction with their environment (Hunt, 1997).

Gergen (2002) discussed social constructivism and extended the definition of learning, also referred to as knowledge construction, by stating that knowledge is a "by-product ... of communal relationships" (The Social Construction of Knowledge, para. 1). This definition does not preclude the possibility of individual learning where the "social interactant" (Hung, 2001, p. 283) includes only oneself. Even when alone, individuals still base their knowledge on social experiences (Gergen, 2002).

Social-constructivist activities support community-centered instruction, central to Vygotsky's (1978) notions of social cognition whereby learning is bound by social context. Piaget (2001) described a view of intelligence in which knowledge is gained or constructed by the interactions of the learner with the surrounding world or by what he stated was the "indissociable collaboration between experience and deduction" (p. 15). This collaboration between learner and environment involves the learner internalizing new experiences by placing the new experiences within an existing mental framework. He or she can relate them to existing experiences and knowledge schema, creating a new or greater understanding of the experience (Smith-Gratto, 2000).

A central aspect of social constructivism is critical constructivism, which holds that knowledge is constructed by social interaction where participants'

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ideas are either strengthened or transformed as a result of the negotiation of

meaning between the participants (Anderson & Kanuka, 1998). Critical

constructivism "assumes that knowledge is constructed as an integration of

internal contradictions" (Anderson & Kanuka, 1998, Constructivist Learning

Theory, para. 4) or as a "synthesis of contradictions resulting from social

interchanges" (Anderson & Kanuka, 1998, Results, para. 18). In group learning

situations such as blogging each individual contributes his or her experiences

and knowledge to the group members. They then internalize the new information

by attempting to reconcile it with their existing knowledge schema. In this

manner, these interactions can contribute to a transformation of knowledge

among the group members. The act of reconciling experiences of the outside

world with internal knowledge of that world can lead to knowledge construction.

Social constructivism posits that learning or knowledge construction

involves negotiation between "both an individual's unique experience and the

knowledge of the group" (Grant, 2006, p. 2). Gergen (2001) supported this view

of learning by emphasizing the "social significance of dialogue" (Introduction,

para. 7) in education and the importance of understanding the social construction

of the classroom. The term 'negotiation' helps to explain the process of continual

reconciliation that occurs between the members of the group. Each member

takes away a piece of knowledge only to return it in an enhanced form with a new

interpretation added to the original. In this view of learning, social software such

as blogging provides a place, or an 'address', where learners can come to

interact, take away new experiences and knowledge, and leave behind their own

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interpretations. By increasing opportunities for interaction and thus the potential for social discord, instructors can provide opportunities for social constructivism.

Du and Wagner (2005) discussed the term "collaborative constructivism" (p. 3) as an alternate term for the social-constructivist learning model. They suggested that blogging enables collaborative activities which can "enhance learning by allowing individuals to exercise, verify, solidify and improve their mental models by interacting with others" (p. 3). Dickey (2004) noted that there is "evidence of learners using the blog for initiating and supporting casual socialization" (p. 284) and that in comparison online discussion boards "had failed many times to elicit the same sense of community" (p. 288). Xie and Sharma (2005) found that, "participants thought that blogs supported their learning by providing different viewpoints" and that students perceived they benefited from the "additional information" (p. 842).

Accessing other opinions through blogging allows students to construct their own view of a topic by comparing and contrasting their understanding of the topic with the comments and reflections of other students. In doing so, students can learn to distinguish between differing viewpoints, accept different interpretations of a particular topic and proceed to clarify and develop their own ideas further (Jonassen et al., 1998). These ideas can then be posted to their blog. This form of interaction is enhanced by operating through a community of learners where students have been given a purpose or intent for their learning and a social context in which to express their experiences. As Scardamalia and Bereiter (1999) explained, the knowledge constructed within such a social context

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may not have much value outside the community but within this context it contributes to the common good of the other learners.

Models of Interaction

By applying collaborative constructivist principles to educational activities, instructors can provide deeper learning opportunities than what might be possible through casual social interaction. Collaboration can be a matter of degree and thus can encompass a wide scope of activities. However, directions for collaborative activities can be over-generalized and lead to difficulty in assessing relevance or effectiveness (Hakkinen & Jarvela, 2006). Models of interaction help to specify forms and types of interaction and thus provide greater clarity to instructors and students.

Various models, including those concerned with blogging, often use the term 'community' when referring to online interactions. Downes (2005) defined an online community, not as a place or a structure but, as "the relations between the members where the relations have semantic value" (Section 4, para. 6). This definition may be construed to mean that the interactions or relations between the members must have a common meaning or focus that is understood by the members of the community. Blogging in an educational forum where an instructor has provided guidelines can create a community where the members are united by a common focus derived from the goals of the course.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (1999) discussed the concept of "authentic knowledge-building" (p. 276) as the process of constructing knowledge through

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community knowledge-building activities. Blogging can provide a forum within which to perform these activities. She argued that through such knowledge-building activities students can contribute to the common good by providing interpretations of experiences and understandings which then become the public property of the community and from which other members of the community can benefit.

In less formalized situations, the learner may still assimilate knowledge and have a meaningful and worthwhile experience. However, when the individual operates within a purposeful group where all members are working towards a common goal, knowledge transformation and construction may be purposefully directed to areas more attuned to the interests of the members. Operating within a purposeful group can potentially increase opportunities for individual learners to take away new understandings, and expanded knowledge (Hakkinen & Jarvela, 2006).

Communities of Inquiry

Garrison et al. (2000) proposed a defined community: one of inquiry. This community is a purposeful, focused blend of social, cognitive and teaching presence that "goes beyond social exchanges and low-level cognitive interaction" (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005, p. 135) to provide a meaningful learning environment (Anderson, 2005; Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). In this model, cognitive presence is considered to be the most basic and important element in the ability to think critically. It is defined as the "extent to

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which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication" (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89). Learners must be able to participate over time and make contributions to the community in the form of interpretations of experiences and in responses to other community members. They must be able to contribute in a manner that is consistent with their role in the community.

Social presence, defined as the "ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry" (Anderson, 2005, p. 2), is the second requirement in a community of inquiry. It is also defined as the ability of individuals to make themselves known and heard within the community. This ability entails not only being able to contribute ideas and experiences to the community in a way that advances the learning of the whole community, but doing so in a manner that is comprehensible to the other community members.

Individuals need to be able to "present themselves to the other participants as real people" (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89), which allows all members to appreciate and accept individuals into the community. Social presence is based on social interaction which can only happen when members view each other as 'real people'. If members have and show respect for each other, they may be able to view each others' contributions in a social context, potentially motivating members to make a greater effort towards the aims of the community.

Social presence is a component of community membership that blogging may facilitate in an academic setting. Blogging, as a form of social software, offers a means for students to share their own knowledge and help others

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construct meaning. It is this act of sharing that can help promote students' perceptions of themselves and their peers as creators of knowledge.

Students who may not be comfortable or confident in their opinions, and thus who may be hesitant to express their views in a classroom or a discussion board setting, may not be able to avoid doing so with certain types of blogging software since their presence in the online community will be noted through an authenticated log-in (Du & Wagner, 2005, p. 4). Blogging affords them the chance to contemplate their topic more thoroughly by allowing them to put their thoughts and positions "in the context of others' writings as well as outline their own perspectives" (Oravec, 2002, Weblogs and the development of students' voices, para. 1). Learners may then be better prepared to voice their thoughts in face-to-face situations.

The third element in the community of inquiry model is teaching presence, which may be divided into three abilities: the design of the educational experience, the facilitation of that experience, and subject matter expertise (e.g., Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison, 2006). While these roles "may be performed by any one participant in a community of inquiry" (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89), responsibility for the design of the content and interactions rests primarily with teachers. However, the facilitation of the interactions may be, "shared among the teacher and some or all of the other participants or students" (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 90). From these interactions, the community gains intent and purpose. However, it may be that the community maintains its purpose through the interaction of a subject matter

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expert who "knows a great deal more than most learners and thus is in a position to 'scaffold' learning experiences" (Anderson et al., 2001). Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) stated that "teaching presence is important for the creation and sustainability of a community of inquiry" (p. 135). Garrison et al. (2000) added that teaching presence supports and enhances "social and cognitive presence for the purpose of realizing educational outcomes" (p. 90).

This model illustrates the value of pursuing socially oriented tasks in which learners are given opportunities to work together and share their experiences. Community-oriented activities can help to provide purpose and focus to learning. Through communities, individual learners can provide greater breadth to learning opportunities by assuming roles suited to their ability and the needs of the community. Online communities may be even more valuable in distance courses where participants are physically restricted in their ability to work within a community of other learners. Nevertheless, while blogging can potentially facilitate social interactions for distance learners, it can also do so for those involved in face-to-face learning.

Blogging as Student Activity

Using social software for activities such as blogging also helps to shift the onus of educational input in the form of content and opinions from the teacher to the wider educational group including both the teacher and the students (Educause, 2005). Teaching presence can be provided by the teacher and the students, who become active participants in facilitating the building of knowledge.

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Students also bring a "wide range of generic knowledge" (Brooks et. al., 2004, Conclusion, para. 1) to blogging through sharing not only their understanding of the formats of writing required, but also of the topics under discussion (Oravec, 2002).

Jonassen and Reeves (1996) stated that many forms of instructional communication technology fail in the classroom because curricula can sometimes "[fail] to recognize learners as active constructors of knowledge" (p. 693). However, Glogoff (2005) argued that "Learner-centered blogging acknowledges the important attributes of learners as individuals and as a group". He added that as an example of social software, blogging "expresses the importance of social and peer interaction as foci of the learning community" (Blogging as e-learning tool, para. 4).

Blogging can be valuable in promoting cognitive presence by highlighting the importance of individuals in making sustained cognitive contributions to the community. Blogging may also have the potential to promote social presence by giving learners an opportunity to make themselves heard by the other members of the community. Community members cannot easily 'lurk' because their presence may be exposed through an authenticated log-in facility, which much blogging software possesses. Their presence in the community, or lack thereof, is easily noted and so may add pressure on members to perform.

Blogging may also help to motivate students because of the control they have over their own blog and entries. Wang et al. (2005) claimed that this motivation is a result of the "inherent desire" (p. 7) of students to display their

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work and themselves positively in public. Blogging may motivate students to actively participate as "they naturally engage in interesting dialogues with others" (p. 7). Additionally, Betts and Glogoff (2004) commented that in one of their courses, despite having given students specific directions for what and when to post to a course blog, the blog entries began to reflect entries "about topics of interest" (p. 3) as opposed to specified topics. From such dialogues, students are able to assert their own perspectives and arguments and so are willing to make a greater effort to their contributions through blogging. This greater motivation highlights the importance of creating a social presence within a learning community by enabling students to make their opinions heard and considered. One study found that 60% of students claimed that blogging was a motivating factor to write class assignments, whereas 47% stated that they found blogging motivating to write for personal satisfaction (Brooks et al., 2004).

In an educational setting, the knowledge that there is a public audience viewing students' blogs can have a profound effect on the style and quality of reflection and writing in the blogs (Betts & Glogoff, 2004; Fun & Wagner, 2005; Hernandez-Ramos, 2004). Students may find that knowing other people are viewing their work in the form of blog entries "may help ease feelings of isolation and alienation because it represents a type of communication that is both personal and public" (Dickey, 2004, p. 289). Huffaker and Calvert (2005) commented 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, para. 2).

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Blogging and the subsequent comments from the community of learners can also provide a catalyst to face-to-face interactions by allowing students time to digest the shared experiences present in the blogs (Seitzinger, 2006). If the blogging activity is conducted within a purposeful community of inquiry, then by giving students advance notice of others' opinions, face-to-face discussions could start from a much more informed and focused level of involvement than might be possible if community interaction was restricted to the classroom setting.

Cognitive flexibility theory (Spiro et al., 1996) indicates that time is an essential factor in constructing meaning. A central claim of the theory is that "revisiting some of the materials, at different times, in rearranged contexts, for different purposes, and from different conceptual perspectives is essential" (Cognitive Flexibility Theory: A Constructivist Approach to Promoting Complex Conceptual Understanding and Adaptive Knowledge Use for Transfer, para. 2). Blogging helps to preserve individual learners' progression of ideas and can also preserve the development of ideas in the learning community over the span of a course. The element of time may also help learners perceive themselves as creators of knowledge. As an online journal, blogging provides students and their peers a record of development over time from which "students can obtain a sense of how others digest and make sense of internet materials" (Oravec, 2002, Weblogs as Genre, para. 1).

In discussing social software, Anderson (2005) stated that the greatest benefit delivered to education by the internet is the "freedom to control one's learning experience in a number of dimensions" (p. 3), including the freedom of

space, time, pace of learning, choice of media, access to learning, and subject of inquiry. Of these dimensions, two deal with time: when learners can fulfill their roles in a community of learners, and at what speed. Opportunities are provided for learners to contemplate their own experiences and reactions to others' experiences before discussing them in face-to-face situations. Time is also a factor through the "immediacy and frequency" (Du & Wagner, 2005, p. 4) of feedback which can provide an enhanced experience and a thus another source of motivation.

Purposes of Social Software and Blogging

The theoretical framework presented in this chapter provides a foundation on which to consider the range and variety of purposes that blogging might serve in an educational context. In the following table, I summarize what I refer to as the purposes of social software and blogging according to author.

Table 1

Summary of Purposes of Social Software and Blogging Organized According to Authors.

Purposes	Author
• supports group interaction	Anderson (2005)
• indicates user online presence	
• notification of new content	
• filtering of content	

- cooperative learning support
- referring
- modeling of interaction
- help features
- documenting, storing and sharing of content
- may facilitate social presence
- offers a means to share knowledge and help others
- can potentially facilitate social interactions

- transforms the learning process from a "personal activity to a social activity" - can potentially expose learners' ideas and opinions more readily to an audience - can more readily expose learners to audience's ideas - enables document sharing, control of communications, and limits access to the shared site - can foster group learning situations where each individual contributes knowledge to the group	Anderson & Kanuka (1998)
- allows students to share a wide range of generic knowledge	Brooks et al. (2004); Oravec (2002)
- supports casual socialization - may help ease feelings of isolation and alienation	Dickey (2004)
- allows students to get to know each other - allows social learning experience to flow from learner to group and from group to learner. - acts as a replacement for regular class web pages	Downes (2004)

- acts as a links page
- acts as a discussion forum
- acts as a seminar hosting forum
- acts as a forum for student writing
- acts as a personal publishing tool for educators
- can create an online community with a common focus

• allows collaborative activities • can provide a source of motivation through the immediacy and frequency of feedback	Du & Wagner (2005)
• shifts the onus from the teacher to the educational group	Educause (2005)
• transforms the individual learning process into a social learning experience	Garrison (1995)
• supports community-centered instruction	Gergen (2002)
• acknowledges learners as individuals and as a group • expresses the importance of social and peer interaction • highlights the importance of individual contributions • gives learners an opportunity to be heard • enables students to assert their own perspectives and so make a greater effort	Glogoff (2005)
• increases opportunities for social interaction	Gergen (2001); Grant (2006)
• can foster collaborative learning within an organized community	Hakkinen & Jarvela (2006)
• provides a certain sense of empowerment	Huffaker & Calvert (2005)

• facilitates distinguishing between differing viewpoints, accepting different interpretations	Jonassen et al. (1998)
• affords the chance to put thoughts in the context of others • allows students to outline their own perspectives • provides a sense of development over time	Oravec (2002)
• can provide a forum for knowledge-building activities	Scardamalia & Bereiter (1999)
• can provide a catalyst to face-to-face interactions	Seitzinger (2006)
• helps to motivate students	Wang, Fix & Bock (2005)
• can record experiences for reflection • supports learning by providing different viewpoints	Xie & Sharma (2005)

From this summary of the literature related to social software, I 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, I derived two purposes for blogging. One is how blogging is used for social interaction, and the second is concerned with knowledge construction. These are purposes that have been largely identified from a theoretical perspective rather than an empirical one. In the current study, I frame my investigation in terms of these two purposes. I investigate the case of a group of post-secondary learners in relation to how they engaged in blogging for social and instructional purposes. In chapter four, I outline the specific instruments used to identify the social and instructional purposes.

Summary

This chapter identified the potential of blogging to contribute positively to teaching and learning. Social software such as blogs can potentially help to transform the learning process into a social experience. The interactions facilitated by this software are not merely two-way interactions but multi-directional between all the members of the learning community.

Definitions of social software range from any "software that supports group interaction" (Shirky, 2003, para. 1) to that which enables not only simple interaction, but also feedback and networking (Boyd, 2003). In an educational setting, social software can facilitate a social-constructivist approach to learning whereby the negotiation of meaning between participants can strengthen or transform ideas (Anderson & Kanuka, 1998).

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Models of interaction help to direct and provide greater purpose to social interaction. A defined model, termed a community of inquiry (Garrison et al., 2000), is a purposeful blend of social, cognitive and teaching presence. Cognitive presence is the ability of members to contribute to a community of learners in a manner that is consistent with their role in the community. Social presence is defined as the ability of individuals to make themselves known and heard within the community. Teaching presence may be divided into three abilities: the design of the educational experience, the facilitation of the educational experience, and subject matter expertise. Blogging can potentially facilitate this model of interaction, not only for distance learners, but also for those involved in face-to-face learning.

Blogging may also motivate students because of the control and responsibility they have over their own blog. If the blogging activity is conducted within a community of inquiry, then face-to-face discussions can start from a more informed and focused level of involvement than might be possible if community interaction was restricted to the classroom setting. Blogs also preserve the development and progression of ideas of both the individual learners and the learning community. As online journals, blogs provide a sense of development over time from which "students can obtain a sense of how others digest and make sense of internet materials" (Oravec, 2002, Weblogs as Genre, para. 1).

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CHAPTER 3

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Due to the relatively recent development of blogging, there is a paucity of sources concerned with blogging in educational contexts. Thus, this review examines a variety of case studies which include both distance and face-to-face settings and undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students. These case studies also examined blogging for a variety of educational goals. Eight studies are examined in terms of their purpose, methods, findings and conclusions. For each study, the purpose is discussed along with the number of participants and their academic level. Then, the methods of each study are outlined. The findings and conclusions of each study are presented with attention to the main conclusions and recommendations of the authors.

The studies are organized first according to their relevance to the current study and then with the most recent. Thus, studies concerned with post-secondary or undergraduate students are discussed first, followed by studies with graduate students.

Studies of Blogging in a Undergraduate-Level Context

Fun and Wagner (2005) explored blog use, its impact on social computing and possible extrapolation to organizational computing in terms of technological development. To understand the use of blogs, they analyzed and presented the features of three main blogging service providers in Hong Kong. In their

exploratory case study, they held 30-minute interviews with 12 university students, 10 of whom were aged 20 to 22. To encourage free expression, they conducted interviews in Chinese and did not audio-tape them. The interview questions explored usage intensity, perceptions of group belonging and sharing, and technology features.

Interviews indicated that blogging intensity provides a meaningful division of blog users into habitual/enthusiastic, active, personal and dormant, with the first two divisions referring to the user and the last two referring to the blog. Habitual users visited and posted to their blogs everyday whereas active users visited at least once everyday but did not always post. In both of these categories, technical features such as skins were used to personalize the look of the blog. Users aimed to build relationships making extensive use of community features such as "Chatterbox, Counters, Commentary, Eprops, profile info and pics" (p. 229).

Personal blog postings were sometimes public or private depending on the nature of the post. Users in this category had little concern for sharing with friends and used features such as "Protected Rings, Restricted Subscriptions, Blocking and Protected Postings" (p. 229) to maintain privacy. Dormant blogs were maintained by people who wanted to see what their friends were doing and so needed a registered blog, but had no interest in making their own posts.

Implications from their study indicated that for blogging technologies to be successful, providers must be aware that in blog-based virtual communities, tasks are based on individuals' needs and desires. In an academic setting, the

authors recommend that curriculum design incorporating blogs must be considered from the needs of the student rather than the institution. Further studies are needed to better match needs to technology and to determine the impact of age on choosing specific technologies.

Du and Wagner (2005) presented quantitative empirical evidence gathered from a senior undergraduate elective course in Information Systems during the 2003 - 2004 academic year to demonstrate the "usefulness of blogs as a knowledge-sharing medium and a cognitive learning tool" (p. 2). They also sought to determine whether students' level of blogging could be used to predict overall student performance and to understand the impact of blogging on different learner ability levels.

All 31 students in the study were required to keep weekly online logs over nine weeks of a 13 week semester. This requirement included descriptions of articles, reflections and opinions of other students' blogs. Blogger.com was used and students, all of whom had technical experience, were given instruction in its use. Each of the students' nine blogs were graded by one instructor and aggregated to a single grade. The blogs were analyzed in relation to three other variables: course performance (excluding the blog), exam performance and a combined course and exam performance.

Results indicated that for high and low academic performers the blogs were strong predictors of performance in course work and exam results. Strong blogs indicated strong course work and exam results. However, the blogs were not reliable predictors for the medium range performers. This effect may be

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attributed to a tendency of average students to do just enough to pass. In analyzing the "continuous effect of blog facilitated learning" (p. 6), the relationship between the weekly blogs was tested using bivariate correlations. The weekly blogs did correlate on a week-to-week basis indicating a continuous effect of writing a blog on the process of knowledge construction. This correlation increased over time after the first three weeks as the students learned how to write to a blog and gained experience in the requisite skills of explaining knowledge and seeking outside materials. Fluctuations in blog performance at the end of the course were attributed to competing interests from other courses.

The authors noted that the public nature of blogs let students continually benchmark their work against other students' work, and that this public scrutiny requires students to better prepare and assess their own work: instructor and student judgment in rating the top five blogs was highly consistent. Future recommendations include employing a control group, which the current study did not do, and determining the best methods for using blogs in education such as the "best frequency of required blog updates or peer involvement" (p. 8).

In an exploratory case study of teaching with blogs conducted in the fall and spring semesters, 2002 - 2003 at North Dakota State University, Brooks et al. (2004) asked "which blog genre(s) (if any) engage or motivate students to make significant contributions to their personal or class blog" (Introduction, para. 5). In both semesters the same entrance and exit surveys were used. The entrance survey investigated students' familiarity with three print genres - journals, notebooks and filters - believed to be useful in blogs and students'

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knowledge of blogs in general. The exit survey asked which genres students preferred and whether they found blogging to be motivating. In the fall semester, 100 students responded to the entrance survey and 84 responded to the exit survey. In the spring semester, 65 students responded to the entrance survey and 61 responded to the exit survey.

In the fall semester, all researchers taught sections of the same first-year composition course and required students to set up personal blogs in the first week. The researchers gave explicit definitions of the three genres of blogging expected. They also maintained personal blogs and a teaching/research blog, although the latter was infrequently maintained during the spring semester. Minimal requirements for blogging were set and the researchers relied on examples and strong encouragement to motivate students to maintain personal blogs.

During the spring semester, the researchers taught different courses with differing requirements. For her 100-level courses, Priebe maintained a teacher's blog, a community blog and encouraged students to maintain personal blogs about controversial social issues. Nichols maintained a teaching blog for her 200- and 300-level courses where students used blogs for notebooks and message boards. Brooks maintained his teaching blog for a 200-level and graduate course where blogs were used to share responses to readings and to build community.

The entrance and exit surveys were paraphrased to three questions: "1) How familiar were students with blogs in the fall of 2002, spring of 2003? 2) How familiar were students with the print genres that blogs ... remediate? 3) Which

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genre of blog did students prefer to write?" (Results from Survey and Observations, para. 20). In the fall, 2% had previously maintained a blog and 21% had heard of blogs; in the spring, these responses were 28% and 48% respectively. The increase from the fall semester was attributed to some students having taken courses with the three authors in the fall. Sixty percent of fall and 72% of spring students had kept journals, although for different reasons such as emotional value, record keeping or intellectual value.

The authors stated that familiarity with particular print genres does not necessarily motivate students to write this style in a blog and that regardless of the course the journal blog was preferred. The notebook genre was more popular within a community blog than with an individual blog, with 15 of Priebe's spring students indicating a preference for notebooks to 17 for journals. The filter genre was found to be very complex and thus not appealing to students despite their familiarity with the genre. Open-ended comments from students indicated that writing for the internet or using communication technology in general is very motivating and that overall, blogging is worth pursuing in college courses.

Studies of Blogging in a Graduate-Level Context

In a research study which was part of a larger study of developing identity in an online setting, Freeman et al. (2006) documented nine graduate students' reactions to using blogs in an academic setting. Of these students, four had previous blog experience, and five had none. All were proficient with web-based technologies and had volunteered to participate in the study out of personal

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interest. Participants were given a blog and training, but no specific instructions on how or what to do. They were provided with five general focus questions: "1) What is the purpose of a blog in your mind? 2) Are blogs more of a public or private tool to you? 3) Do you see them as a primarily individual or collaborative activity? 4) If collaborative, what role might others play? 5) What does the idea of posting your thoughts online feel like to you?" (Methods, para. 4). Responses were categorized in the following themes: expectations, process and outcomes.

Most participants in the study saw blogs as a reflective tool or journal, but were concerned about their public nature and the potential loss of intellectual property. One student noted that by posting unfinished or 'work in progress', "others will be judging me for my lack of clarity or focus" (Expectations of the Weblog Environment, para. 2). Conversely, the public nature of blogs was also seen as a strength in that participants could access each others' graduate student experiences. The time required to keep a blog was viewed negatively partly due to the perception that blogs were not conducive to collaborative activities. Only the experienced user identified an academic and professional role for the blog and noted that the purpose and use of blogs had to evolve over time. Participants supported the use of blogs and saw benefits in their public nature, although they did not regularly post to their own blogs.

Findings showed that experienced users find blogging easier, and that purposes for use develop over time. Freeman et al. (2006) suggested that the collaborative use of blogs will take time to develop as it is less tangible than other forms of collaboration and that students' perceptions of blogs are influenced by

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prior knowledge and experience. They also suggested that blogs may be useful when they are supported with explicit requirements and where they are voluntary, more time and structure will be needed.

Xie and Sharma (2005) found few studies concerned with individual perceptions of the usefulness of blogs and thus presented a case study of "student feelings and their lived experiences" (p. 839) of using a blog for "individual reflection and group discourse" (p. 841) in a graduate level course. The research questions for the study were "how do graduate students engaged in course-specific web logging activities describe their experiences of reflecting on the blogs and what meanings do they attach to those descriptions?" (p. 841). The authors also stated that they wanted to "address the nature of course-specific blogging phenomenon" (p. 841).

They used a criterion sampling technique to select four male and five female doctoral students, between 24 and 40 years old, who had maintained a blog for at least one semester prior to the study. Students were required to maintain a blog for one academic semester. At the end of the course, the authors conducted hour-long interviews with each participant following a phenomenological approach. They asked open ended questions around the following main themes: "students' feelings towards blogs in class, their approach to reflecting on the blogs, and their perceptions of its utility in their learning" (p. 841). Preliminary categories of students' responses were presented and then the data were thematically grouped creating a composite, textual-structural description of student experiences. This description reflected influences on

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students' perceptions and uses of blogs and how these experiences contributed to students' reflective thinking and learning.

Findings of the study revealed that students felt they had benefited from reading different viewpoints and seeing how others connected both class and additional content to their own experiences. One student noted that blogs "let me consider other alternatives" (p. 842). Students also found that being able to read others' posts helped foster a mutual understanding and forge a sense of community. This sense was heightened through opportunities to discuss their written reflections with classmates face to face. Posting to a blog also forced students to be more "critical" and "questioning" in their reflections and pushed them into deeper thinking. One student commented that blogging allowed students "to lay out a roadmap of [their] development" (p. 842).

Negative concerns arose from students' uncertainty concerning instructor expectations and guidelines. The public availability of the blogs raised concerns about responses that might not be reasoned or based on facts. Issues of privacy led to an avoidance of overly "controversial" topics (p. 845). The researchers provided themes for future investigation including students' perceptions of blogs compared to other online technologies and students' interpreted purposes and motivations for using blogs. They noted that students' perceptions of blogs are paramount to understanding how to better implement blogs in education and that a guided introduction to them would be conducive to proper usage. The researchers also recommended additional activities that help structure learning and reflective activities to provide a more holistic picture of learning. The

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researchers noted that further studies are required to help achieve a balance between online community building and a sense of safety or privacy within the online community.

Hernandez-Ramos (2004) conducted a study on the efficacy of using a public, technology-based tool such as a blog to provide a means for student reflection in a teacher training course instead of the traditional paper journal, which is private and often 'biased' towards instructors' expectations (p. 2). The study also used discussion boards to allow students "to consider the differences between a 'public' voice … (the blogs) and a more 'private' voice (discussion boards)" (p. 3). Students were encouraged to consider blogs and discussion boards as effective professional development tools and to see themselves as "creators of knowledge" (p. 10) and other students as sources of knowledge.

This study was conducted in California where a required element for fifth-year education students is that each candidate communicates through a variety of electronic media. Two sections of 28 students were directed to write to a public blog, starting by creating their own blog on blogger.com. Over a seven-week period, students were required to post 10 reflections on "teaching, learning and technology" (p. 6) one paragraph or longer in length, which were printed and submitted at the end of the course. Student responses to the activities ranged from two pages for 10 postings to more than 20 pages and more than the required number of postings. Each group completed three discussion board activities spaced three weeks apart. Each activity required responses to at least

two discussion questions and one reply to peers' entries. The boards were not visible across the two sections.

The findings of the study revealed that 53 of 56 students were able to create a blog with no instructor assistance. The study also found that students had difficulties understanding concepts such as the difference between public and private postings rather than with the technical aspects of actually creating a blog. In the end, nine students did not fulfill all requirements for both blogs and discussion boards. A wide range of themes was evident in the blogs with the most common one being experiences students had in their school placements.

Only five out of 56 students indicated that they would incorporate blogs into their own teaching. However, there were indications that "blogs seem to be an effective tool" (p. 10) to promote higher quality writing and reflection despite the observation that the "the public nature of blogs can be simultaneously a motivating and threatening resource" (p. 9). With both blogs and discussion boards, "simply making the tools available" (p. 12) was not enough to foster their proper use. The author concluded that guidelines, both pedagogic and instructional, are needed to help students use these tools to their maximum potential and that there is a need for further study to "evaluate in finer detail" (p. 13) the quality of reflection and content.

In an interpretive case study, Dickey (2004) investigated how "blogs may impact learners' perceptions of isolation and alienation in a web-based learning environment" (p. 280). This study provided insight on how blogs may enable or marginalize web-based learners. It was based on the fall, 2003 semester of an

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advanced web-based course entitled, "Integrating Technology and Education Practicum" (p. 281). This course had an enrollment of 111 students from 12 different teacher education programs. Based on which teacher program they were pursuing, participants were placed in learning communities containing a communal blog where they were encouraged to comment on experiences with technology. The participants were also required to post one reflection per week and to post updates on a course project which ran for 8 of 16 weeks. Data for the study came from blog postings, 66 course evaluations, 15 informal student interviews and 36 email interviews. The author noted that she had "a bias towards technology" (p. 283) and stated that despite triangulation of multiple data the interpretation was still subjective.

Findings indicated that the blogs were used for a variety of purposes including socialization, reports of activities, feelings and emotions, and support. All interviewees reported having positive experiences with blogs, and most felt that blogging helped reduce feelings of isolation. One student noted that "it helped knowing I wasn't alone" and another stated that "it helped to be able to see that each student was in the same boat as me" (p. 287). Students who reported frustration with their blogs noted in the interviews that their frustration arose from procrastination on their part and was not caused by the format of the course. Other negative comments observed that some of the friendliness displayed in the blogs was false and one student reported that she felt she was ignored by her blogging community.

The researcher stated that "the use of blogs...supported the emergence of community [and] helped bridge or prevent feelings of isolation" (p. 288). Possible reasons given for the emergence of community included the fact that blogs allow people with little technical experience to post to the internet informally, thus allowing a type of communication that is both personal and public. The novelty of blogs was also offered as an explanation. The authors recommended that further studies include a discourse analysis of blog postings and an investigation of other communication media to reveal how learners interact.

Betts and Glogoff (2004) reported on the use of blogs to address three instructional techniques including receptive, directive, and guided discovery, as outlined by Clark and Mayer (2003). Blogs were introduced into two courses: a hybrid (online and face-to-face) course of graduate education students and a virtual course of approximately 30 graduate library resources students including some students who were already working in a professional capacity. In the hybrid course, the goal of introducing blogs was to give an experience of "new literacies" and help develop a "classroom community of learners" (p. 2). Blogging was used for a variety of purposes including for course assignments, reflections and journal entries. It was also used for extended discussions on topics ranging from students' own classroom activities, course work, collaboration on projects, and the blog itself. In the virtual classroom course, conducted during the summer 2003 semester, blogs were used to facilitate sharing information about technology and for help on how to use course resources. However, the authors

note that the blogs' focus changed "totally by student actions" (p. 3) from their intended purpose to postings about topics of interest.

At the end of the hybrid course, an informal survey was conducted with 13 out of 17 participants responding. Only one student replied that she had participated in "something like a blog" (p. 3). Other questions included whether students would use a blog in a future class, either as a teacher or student (five said yes and three, maybe) and what they liked the most about blogs. To this last question, students replied that blogging provided "an opportunity to participate" and to "participate in writing, not necessarily verbally" (p. 4). Another question asked students how they might use blogs themselves, prompting comments that blogs could be used as a journal, for notes or posting examples and for discussing articles. However, one student commented that blogs were intrusive to her privacy. At the end of the virtual course, both survey and student assessment data were collected. The survey also included questions on participants' level of experience with blogs (95% were novice users) and their general attitudes towards blogs. Other questions asked if students had joined another blog since the course began (29% said yes) and whether students planned to join another blog (70% said yes). Students were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: "Technology News Web log was a good way for me to learn more about technology" (90% agreed).

In both courses, the blog fostered a greater sense of community among classmates. Both authors stated that they will assign weekly, required blog activities. The authors concluded that a useful study would be to see if this

requirement enables students to use the blog as an authentic literacy experience, help to strengthen participation, and foster the growth of classroom communities.

Summary

The findings of the studies presented in this review of the literature highlighted the dual purposes of blogging for individual and collaborative purposes. Blogging offered students the opportunity to personalize the look of their blogs (Fun & Wagner, 2005) in order to support personal expression. It also offered them an opportunity to express individual needs and desires (Fun & Wagner, 2005), share feelings and emotions (Dickey, 2004), assess their own work (Du & Wagner, 2005), and to engage in personal and private reflections in journals (Betts & Glogoff, 2004; Brooks et al., 2004; Dickey, 2004; Du & Wagner, 2005; Hernandez-Ramos, 2004; Xie & Sharma, 2005).

A more common theme in the findings was the use of blogging to support collaborative purposes. Students could use their blog to build relationships (Fun & Wagner, 2005), to share information about technology (Betts & Glogoff, 2004), to continually benchmark their work against others (Du & Wagner, 2005), to access each others' graduate student experiences (Freeman et al., 2006), and to build mutual understanding (Xie & Sharma, 2005). In addition, being able to read each others' posts meant that blogging provided students with opportunities to read different viewpoints, consider other alternatives and see how others connected both class and additional content (Xie & Sharma, 2005). Some findings suggested that blogging could be used for socialization (Dickey, 2004)

and supported the emergence of community (Betts & Glogoff, 2004; Brooks et al., 2004; Dickey, 2004; Xie & Sharma, 2005).

This public nature of blogging that allowed collaboration, sharing and community building also raised concerns for some individuals. Some participants did not like the public nature of blogs (Freeman et al., 2006). Others were concerned about being judged for "lack of clarity or focus" (Freeman et al., 2006, Expectations of the Weblog Environment, para. 2). The public availability of the blogs raised concerns about responses that might not be reasoned or based on facts (Xie & Sharma, 2005). Issues of privacy led to an avoidance of overly "controversial" topics (p. 845). In this regard "the public nature of blogs can be simultaneously a motivating and threatening resource" (Hernandez-Ramos, 2004, p. 9).

Blogging could also provide an opportunity to connect the private nature of blogging with the public, for example by allowing students to discuss their written reflections with classmates (Xie & Sharma, 2005) and by allowing a type of communication that is both personal and public (Dickey, 2004). Blogging could help bridge or prevent feelings of isolation so that students could see that each "student was in the same boat" (Dickey, 2004, p. 287).

CHAPTER 4

Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the context of the current study

and to describe how it was conducted. The chapter starts with a description of

case studies followed by a discussion of the level of student participants, the

college setting and the program in which the students were enrolled. Next, the

current study is discussed within the context of the wider project in which the

current study was conducted. This section is followed by a description of the

process used for selecting participants and their blogs. Next, there is a

description of the content analysis of the blogs, the focus group discussion and

its analysis.

Case Study

The goal of the current study was to explore students' purposes for

blogging in the context of their post-secondary studies with particular attention to

the social and instructional purposes. To meet this goal, I conducted a case

study. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2001) defined a case study as the study of

an "instance in action" (p. 181). In the current study, the instance is students'

purposes for blogging in the context of their post-secondary studies. The point of

a case study is to provide an explanation of a particular "object of study" in terms

of the context in which the object of study exists (Hamel, Dufour & Fortin, 1993,

p. 32). The context in which the blogging was conducted will be detailed to provide a clear set of boundaries for the current study.

Cohen et al. (2001) explained that one purpose of case studies is to "portray, analyze and interpret the uniqueness of real individuals" (p. 79). A case study can be concerned with either an individual case or multiple cases (Yin, 2003). The current study examined multiple cases of blogging where each individual case consisted of one student and her experiences with blogging within a specific activity. In order to provide a balanced set of data and adequately capture what Yin (2003) described as the "richness" of the social context, a content analysis of the blogs was conducted followed by a focus group discussion. The content analysis provided a core set of data which demonstrated the purposes for which the students used their blogs.

Context of Study

The current study was conducted in the Foundations Department of the Dubai Women's College, an all-women's college and one of 13 colleges that comprise the Higher Colleges of Technology in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates. The Foundations program is an entry-level program intended to give students "a foundation of academic skills and core knowledge" (Dubai Women's College, 2006a) in Mathematics, English language, Arabic language, and Applied Computing to allow the students to succeed in their further studies.

College enrollment is restricted to Emirati nationals, partly due to complete government funding and free tuition, with students' only financial obligation being

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to purchase a college-recommended laptop computer. The college is committed to providing the most recent and most advanced technology. So, to maximize the potential of this technology, students must purchase a laptop which can fully utilize the technology infrastructure provided. The college technology policy also provides for a robust, ubiquitous wireless internet environment. The virtually unrestricted access to the internet means that students can pursue blogging at any time while on campus.

In the Foundations Department of the Dubai Women's College, 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. The faculty involved in the facilitation of the blogging activity and the e-portfolio project included the author and principal investigator of the current study and the other two members of the Applied Computing faculty at the Dubai Women's College. The Applied Computing faculty introduced blogging within this e-portfolio project to provide students a place to record and share their experiences in developing the e-portfolio.

As part of the e-portfolio project, all Foundations students were required to create a blog using Blogger (Google, 2006). This blogging software is available on the public internet and so access was not restricted by password or log-in. However, in response to privacy concerns students were free to give themselves nicknames rather than use their own name. Consequently, most did choose a nickname for themselves. To enable students to find each others' blogs, they were instructed to use another feature of the blogging software, which allows users to create part of their blog internet address. All students were instructed to

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incorporate their student number when creating the address so that other students could easily determine their blog addresses. Additionally, the software provides students the ability to advertise their blogs by completing parts or all of their personal profile on the blog. The software then provided links between their blog and others which shared similar profiles.

The blogging software allows students to write comments to each other's postings. In these comments, students could reply to ideas and opinions posted by the blog owner. The blog owner could then reply to the comments left by visitors to her blog. The software gave the students the ability to control who could make comments on their blogs, although it is unknown how many students in the current study made use of this blog feature.

The exact directions for the blogging activity, as written on the e-portfolio website (Dubai Women's College, 2006b), were as follows:

1. You will start your blog at the beginning of the e-portfolio.

2. You will write a log of your experiences so that people at the college can read them.

3. You will comment on your friends' and classmates' entries.

4. You will make an entry in every Comp 100 class.

Faculty assisted students in creating their blogs and gave them a one-hour basic training session on how to make a blog entry, or post, and how to comment on others' posts. During each of their three, one-hour classes per week, students were reminded by the Applied Computing faculty to post to their blogs. If time permitted, some blogs were read and discussed with the entire class. The e-

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portfolio project website (http://www.dwc.hct.ac.ae/fnd/portfolio.htm) stated that students were required to make an entry during every Applied Computing class. However, since this cohort of students was the first group at the Dubai Women's College to participate in blogging, this requirement was not rigorously enforced.

A model blog maintained by the faculty provided further guidance and encouragement. Postings to the model blog served various purposes including motivation, technical support and administration. While directions for the blogging activity were provided on a web site, faculty also played a role in delivering instructions and motivating students to continue to pursue the blogging activity.

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 with the majority being 18 years of age. Despite the homogenous nationality of the students, they come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds depending on where their families originated. They also have a diverse educational background ranging from foreign or local private schools to government-run schools, leading to a range of educational experiences. In Dubai, some private schools follow a British-style educational format whereas others follow a North-American style.

When this cohort began the e-portfolio project and blogging, they were told by the Applied Computing faculty that all student blogs would be analyzed for

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content after the completion of the project. Students who did not wish to have their blogs analyzed were free to delete them at the end of the project. 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 current study.

The selection of participants involved a preliminary analysis of the 266 available blogs. Hamel et al. (1993) discussed the issue of how many cases are needed to provide a representative sample and asked the question, "What is this case (or are these cases) intended to explain?" (p. 35). They also commented that the actual number of cases is not paramount to the overall study. In this regard, Yin (2003) stated that the selection process must consider cases that demonstrate exemplary outcomes (p. 12). In the current study, only instances of blogging that demonstrated the selection criteria were included. In order to achieve the purpose of the current study, I wished to present in-depth profiles of the blogs. This would not have been possible on a large number of blogs.

This selection process was conducted as follows: first, I summarized the purposes of social software and blogging in Chapter two, and identified two themes. The first relates to social interaction and social presence. The second theme relates to the social and collaborative construction of knowledge. Thus, to be selected as a sample, blogs had to demonstrate evidence of both social presence and interaction and knowledge construction. The first of these criteria, social presence, is indicated by evidence that blogging does the following: supports, facilitates, models, and increases opportunities for social, peer and

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group interaction, communication, presence, feedback, networking, learning experiences, and getting to know each other.

In a study of social presence in a computer-mediated communication, Rourke et al. (2001) presented a set of indicators used for assessing social presence (See Appendix A) which was adopted for the blogging analysis. Rourke et al. identified three categories of responses indicative of social presence: affective, interactive and cohesive. Thus, to be selected as a sample for the current study, student blogs needed to show examples of at least one type of response from each category in the table.

I first 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 as described in chapter two 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). They provided a framework comprised of five phases of knowledge construction (See Appendix B).

The 47 blogs that contained evidence of social presence as indicated by Rourke et al. (2001) were then analyzed for evidence of the 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.

The data analysis involved two phases: an analysis of the blogs in phase one, and the use of a focus group discussion in phase two. Thus, I first had to ensure that the authors of the sample blogs would be available for the focus groups. The nine students who had used blogging for social and instructional purposes as defined by Rourke et al. (2001) and Gunawardena et al. (1997) were cross-referenced with the college enrollment to determine if they were still attending the college. They were then contacted via email and asked if they would be willing to participate in a focus group discussion which would be recorded. Eight students responded positively to the request and thus comprised the participant group.

Phase 1: Analysis of the Blogs

The aim of the analysis was to uncover both quantitative and qualitative information that is not readily available at the "surface" of the transcripts (De Wever, Schellens, Valcke, & Van Keer, 2006, p.7). Currently, there appears to be

little agreement amongst researchers concerning a coherent methodology for performing analyses on computer-mediated communications (De Wever et al. 2006; Strijbos, Martens, Prins, & Jochems, 2006). Furthermore, there has been little substantive research on blogs to date (Du & Wagner, 2005; Freeman et al., 2006; Hernandez-Ramos, 2004; Mishne & de Rijke, 2006; Xie & Sharma, 2005).

Strijbos et al. (2006) stated that for any analysis, one of the first requirements is to determine a unit of measurement (p. 31). De Wever et al. (2006) described one possible unit of measurement as a, "consistent theme or idea", and cited the term, "unit of meaning" (p. 9), after the work of Henri (1992). In the current study, we relied on the unit of meaning to examine each blog for evidence related to social presence and knowledge construction.

The eight blogs were hosted on a commercial internet server and were first downloaded and saved to a CD-Rom. I began the analysis with a quantitative measure of the number of entries, or posts, the total word count, inclusion of photographs, and evidence of personalization for each blog. I recorded this data in a spreadsheet (See Appendix C). I then used the two analytical tools to conduct content analysis of the eight blogs for indicators of social presence and the social construction of knowledge.

Phase 2: Focus Groups

The goal of phase 2 was to provide the eight student participants with an opportunity to discuss their purposes for blogging in the context of their studies. In phase 1, the participants' blogs were analyzed and the results were

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summarized prior to the focus group discussion. From these summaries, questions were prepared which then were used to guide the focus group discussion.

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). Sharing common characteristics allows the participants of focus groups to feel more at ease with each other and facilitates the "explicit use of group interaction to produce data" (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). Ideally, the participants should not be overly familiar with each other (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997), however in the current study this criteria posed a difficulty since the participants were all members of the same student cohort.

Generally, focus groups should contain between five and twelve members (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Additionally, three to five groups are usually recommended to ensure a level of saturation (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997). With more homogenous groups, as was the case with the current study, the number required to reach a level of saturation tends to be lower (Morgan, 1997). In the current study, scheduling difficulties forced me to divide the eight participants into three focus groups: two groups of three students each, and one group of two students. This division suited the current study because my analysis required me to match the comments of each author to her blog for purposes of triangulation. However, due to cultural issues, interviewing one student at time,

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even with a female chaperone would have presented difficulties, notably a shyness and reticence that might have rendered the interview results unusable. Thus, I needed to conduct focus groups but keep the number of participants small.

Each focus group took approximately 45 minutes to allow participants to feel comfortable with the setting, and with each other. Although a longer period of time is recommended to allow for the development of a "dynamic and insightful exchange" (Ruane, 2005, p. 157) between the participants, the small size of these groups provided for exhaustive discussions in each group. At the time of the interviews, the students were no longer in a student-teacher relationship with the interviewer. As a result, their responses may have been more frank and open than if they were still in a student-teacher relationship.

I asked a predetermined set of questions in order to create a positive atmosphere and keep participants engaged (See Appendix D for the complete set of questions). All participants were female, native Arabic speakers with English as their second language. An Arabic speaking colleague was asked to accompany the interviewer to provide students with suggestions for English vocabulary and terminology. This colleague was also a member of the faculty that ran the blogging activity. The focus group discussions were digitally recorded and a complete transcript was prepared from each of these recordings following the recommendations from Krueger and Casey (2003). Finally, the focus group comments for each participant were separated from each other and matched to

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the corresponding blog analysis. In this manner, the focus group results served as a method of triangulation, helping to verify in part the results of the analysis.

Analysis of Blogs

Once I examined each blog for quantitative measures and used the instruments to identify social presence and social construction of knowledge, I compiled a profile of each blog. The profiles include 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. The profiles contain few actual numbers as it is considered unwise to give specific numbers or percentages in this form of analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2003; Litoselliti, 2003; Morgan, 1997), although Morgan did comment that there are instances where purely statistical data may be useful.

The profiles include quotes taken from the individual posts. Since all students were writing in English, which is their second language, spelling and grammatical errors intrude throughout the text. In order to preserve the original message and to avoid misinterpretations of errors, I retained the original spellings and mistakes in the quotes. Thus, to avoid an overuse of (sic), it has been left out altogether. The profiles also include extensive use of text-based emoticons (e.g., MSN Messenger, n.d.; Yahoo Messenger, n.d.). These emoticons have been retained in their original form to preserve the authors' original meanings and

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intentions in their posts (See Appendix E for a complete list and explanation of all emoticons found in the blogs).

Analysis of the Focus Group Discussions

To begin the analysis, a unit of measurement needed to be decided. Morgan (1997) cautioned that "neither the individual nor the group constitutes a separable unit of analysis" (p.60). Additionally, responses must be viewed in light of the fact that participants were responding not only to the questions but also to comments from each other. Thus, while the questions provided a framework for the focus group discussions, grouping of ideas required that I look at each comment in the context of the whole body of comments made by that student. Student comments ranged from short utterances to lengthy examples and so the specific unit of measurement was deemed to be an idea or argument chain produced in response to questions or comments from other focus group participants.

To group the comments for each individual participant, I followed an inductive approach looking for repeated keywords and ideas. From these repeated items, I derived categories, described by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) as "an implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas" (p. 38). As categories were identified, the focus group data were reviewed in light of these emerging categories. Once I was satisfied that I had highlighted all relevant comments, I then copied these into a new location where they were organized first according to repeating ideas. Subsequently, the repeating ideas were

organized according to criteria including positive or negative comments, vague or specific, tone, and similarity to other comments (e.g., Krueger & Casey, 2003; Litoselliti, 2003).

Once I organized the focus group data according to main ideas or concepts, I added these data to the profile of each blog. Thus, each profile is based on the content analysis and a summary of each author's focus group responses. These profiles can be found in the following chapter. In order to preserve the anonymity of the blog authors, I assigned pseudonyms. To allow for ease of reference, I assigned pseudonyms in alphabetical order starting with the letter 'A'.

Summary

A case study was conducted to achieve the purpose of the current study, which was to explore students' purposes for blogging in the context of their post-secondary studies. To preserve the richness of the social context, a content analysis was conducted on the blogs and focus group discussions were held with the authors of the blogs.

The participants in the current study were first year students at a women's college located in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. They were required to maintain a blog as part of an eight-week e-portfolio project. Students were given instructions on how to blog and a model blog was maintained to help facilitate the blogging process. The blogging software allowed students certain controls over their blogs including who could leave comments.

Participant selection came from the original body of 266 blogs available for study. Sample blogs were selected based on evidence of social presence as defined by Rourke et al. (2001) and the social construction of knowledge as defined by Gunawardena et al. (1997). This selection process produced eight blogs for the current study.

Content analysis was conducted on each blog for evidence of social presence and knowledge construction. From the content analysis, questions were prepared for the focus group discussions. Students participated in focus group discussions concerning their experiences with their blogs. Due to scheduling difficulties, the participants were separated into three focus groups. A female chaperone provided the participants with vocabulary. Their comments were separated and organized according to keywords.

Profiles for each blog were compiled using the completed content analyses and summaries of the focus group discussions. The profiles are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Presentation of Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents profiles based on the findings of the content analysis of the blogs and focus group summaries from each participant. The profiles were intended to determine the students' purposes for blogging with particular attention to the social and instructional purposes. Each profile starts with an overview of the blog. In each instance, the original title of the blog is used. The overview is followed by a description of evidence of social presence established by the author as well as a description of knowledge construction found in each blog and in the blog comments. This order is repeated for each blog.

Profiles of Blogs

Blog 1: ×?°?`"°?× (ĐùFfy ĐuÇк) ×?°"?°?× - by Alia

Overview.

This blog contains 1076 words in 12 posts. There are 57 comments, approximately half of which are from other students. The rest are responses from the author to these students. The author uses various techniques to personalize the blog including different font styles and photographs. She also gives her age in her profile, which appears underneath her username.

The author's primary use of the blog is for self-disclosure, revealing emotions and opinions about herself and her school work. She uses descriptive

titles for her posts such as ":: GooD MorninG ::"; "Fun Stuff"; "Photos"; "I was Excellent"; "Poem: Trapped"; ":: Presenting ::"; "(s т ε ρ s) (ţ σ) (ß ù я ñ) (ţ н ε) (Ç Đ)"; ":: Short journey to the beach ::"; ":: College life ::"; and ":: 12 Ways to be happy =) ::". Every post contains at least one image or photograph, with several containing two or three images. The majority of posts contain images only. The author distinguishes her blog with a consistent theme based on the cartoon character Daffy Duck.

Social presence.

The author makes extensive use of emoticons, repeatedly using one in particular: "=D", which represents an open-mouthed smile. Expressions of mood rely on use of larger bold font and images related to the theme of each post e.g., of Daffy Duck running and looking worried and conveying a sense of urgency. Other expressions of emotion include a poem in which the author expresses feelings of confinement as follows: "I am trapped in a world without any light i have suffered muck pain". This post is accompanied by an image of Daffy Duck trapped inside a balloon. Humour is often expressed through the use of cartoon characters: for example, the author uses an image of Daffy Duck as her avatar. Two posts with photographs about family trips, including one to a local beach, disclose personal details about her family and life outside of class.

Interactive responses appear both in the blog postings and in the 57 comments made on the blog. In the postings, the author makes three requests for feedback such as: ":D Did u like it? LEAVE A COMMENT!!", or "Did u enjoy it ??

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=D". She receives 28 comments spread out over every post, including to posts in which she did not specifically ask for feedback. Most of these comments are expressions of encouragement and congratulations, such as, "u was amazing and I liked ur e-portfolio and I wish all the best for u ^_^". Twenty-seven comments are responses by the author to each individual author of the comments such as: "U are amazing sis =D, i wish all the best 4 u too".

She does not refer to others' posts specifically, except to acknowledge their comments e.g., "thankxxxxxx for passing by =D", which she does repeatedly. She does not explicitly agree with others' comments but she does show gratitude and when responding to comments, repeatedly compliments others on their work e.g., "I think your's was amazing too, I like it". She also compliments her classmates in a post as follows: "My friends are great. I like to deal with them because of their funny characters and they like to help each other at the classroom."

The author makes consistent use of a number of cohesive responses. For example, almost all posts begin with greetings and salutations to reference and acknowledge her audience using inclusive pronouns e.g., 'hi friendzzz, how are you AND how is your life??", "Hey all", or "Good evening friends". In her responses to others' comments, she addresses each student by their user names e.g., "sweet princess".

Knowledge construction.

The author of this blog provides a limited number of examples where she shares and compares information (Phase I: subsequent references to Phase I, II, III, IV, and V are taken from Appendix B). In one post, she offers advice on twelve ways to be happy e.g., "Make up your mind to be happy. Learn to find pleasure in simple things". In another post, she makes a statement about her classmates: "First of all, in FD6 we are 20 students all of us collaborate with each other". The author receives this suggestion from a student: "your blog could have been better if the overall template design is of different design". The author thanks the student and invites further comments: "Wish to see ur comments again".

The author receives one restatement and clarification of an idea (Phase II). To a poem she wrote and posted, a participant comments: "it describe someone fall in his problems and sadness". There is no evidence of any negotiation of meaning or testing and modification of ideas (Phase III and IV). The author provides only one example in which she acknowledges new understanding derived from her work (Phase V): "I also think that these experiences teach me several skills on a different programmers".

Alia – Focus group summary.

Alia describes blogging as a more interesting way of learning:
We are just going to be boring if we just look at the white board ... and in WebCT, we just answer true or false and then we are finished. But I think

in blogging ... you can share with your friends any ideas... it will be another way of learning ... it is a special one, I think it is good.

She also describes blogging in relation to a new generation of learners: "I think that our generation is more open minded than the old one, especially now that there is a hotmail space, My Space. You can do your own blog there."

In this style of learning, sharing with friends is important. She describes how the blog helped her to add "friends' comments and share with them my ideas". It also served as a means to share accomplishments: "[You will feel] proud that you have done something that people see and share with you..." This sharing with other students is not only for learning, but for social purposes as well: "if there is no social [aspect], there is no fun in the education, and if it is only · education it is boring".

This sharing of accomplishments and ideas is achieved largely through commenting on the blog. Not surprisingly, therefore, she added: "I would be happy if they write their comments on my blog" and "I was happy to see that there was another person who was adding a comment". Comments are so important to her that she argues that receiving no comments on her blog "is like life without water". Although comments are important, they are not automatic: "We have to fight to get the comments". Alia uses deliberate techniques to encourage students to comment on her blog: "I wrote an email and then I sent it to all my friends ... so they all knew the address". She also indirectly encouraged students to visit her blog: "One of my friends said she likes it when she comes and sees her nickname ... so I used their names". She admits that to receive comments

from others on her blog she also needs to comment on their blogs: "if I did not communicate with them, they would not communicate with me". She therefore makes a conscious effort to visit others' blogs and comment:

> When I saw my friends' comments on my blog, I tried to visit their blogs too, to see how their blog is going on and I find it good with their backgrounds and fonts and what they did so I added my comments too, so that they will be happy.

It is this interest in sharing and interacting with her peers that drives the design of Alia's blog. She notes that she designed it with the following intention: "[To attract people] was the first reason". She chose the Daffy Duck image to compliment her theme and "to have a funky website". Likewise, she used large font sizes "just to grab attention."

Alia's blog represents a means not only for interaction and communication with other students but also with the teacher. This is demonstrated by the following comments: "I think also it is good if there is a part in this blog that has comments for the teachers. And the students can say that, like, we are sad..." She argues that it is "not professional to send an email" but "better" to write a comment.

Blog 2: ~*loOolzZzz*~ - by Badria

Overview.

This blog contains 827 words in 11 posts. There are 52 comments, approximately half of which are from other students. The remaining comments

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are responses from the author to these students. The author uses various techniques to personalize the blog including different font styles, images and photographs.

The author mainly uses her blog to express emotions about her college work and her personal life. Her username, "loOoOVE ME", is unusual in that it is an imperative statement rather than a noun. She uses post titles that express the general emotion of each post. For example, titles include: "what doOoOo you think?"; "sOoOoOoO cute ^^"; "Finally *.*"; "What I loOoOve ^.*"; "my beginning"; "My First POoOost ^.^". Every post contains images or photos, most of which are closely related to the theme of the post. For example, a post describing feelings of frustration contains a picture of a Rubik's Cube. The title of the blog and the light background colour help to establish an overall sense of light-heartedness to this blog.

Social presence.

The author makes repeated use of a variety of emoticons. All but one post title contains an emoticon to help establish the mood of the post e.g., "!_!", which represents narrowed eyes and a straight mouth, conveys a sense of unpleasant surprise in a post called "Gonna cry !_!". In another title, "O.O" represents eyes opened very wide, and conveys a sense of wonderment in a post titled, "Cant believe it O.O". She also establishes a sense of her mood and feelings through varying fonts, font size, font colour, italics and spelling to emphasize certain words e.g., "i found it soOoo HARD><".

There are no obvious attempts at humour although the author writes "hehehe" once in reply to a comment and writes "loOolz" twice. Affective posts about her personal life concern love for her cat, a song, and a friend. In a number of postings, she communicates affective responses to course work which range from happy to anxious such as: "I feel soOoo gOOoOoOD about my E-portfolio NOW ... it's true that i started it feeling soO anxious and worry but Now i feel soO comfortable and relieved". The author discloses details about her personal life including a visit to the beach with family, a reference to the fact that her cat understands her. She also posts the lyrics to her favorite song, which is about love. Her expressions of vulnerability are common and include references to being frustrated with the e-portfolio and bursting into tears about it.

Interactive responses are reflected in a post in which she explicitly asks for feedback: "WRITE to me what doO you really think about me??
cute, lovely, sweet loOolz anything you want ... wanna know what doO you feel about me toOo". In another interactive post, she makes an offer to help other students: "You know what??? you all should try toOo it's really simple ...want me tOO teach ya loOolz ^.* ". Interactive responses are also evident in the 52 comments made on the blog. Twenty-eight of the comments were made by other students, many of which refer to content in the author's posts such as: "I like the beach too and I went to Al memzar beach before tow weeks".

The author responds to most comments with expressions of gratitude and affection, often thanking the visitor for responding e.g., "im sooO happy that you write to me". No posts or comments quote others, and only a small number of the

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author's comments actually refer to specific content mentioned in another student's comment e.g., "yeah I called him that", although several comments compliment others' work e.g., "thanx ma dear friend saroOh i loOved urs". She only explicitly agrees with another's comment once: "guess i am" but implicitly agrees by thanking a number of students for their compliments. In her final post, she asks for feedback about herself: "today i wanna ask you somthing plzZzz WRITE to me what doO you really think about me?"

Cohesive responses include the occasional use of standard responses in replies to others' comments usually in the form of a closing to a comment e.g., "loOve ya". There are no cohesive responses in the posts. There are only two isolated instances of inclusive pronouns, both in posts e.g., "I hoOpoe that all of us win" and none in the comments. There is frequent use of people's names or pronouns referring to a specific person e.g., "thanx suger", almost exclusively in the comments. There is one reference to a specific group in the last post: "this is a special message to 7ashoOsha team".

Knowledge construction.

Almost all of the evidence for knowledge construction relates to Phase I: sharing and comparing information. The author posts song lyrics and states that they are from her favourite song. One person writes a comment containing a statement of agreement to this post: "I like the words, it's nice and it has influent". In one of her earlier posts, the author shares information about how people can contact her: "I also put my college e-mail soO they can contact me".

There is no evidence of dissonance, negotiation of meaning, or testing and modification of ideas (Phase II, III and IV). The author posts one metacognitive statement (Phase V) indicating that she has gained new understanding: "It's enough for me to know that I reach this point and finished a work that I thought that I couldn't finish".

Badria – Focus group summary.

Badria discusses how her purposes for blogging changed over time: "at the beginning we were like, forced to do it. But then we got used to it". She mentions that students took time to discover different uses for the blog: "At first it was relating only to the e-portfolio, but then we started to put another posts about our lives, about our favourite hobbies and these stuffs". She mentions how the use of the blog changed over the course of the e-portfolio project: "It's like a project but then we become more social with people. We are talking to them, replying to them". She adds that "I thought it was more social because ... actually it was like a diary for me. I was writing like everyday what did I do today and what I will do". She used her blog as a diary because, "We wanted to go and share it with other people, and let people know what we do in everyday". She also shares concerns she had over this purpose: "Sometimes I was saying, why do they want to know about me in my blog?" However, she came to the realization that "... you discover that there is people who are interested in you".

The comments were very motivating for her as indicated by the following remark: "When you see a lot of comments on your blog, you want to post a new

thing, new topics so they can comment more". Badria also feels that the comments were instructive: "There are some comments ... that are telling us that your font is small ... or something like that. So we learned a lot from this". She acted on these comments to make her blog more appealing: "We are trying to change our blogs so they can post again".

One belief that guided Badria's blog design was that: "it reflects your personality, like okay this is me". She also wanted to attract people to read it, and leave comments: "I want other people to reply to me. Because of that, I put ... images... and strange kinds of topics ... [and] used so many pictures and colourful font". She also states that the design is the "most motivating thing to put a post or something". She shares her opinion of poorly designed blogs: "For example when I had to access a blog I didn't even want to post because the design was so dark and ... I don't want to post here, I don't even want to see it". She adds that "I think that everyone that accesses their blog, they think the way that I think."

When using blogs in the classroom, Badria cautions: "Don't make it very free or make it controlled. Because if it's free you will feel it's not for education". She also suggests how to attract students through the proper choice of topics: "But put a topic that everyone will want to participate. Like, do you like the telephone rule in the college? Everybody will write about it. Mobile phones. Everybody will write about it". She then states that blogging should be promoted at the college: "I feel it is better to teach the Foundations students, whether they

are diploma or higher diploma students, you should teach them about these stuffs."

Blog 3: SHAMBRI - by Chaltham

Overview.

This blog contains 400 words in nine posts. There are 29 comments, of which 15 are from other students while the others are responses from the author to these students. The author employs various techniques to personalize the blog including an extensive use of different font colours, faces, styles and sizes. She also includes a profile of herself: "a human in this earth ... Addicted to: ice cream + chocolates + motorcycles."

The author mainly uses her blog to share information about specific topics such as junk food. She also makes statements about topics such as the importance of sharing dreams and listening to each other. Some post titles reflect the theme of the post while others reflect the author's feeling about the theme of the post. For example, post titles include: "RigHt?"; "DreAmS ..."; "WeEk EnD ^^ ....."; "1 of my interest ?"; "jUsT An inFo ..... Junk Food"; "TrY iT ^^ ymd7oonh tra"; "what's ur opinion!"; and "sHaMbRi •°o.`·.¸.·°°¤ø". A notable feature of this blog is that the author only makes one post about blogging and makes no mention of the e-portfolio project, which provided the impetus for the blogging activity. There are no photographs taken by the author. However, each post contains at least one image only some of which are clearly related to the theme of the post. For

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example, a post about taking tests contains a cartoon image of a boy taking a test.

Social presence.

Evidence of affective expressions includes limited use of emoticons e.g., "^^", which represents raised eyebrows in an expression of surprise. Expressions of mood include text with repeated letters, which are intended to emphasize the comment e.g., "THAAAAAAAAAANX CHIIICKOOOOOOOO". She also relies on the use of images to convey her mood. One post title expresses a sense of interest in the topic: a post about listening and speaking from the heart is entitled ".. wOw ..". Expressions of humour are evident in the images accompanying posts. She illustrates a post about test-taking with a cartoon image of a student sweating while writing a test. Two of the nine posts in the blog disclose personal information about her life e.g., "its the only time i like to relax and have fun. I know its a bit weird if i say i like to stay home during weekends".

There are only two interactive posts in which she asks questions. After describing how she spends her weekends, she asks: "what about you?" In another post, she poses a question in the title of the post: "what's ur opinion!" Evidence of interaction occurs mainly in the comments. She receives 15 comments to eight of her posts. Most of these comments are expressions of encouragement, such as "Thats right and I hope u will write more and more beautifull things". She makes 14 of her own comments in response to the comments of others. Most of her comments involve thanking others. Several of

the author's comments are in Arabic and were not translated for the current study e.g., "3Ad aNa ByToTyAh W a6La3 '3a9B". She does not quote or refer to others' posts specifically except to repeatedly acknowledge their comments e.g., "thanx thanx thanx". She explicitly agrees with one comment but only briefly with the word "true". She also compliments one student on her work: "uRz IS AMAAAAAAAZIN' ALSOOOOOOO".

Chaltham makes only limited use of cohesive responses. She does not use any greetings or salutations. She uses an inclusive pronoun only once in the entire blog: "Well I just found th BLOG is a cool idea to share couple of things with U people". In her responses to comments, she twice addresses other students by their names e.g., "I'm GLad & ThAnX a LOT AnNiE".

Knowledge construction.

The author shares information (Phase I) in eight posts from a range of topics including personal growth e.g., "If we don't change, we don't grow. If we don't grow, we are not really living. Growth demands a temporary surrender of security". She also shares information about junk food e.g., "If you like these snack foods, the trick is to eat them in small portions so that you still get the nutrients you need each day". Several of her posts receive one or more comments from other students agreeing with her e.g., "thats right and I totaly agree with u my dear".

A reader writes a statement of agreement to a post about sharing one's dreams but also cautions against sharing dreams with everyone: (Phase II): "you

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know sometimes you can say too your mother or father or your friends but on the other hand you cant because some of them will laugh at your dreams so you keep it for yourself". Chaltham's response was to thank the participant for the comment. Another post stating an opinion about sharing feelings receives two comments from others advancing more information about the topic. One person writes: "Also, when we share our feelings with others, we may find that we are more alike than different". Another writes: "That's right and also if you say to your best friend how you feel about her maybe she will do the same".

There is no evidence of negotiation of meaning, or testing and modification of ideas (Phase III or IV). The author acknowledges agreement with additional information (Phase V) provided by another student, cited in Phase II, by briefly responding: "TrUe ... THANK YA el3oOoOoda".

Chaltham - Focus group summary.

Chaltham was inspired to blog after benefiting from informative content found on other blogs: "Some blogs had really motivated me in the way their content was very educational and helpful to help me pass Foundations". She shares this anecdote:

For example, a blog had a short article that says, 'How to memorize fast before you enter the place that you're going to exam in'. I have personally done what the article says and I had passed the math final exam with excellence I have ever had.

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After this positive experience, she began to "search for useful tips to post, to help all the students". Chaltham states that she wanted to use her blog to "make friends and communicate with other students in DWC and discover how they think in such situations. And gain more knowledge". She felt that the blog would help her to do this because through using a blog a student could "get different viewpoints about your comments and you know what you are going to post next. You get a bit of guidance".

Chaltham believes that blogging to communicate ideas is useful "because using the blog made it quick to see their comments, rather than to gather and talk". She seems convinced of the value of sharing ideas through the blog and reasons that blogging should be pursued: "Absolutely, because I'm a student and my job is to grab learning information that I benefit from and use in and out the college". She adds that "it will be good if we do one each year". To support this belief, Chaltham provides an example of feedback that she shared through blogging: "When I enter a blog and I see an English spelling mistake, I directly comment to fix that problem".

Chaltham describes her blog design: "What I had in my blog was my favorite characters of cartoon and my favorite graphic designs that I found interesting". She was inspired to include these design components "to make it attractive. To make everyone want to visit it. Yes, and to get them to write as well". She also hoped the colourful design would "cheer the reader and post the information in their minds in someway".

She also tried to design her blog to reflect her personality "because that person will say, oh she is like me and so she will be motivated to put comments on your blog and visit it everyday". Chaltham describes her reaction to receiving comments on her blog: "When I had nine comments, I was really motivated to go back and make another post". She also suggests other reasons that might inspire students to post comments on each others' blogs:

> When we find something interesting, that we read, the content. I've commented on others' blogs because they've posted a comment on mine, some of them were my friends and they wanted me to give a feedback about their blogs, and I did.

Chaltham uses one particular post about junk food to illustrate the various purposes her blog served, explaining that she wrote this post "because everyone was eating fast food, Macdonald's ... so it wasn't a good habit to develop". She then states that,

> It has an educational purpose to share knowledge about how to be fit, and have some advice to make yourself healthy, and it has a social purpose, for example if someone is facing a problem with junk food ... it is a social problem.

Blog 4: The Princess Blog - by Dana

Overview.

This blog contains 358 words in eight posts. There are 16 comments, eight of which are from other students. The rest are replies from the author to each of

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the respondents to her blog. She personalizes her blog through the use of a wide variety of font colours. She also gives a description of herself which is visible on the blog under her username: "aM a tEEnaGe gIrL wHo doEs LovE WhaT OtHer giRls Do N i Like To Be noIzY N dO maNY InteResTIng THinGS".

The author uses her blog mainly to share informative statements and opinions about such topics as how to start your day, how to live your life, and the importance of smiling. Her later posts become longer and more descriptive than the earlier ones with greater use of images. She uses no images or photographs in the first three posts, but then uses several in each of the other posts. An unusual feature of this blog is the inclusion of two images, a heart and a flag, which are created entirely with font characters. Some post titles are descriptive e.g., "Some Advices From Me" Also, "By: Albert Einstein" starts a post containing a quote from Albert Einstein. However, other titles are less descriptive: "(UAE) You Are Always In the Heart"; "...LOVE ME..."; "Smile For Me (I am Always Here) ^^"; "How Was Your Day?!"; "Q & A"; and "hEEyzZz..".

Social presence.

The author makes only limited use of emoticons, using only one, "^^", which represents raised eyebrows to convey a sense of surprise. She uses this emoticon once in a post title and several times in her replies to comments. Expressions of mood in the posts rely mainly on the use of cartoon images of teddy bears, hearts and stars. Her profile description also conveys a sense of her general demeanor by stating that she is a noisy girl who likes to do interesting

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things. In the comments, she specifies her feelings in several responses to other students e.g., "thx dear MiKutO I love ya 2 ^^" and "am so glad to read ur comment in ma blog". Expressions of humour are limited to one comment in which she responds to another reader by writing: ""Loooooooooooool". The author does not disclose any personal details of life outside of class, except indirectly through sharing opinions and quotes about how to live one's life.

Interactive responses mainly occur in the comments made to the postings. However, at the end of one post, she makes a request for comments: "I am Waiting For Your Comment". She receives comments to all but one post, and responds to all. She replies, continuing the thread of the comments, several times e.g., "and inshalla i will ^^". She does not quote others' posts, but she does refer · to others' comments e.g., ""loOoOVE ME DEAR am so glad to read ur comment". She also agrees with others' comments e.g., "n you are right and life will not be perfect without friends ^^". She does not compliment others on their comments or blogs, but does show gratitude when responding to comments and thanks others for their comments "thxx dearooh n glad for seeing u passin' by ^^".

The author uses a variety of cohesive responses, mainly in her comments. However, in her posts, she uses a greeting once in the title of the post: "How was your day?!", and salutations twice: ""HiizZzZz.." EvREy oNE ^^""" and more simply: "Hi". In most responses to others she uses variations on a standard closing e.g., "thx 4 passin' by". She uses only one inclusive pronoun in her posts: "EvREy oNE" and none in her responses. In most replies, she refers to the other

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students by their username e.g., "hey dear mikuto", or by a personal pronoun e.g., "dearooh".

Knowledge construction.

All of the evidence for knowledge construction is examples of sharing and comparing information (Phase I). Two of the eight posts in her blog are about her e-portfolio: "I ThiNk THis bLoG give us a chANce to disCuSEs maNy tHinGs bUt iN a nEw And fASt wAY". In another post, the author makes a statement about an aspect of her work: "I learnt how to use Movie maker and Microsoft Office frontpage". She also receives statements of agreement, including one that is indirect: "I like your advices I will try to do some of them".

There is no evidence of dissonance or inconsistency, negotiation of meaning, testing and modification of ideas, or illustrations of new understanding derived from her work (Phase II, III, IV or V).

Dana - Focus group summary.

Dana initially used her blog to support her e-portfolio project, stating that "at first we were required to do it". However, she soon turned to other uses: "But then we used it just for having fun or for our e-folio. We posted comments and topics, different topics". She mentions how blogging helped students to share ideas and opinions, saying that "It gives students a place to express opinions and what they think about something". She feels that the blog allowed her to pursue more than one purpose: "We used the blog for the e-folio but in the same time we

were communicating and talking to others". Dana then differentiates between how she uses the posts and the comments, stating that, "The post topics were more for the e-folio and the comments on our friends' topics were more for fun and for chatting".

Dana discusses her reaction to receiving comments on her blog: "The more comments we have, the more happy we are". She elaborates on her feeling of happiness stating that "and so you feel active and want to keep adding to it ... it's like it never ends. You just keep going on. It is like a discussion table, you just keep talking and talking". She also responded in kind to others who commented on her blog: "So, like if some other students that we don't know, they just come and post on our topics, that motivated me, motivated us more and make us just go and post comments on them, on their topics".

She also has other reasons for wanting to post on others' blogs, explaining that "Maybe because they posted some nice topics, or weird just to attract you and you keep, you post comments on them". To encourage students to make comments on her blog, Dana used 'weird' tactics as well, explaining that "sometimes we used strange names just to attract others". However, she also attributes visitors to her blog to the following: "I think it is nice topics that will bring others to the blog".

She received a variety of instructional comments on her blog. Some comments advised her on the structure of her blog: "Maybe it's something with the link or something like that, so when they tell us about it, we go and fix it. Sometimes that happened". Other comments provided advice on the look and

feel: "If they told what our mistakes are in the blog and the e-folio, then we change the colours to suit to the background".

Dana feels that blogging was beneficial to her current studies, noting that, I think the educational part, I think it teaches us more, in Foundations, about how to post comments, and then how to reply to it, and how to keep the topic going. So, now in HD-1 we have topics to discuss and we get marked on it so I think it was very useful.

She compares her current studies to her blogging experience and notes a difference: "In Foundation you give them more freedom with it so they will post more". She adds that from a "conceptual" viewpoint blogging "shows how we communicate with each other". Dana felt that blogging was also beneficial from a more technical viewpoint, noting that "I think it helped us, even on our e-folios".

Blog 5: Maryam DXB - by Ebtisam

Overview.

This blog contains 777 words in eight posts. There are four comments, three of which are from other students and only one written by the blog author. Ebtisam personalizes her blog mainly by writing an extended description of herself in the profile section. She also makes use of a variety of fonts, colours and styles.

The author uses her blog to disclose both detailed personal information about her life outside the college and opinions about her course work. Her post titles tend to be longer than other students' titles, and are very descriptive of the

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contents of the post. For example, the title of a post about problems she had with her work is entitled: "The difficulties that I found during doing the e-portfolio..", and another discussing the benefits she has gained is entitled: "What I have learnt during doing my e-portfollio ?" Further post titles include: "HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME !!"; "4 GIRL'S BIG DAY !!"; "I bought I new mobile :D :D ATLAST"; and "My first post in this Blog". She makes only limited use of photographs and images, using four in her entire blog. However, the two photographs are original and one of the images is a screen shot of her portfolio main page. The other image is from an advertisement for mobile phones.

Social presence.

The author uses emoticons three times throughout the blog. Although she uses three different ones, they are all being used in situations which imply a sense of surprise and happiness with the situation she is describing. She uses expressive post titles to establish a sense of mood for the post e.g., "MABROOOK!! (congratulation) for 4 girls!!" indicates a celebratory mood. In several posts, she establishes a sense of her mood by explicitly stating her feelings concerning various events e.g., when relating that her mother bought her a mobile phone for her birthday she writes: "I was sooo happy when I heard it from my mom".

She also describes a negative emotion arising from an experience with her laptop: "I really got mad when my laptop stucked and the programmes that I worked on them closed without saving them so i lost everything". She does not

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attempt to convey a sense of humour, except to mention in her profile that her friends see her as funny. Her profile also discloses a number of personal details including the fact that she is sociable and likes to meet people. She concludes her profile by stating: "I am also a horse rider and i started in many competition. I love animals, all kind of animals". In several posts, she discloses other personal details e.g., about her birthday: "Two of my friends send me a massege and called me at 12:00 to say (happy birthday)", or about her cat: "This is my cat Coffee, she is soo sweet, isnt she?"

Interactive responses are found mainly in the posts. However, in her only response to a comment she continues the thread of the original comment by responding to a friendly warning about her new phone: "Dont worry nobody can touch my mobile". She also agrees with the student by responding to a compliment on her new phone: "yeah it is a nice one (LOVE IT)". She does not quote anyone in her posts or her comment. In two different posts, she compliments others. In one example, she states "all of you did a great job by doing the e-portfolio". She also asks a question about her new phone: "What do you think about it?" She asks a question when writing about her cat: "She is soo sweet, isnt she?"

The author makes a limited number of cohesive responses, which are mainly in her posts. In her first post, she relies on a standard greeting to introduce herself: "Hi my name is Ebtisam", and closes the same post by writing: "CIAO CIAO". She uses inclusive pronouns three times. In one example, she writes: "Can u imagine?" and in another, "All of you". In her comment to another

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student, she refers to the student's nickname and not her username: "MARWOO". Her other references to people are limited to mentioning the winners of a class competition and one mention of her mother.

Knowledge construction.

The author shares only limited information (Phase I) about her blog and e-portfolio e.g., "This time the teachers will vote for the one and best e-portfolio". There is no evidence of dissonance or inconsistency, negotiation of meaning, testing and modification of ideas, or illustrations of new understanding derived from her work (Phase II, III, or IV).

In four of her eight posts however, she makes several statements indicating that she has changed her way of thinking and has learned new skills (Phase V). In one comment, she writes: "In the end I thought about what she said and I continued doing my E-Portfolio". In another post, the author describes a mistake she made: "I started doing the e-portfolio very very late, it was about 2 weeks before the deadline and it was a great mistake that I did and I'm really guilty of that". She also mentions benefits she has gained from the portfolio project: "In my opinion this blog give us an apportunity to discuss about us in real time facing some difficulties and also sharing the pictures".

Ebtisam - Focus group summary.

Ebtisam started to blog because "The purpose of using the blog is firstly, that we were required to do the blog, because for the e-portfolio". However, her

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purposes for blogging were twofold and she states that "while you were doing the portfolio, you had to do the blog, but socially, after doing the e-portfolio, we put extra things". Thus, she notes that "For me it was both social and education". Ebtisam shares some examples of how she used her blog:

It was social because I put posts about my birthday and many of my friends put feedback about that, greeting me, congratulating me. And there was another post about when I bought a new mobile so ... I wanted to share my happiness with other people in the blog.

From these posts, she discovered that "they even put comments so its not about education, its not all about the challenges you faced and the e-portfolio, and not all about the college and stuff, its even about the social, and its about your life". However, she did use her blog for the e-portfolio project, and shares some examples: "Well, in the blog I posted some comments about the challenges I faced while doing the e-portfolio ... and put in some pictures which contains some screen shots of my e-portfolio website". She found this use helpful, noting that "[It's good to share] suggestions and advice, their point of view of how your work is done". She gives one more example that demonstrates how she used her blog:

That day I felt that I would put the post to congratulate the three students who were selected for the best website, so that encouraged me to put a new post, so I was ... [So I wanted to add something] to what happened.

Ebtisam feels that receiving comments on her blog is important:

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The comments make the blog ... to keep going on, because without the comments, you are putting new posts and then it makes the place, the blog very boring because nobody is entering your blog and reading it, so what's the point of putting posts?

However, she acknowledges that other students might not share her sentiments: "There are people who like to put their life, like a journal or a diary about their life and they are not worrying about the comments they are receiving". She also states that "if they are adding comments, it will make you feel like, proud and glad". When she discovered that now, one year later, no one had added any more comments, she says she felt "sad to see this". She acknowledged students' comments on her blog, stating that when "they replied to my post, so I replied again to the same comment after my friends replied to the comment". Conversely, she was not readily willing to comment on other students' blogs, sharing the fact that,

I was, like, convinced to write the comments for my other friends on their blogs, because they asked me to do it. And if they won't ask me, then I won't even visit their blog so they convinced me to put the comments.

Ebtisam mentions that some students' comments contained "suggestions and advices, their point of view of how your work is done, if it is well, or there is some mistakes they will correct by adding some comments".

She is also very concerned with the physical appearance of her and others' blogs. She describes the effects of good blog design on her classmates' opinions of the blogs, noting that,

Everybody was doing it quickly with no motivation or no creativity or

innovation, but like some of these students made a really great blog with a

great design, ... and they have a great, a big number of comments, and

then the girls, they wanted to do the same thing as she did, so everyone

was like, motivated.

She continues to share other ways in which good blog design affected her

opinion of blogs:

So what, it makes the person who wants to read the blog by, ahh, looking

at the style of the blog and the colours, because the colours, it ... affects

your feelings, like the colour red, it gives you power. It's like, eye-catching,

and it makes you eager, and so keen to read the post and comment, and

put comments on it.

She also notes that a good design "refreshes the post and the whole blog".

For her own pleasure in blogging, good design is important "because I don't like

to put one colour because it makes me boring". She then discusses the effects of

a poorly designed blog: "the point of her blog is about the challenges she faced,

but the blog is so boring because there is no style so it makes you not complete

reading her posts". Her designs on individual posts also conveys her feelings on

any given day: "Once there was like blue and grey fonts because that day I was

so upset and very sad.

Blog 6: ღ✿ MaRyoOoM ••ღ - by Fatma

Overview.

This blog contains 420 words in six posts. There are six comments: three from other students, and three responses from the author. The author personalizes her blog with a consistent use of colour shades between pink and purple. The template design uses shades of pink overlain with purple fonts, which lends the blog a unique look. Another unique feature of this blog is an extensive use of font symbols in the blog and post titles and throughout the posts. This feature is accentuated by the use of combinations of regular punctuation marks to create designs. She adds further personalization by using a variety of purple shades for the font colours.

The author uses her blog almost exclusively to share personal information about her personal life and her college activities. All of her posts are descriptive, using a variety of adjectives and an informal style of writing that conveys a familiarity with the English language, despite her frequent grammatical and spelling errors. Every post contains an image or photograph, of which three are her own designs and three are not. All images and photographs provide visual descriptions of the contents of the posts. All of her post titles are also descriptive of the contents of the posts, in contrast to certain other blogs in which authors use post titles that convey very little about the contents of the associated post: "(⌒ Raffaello Chocolate ⌒)----»", "●∘•° My Favorite Pit °•∘●", "@ Exams are near @", "εϊз.. My Summer Plan ..εϊз", "♣♣ My E-Portfolio ♣♣" and "ღ About Me ღ".

Social presence.

Fatma uses emoticons to close each of her responses to students' comments e.g., "=/", which represents a crooked mouth and is intended to convey the author's uncertainty in a response about her Math studies. She conveys a sense of mood regularly in her posts by expressing her emotions quite openly in her posts e.g., "Im so happy in excited to write my first post..", or "I'm so excited for the summer holiday". She also expresses a sense of humour in certain posts e.g., "Raffaello chocolate.... Yum Yum Yum that's what I say when I see that chocolate", and later in the same post: "Who doesn't like that chocolate?!! ...lool in fact I feel free when I buy it". Each post discloses information about the author's life. Her last post discusses her love for chocolate while the second last post explains her favourite pet. Another post describes her summer plans: "Working in summer job is my first idea actually. ɛïɜ The second plan is studding in Direct English to have a toefl certificate". She also writes three posts in which she discusses her college activities e.g., "In math I have to study 10 books".

Interactive responses can be found in each of her comments and in the posts. In one comment she continues the thread started by another student who tells her to keep working by responding: "enshalah i will keep it up and work hard...". She does not quote others' posts, but she does refer to one comment by stating: "loool thnx for your comment :)". In her only other response to a comment, she agrees with another student: "yea its really aperitif from first look.... :P". She does not compliment others but does thank each of the three students who commented on her posts. In three of her posts she asks questions inviting

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others to give their opinion about the topic of that particular post e.g., "How about you can you tell me what specification would you like to be in your cat????" In another post she inserts a screen shot of the home page of her e-portfolio and then requests feedback: "can i have your comments about my E-Portfolio ??!!"

The author uses few cohesive responses in her posts and comments. In her three responses to others she uses variations on a standard closing e.g., "thnx for your comment". She uses no inclusive pronouns nor does she use usernames or individual pronouns in any post or comment.

Knowledge construction.

In different posts Fatma discusses aspects of her studies which indicate new understanding derived from her work (Phase V). In one post she identifies problems she has with her studies and then states how she will overcome them. "My final exams in so close, and I have to focus more especially in Math and English", and later in the same post she writes: "I face some difficulties in reading so I have to do more reading papers to get use to it". In another post, she identifies items that she has learned during the e-portfolio project: "I realy learnt so many new things such as the front page, and i leant thing that i didnt knew befor,".

There is no evidence of sharing and comparing of information, dissonance or inconsistency, negotiation of meaning, or testing and modification of ideas (Phase I, II, III, or IV).

Fatma – Focus group summary.

Fatma admits that at first she started to blog to fulfill her project requirements: "We use it for our e-portfolio and that's why we did it". After her first post, however, she discovered other purposes for blogging:

When I posted the first topic, when I looked at it, I thought, oh, it's nice, I want to do more. See my blog. Some of them there are no comments ... It's for me, it's like a diary, what I did, it's for me.

She asserts that her purpose for blogging was personal, adding that,

Yeah, even though I didn't get any comments, I want to post more. Maybe they will comment. Maybe they saw my post but didn't like it, or they didn't want to comment. Maybe they want another topic, I don't know.

She continues to give personal reasons for why she continued to blog: "You know when you do something for yourself, and you like, you want to do again and again". Fatma then describes how she felt when viewing her work in the blog: "For example, I didn't open it for one month, and when I opened it again, I want to know what I did. What I learned. I want to remember". On opening her blog after one year, she comments: "Wow, I was shocked ... I did that! And chocolate, cats ... what was I thinking ... what was I thinking before and now what am I thinking about". Reflecting upon her blogging experience one year after, she notes: "now I know more the value of it".

Fatma discusses blogging in a more general fashion, sharing her impression of the various purposes of blogging:

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You know, I think it was really about sharing. When you share your

personal things like what did you do today, or what you will do, you know

you need someone to tell you their opinion about what you did. I think it's

fantastic.

She expands on the concept of sharing comments and suggests that

simply using the blog is helpful:

Maybe if the other students added their comment about me, maybe it

would be educational because I encourage them to reply to use the blog,

then it would cause them to use the blog, so then it would be educational.

She elaborates on this opinion: "Well, when I post my opinions, the other

students will know what is my opinion, and they will get more information about

that topic". She also uses an example from another blog to illustrate how blogging

can have a dual purpose:

You can see from the topic, information about junk food. It is educational

because when they read this kind of information, they will know if it is

good or it is bad, and they will share a comment with you. But social, it's

her opinion about this topic. She doesn't want to eat it. It's a personal

thing.

Fatma also believes that the quantity of blogging provides benefits: "When

you do more blogging, there will be more students who share their opinions, and

more comments, it will be more and more and more". She provides more

concrete benefits as well: "The blog will encourage students ... also to use the

technology, and use the internet. They can use many things, like posting and

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writing, typing and inserting images. They can learn many things". She returns to the idea of using the blog as a diary, noting that, "Yes, every year should do it. I want see what I did in Foundations when I am later years."

Fatma defines the range of people she was expecting comments from, and why:

Well, I didn't want to share comments only in class or in Dubai, but outside the country. We want to know what other people are thinking about what we do, not just my friends and other Arabic people, you know? Maybe they have another opinion, different, about what I did.

However, she notes that "I didn't get any comments from anyone outside the class, only from my friends. I would like to get those comments but I don't know if anybody else read my blog". She then shares her reaction to another student getting such a comment: "For example my friend had a comment ... from outside and I was really upset. Why did she get this comment? And why I didn't?" She feels that, "it was a competition. Why did she get these comments and why I didn't? I have to do better". On getting comments from people she knew, she says "I know her so I wasn't excited". Nevertheless, she directly encouraged her friends to comment "by putting my post, and then telling them that I have a new post, and reply to me and have a look". Fatma discusses what kinds of comments would have been useful to her: "I don't have enough comments that show me what I did, like share with me what I did, talk more about what I did, what I wrote". She was not motivated by others' blogs: "Actually, I didn't comment on any blog",

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and states "I just thought, oh there's a mistake, why didn't she do it? Just like that, but I didn't comment".

Fatma discusses her design: "For me, it also reflects my personality, what I like, what colours I like, what kinds of images I like to post, what kind of topics".

Blog 7: My e-portfolio - by Ghadeer

Overview.

This blog contains 436 words in five posts. There are five comments, all of which are from the same student. She uses a plain template design, which has a white text background and light gray and blue colours in the banner. However, this blog has several unique features. One such feature is that the author makes no attempt to personalize her blog with font styles or the use of symbols or other decoration. Another unique feature is that she does not give any of her posts titles. A third unique feature is that every image she includes is an original design incorporating the photos of the three Applied Computing instructors. A final feature is the complete lack of any greetings, salutations, or closings.

The author uses her blog exclusively to record her progress with her e-portfolio project. She describes various aspects of her work including how she feels about the project in general and gives very specific information such as the length of time she took to complete certain tasks. The first four of the five posts contains one of the original images.

Social presence.

The author uses only one emoticon, which accompanies a comment in a post describing her happiness at creating her own portfolio: ":-)". This emoticon represents a smiling face. She makes no attempt to express humour and gives little indication of any other mood, expressing only a limited number of emotions. At various points, she mentions that she is happy with her work: "I am happy becaues i got my own web site that represent me". In her last post, she describes the experience of presenting her e-portfolio: "I was little bit nervous but I keep going". Interspersed with comments about her progress with her portfolio are disclosures about personal aspects of her work and her feelings concerning the e-portfolio and her blog. In one post she writes: "After when I finished they all liked it, and one of the girls told me if you did not win we will be sad".

The author does not make many interactive responses. She does not reply to any of the five comments, nor does she quote, refer to, or agree with any of the comments. However, she indirectly compliments others, including classmates, by writing in a post: "The day befor i did something new in photo shop and one of my friend who helped me with it". She also writes in another post that she would like to share her work by showing it to others: "And now i would like to show it to everyone what i had done."

The author uses no salutations or closings of any kind in any of her posts nor does she make use of any inclusive pronouns to directly address the audience. She regularly acknowledges that she works with and receives help from classmates and others, although she doesn't use any proper names. She

refers to others with generic expressions such as: "one of my friends"; "my class";
"my teachers"; or "one of the girls".

Knowledge construction.

This blog contains various examples of knowledge construction. The
author shares comments and opinions on various aspects of her work with the e-
portfolio (Phase I). While writing about her efforts with her portfolio template, she
makes this statement: "The other thing is i changed my indexs background for
three times. Because I wanted all the backgrounds to have the same color". She
also makes a statement about the time given for the project: "About the time we
had enough time to do it and it was really a long time so i did not have any
problem with the time". In various posts, she shares some problems she
encounters e.g., "Yesterday I started putting the banner and one of my sister who
helped me with it So I found some difficulties in doing it". Another student writes a
comment to this post confirming that some aspects of the project are difficult:
"about the difficulties i faced some of them ... and i hope we can solve them
easily...". In one post, she writes about how she worked with a classmate to
accomplish some of her work: "And it was about how to move the pic from one
pic to others and it took me like 2 hours to do it but at the same time i learned
how to do it".

There is no evidence of dissonance or inconsistency, negotiation of
meaning, or testing and modification of ideas (Phase II, III, or IV). However, she
does provide examples illustrating new understanding derived from her work

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(Phase V). For example, she writes a general comment in a post crediting her teachers for their assistance: "and my big gift is my teachers who helped me to do something that I never did it before".

Ghadeer - Focus group summary.

Ghadeer states her purpose for using the blog:

For me it was educational because they were asking me lots of questions about the e-portfolio, and what was I going to do, and from where did I get the pictures, and why did I choose this colour... it was educational.

However, she gives an example of how her blog also served another purpose:

it was social because I did not know this girl because she was not in my class. She just asked me something and wrote me something and I was like, who is she? I don't know her. So, we were in contact and, ... I made new friends, like three or four and from that day only I knew these three girls.

She adds that "Yes, so the social maybe was only in this way, but the most is educational". Ghadeer then reflects on her blogging and states "If I did another blog, it would be, like, social so they can talk to me and they can ask me whatever they want".

Ghadeer notes that in the comments "my blog was a lot of questions about the e-portfolio and they are asking me, what are you going to do next". She then shares her reaction to receiving these comments: "I was so happy because I

didn't know who told them about me and whenever they want something, they would just write something in the comment, or send me an email and I would just go to them". She also states her expectations from the comments: "And I wanted everyone to give me their ideas."

Ghadeer pursued an educational approach to her design, linking her blog to her e-portfolio:

For me the colours, I chose, as I created my portfolio it was blue and the blog I did the same as I did in the e-portfolio, so it was the same. And, also my images I just played with the pictures, but every picture had to be a blue colour. I wanted everything to be the same. Yeah, and a theme in everything.

She shares an example of how she was advised to change her blog design, and her response:

She went through my blog and asked me to change something, and I thought, why are you asking me to change this? And then she told me that because then other people will go to it to see the colours. And, ... and why don't you put lots of colour? And I told her because it was educational and I wanted it to be very simple. So, I made it, I made this blog because I want it to be educational and I told her I want it to be simple.

Part of her design included pictures of her applied computing teachers. Other students asked her why she included these pictures and she relates her response: "I told them because they are my teachers and they teach me IT and I wanted to put their pictures. It was kind of interesting."

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Ghadeer discusses how blogging can best be used:

I prefer everyone of you to instead of sending email, you can just say to

go to the blog and there is a question and you can just answer it. I think

they will go there to blog and they have to answer their question. Unless,

you put a question and tell them to do it, and then they will do it. Like the

whole class will go and do it.

She also believes that a social facet is necessary to encourage a wider

use of blogging: "If you put it only for the education, it is my point of view that I

don't think everyone will go to this blog. If it is social and open and that they can

do what ever they want, yeah it will work". She also believes that students should

start to blog before they come to college:

I prefer if they learn about the blog in school, because some students they

really don't know what is a blog so for me I want them to start while they

are in school, so when they come to college, they don't find it hard.

Blog 8: !i SaRa i! e-portfolio - by Hanan

Overview.

This blog contains 286 words over five posts. There are three comments,

all of which are from other students. To personalize her blog the author uses a

template containing pink borders and a white background for the text area. She

also uses predominantly pink text accentuated by some black and grey text to

give a striking visual effect. A unique feature of this blog is the use of an original

logo based on a butterfly and a pink letter "S", for the author's first initial. The

author uses her blog exclusively to discuss her portfolio project. She provides a range of comments about her experiences using post titles to describe her topics including: "Benefits...", "Difficulties..." and "People's Opinions...".

Social presence.

The author does not use emoticons anywhere in her blog. She does establish a sense of familiarity in her first post by directing people to call her by her nickname: "My name is Hanan and I prefer to call me !i $aRo0o i!". She also conveys a positive atmosphere by stating: "Now I'm really exciting to start doing my e-portfolio ..". While all of her posts concern her project, she discloses a few personal items in relation to the project. She mentions how her project presentation was received: "Every body was interested with it and I was very happy for that". She also mentions her success with the project: "My teacher entered my name with some other girls who had the best e-portfolio to be in the competition".

She does not respond to, or continue the thread of any comments and so has limited examples of interactive responses. She does not quote, refer to, compliment, or agree with other students, their comments or blogs. She does not ask any questions in her posts. She uses three cohesive responses, all in her first post. She uses a standard greeting to acknowledge her audience: "Hi .. welCome to my Blog ..". She closes this post by making a general wish to her readers using an inclusive pronoun: "I hope you all enjoy it ..". She then offers a general

invitation to view her portfolio: "See you there later". She does not direct comments to anyone in particular either by using names or pronouns.

Knowledge construction.

This blog provides a limited number of examples of knowledge construction. In one post, the author describes some of the difficulties that she faced while working on her portfolio: "For example sometimes suddenly the page closed before saving my work, so I lose it" (Phase I). This statement prompted a reader to respond with some advice: "and about the problems i think it is better to save ur work from time another...". The author also offers some cautionary advice of her own: "Also there are limit size for the pictures and other things that you want to put it the site". There is no evidence of dissonance or inconsistency, negotiation of meaning, testing and modification of ideas, or illustrations of new understanding derived from her work (Phase II, III, IV or V).

Hanan – Focus group summary.

Hanan relates how she started blogging with one purpose, but then began to use it for different purposes:

In the beginning it was educational because you know we had our task to do the blog, so it was educational because we had to write what we learned through creating our own sites in FrontPage and in the blog. After that, it became social because you put in your designs and music you like,

and poems and your thoughts, and so then it became educational and

social.

She discusses one purpose of her blog, noting that:

I have plans and I have ideas and I want to share them with the people so

I used the blog as a chance for people to look around it and give me their

opinions and share their ideas with me.

She shares another purpose for blogging, which was more personal:

For me, using the blog as a diary and posting daily, it let me know that if I

didn't open it for one month, or ... for one year, then I come back to it and

open it again, I will see myself and how I was and now what I am. I can

see how I improved myself.

She elaborates on the use of blogging as a diary: "Yes, imagine if we see

it now and we laugh at our work, how we were in Foundations. Imagine in our

graduation year, and we are seeing what we did in Foundation? It will be really

good".

Hanan discusses the nature of the comments she received on her blog:

"we got comments to correct our mistakes about our blog, or to ask more specific

details about what we thought". More generally, she notes that "I got from them

their observations of me and they could share their ideas and give me

encouragement so I was very happy with it". Hanan also wrote comments on her

friends' blogs: "I had comments only on my friends' blogs and they wrote what

they did in creating their e-portfolio or on their blog. So, I wrote, yeah, you put this

picture or that, and its really nice ... like that".

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She explains how she was entertained by reading others' comments: "I found it funny to read other comments on each other and see how the different [students] talk with each other. It was really funny to me. Their comments... Seeing their pictures..." She offers the following explanation for those who did not interact through blogging: "Maybe at the beginning we didn't know the importance of the blog, and if we use it, it will be useful for us in the future. Maybe for that reason we didn't comment and have others' comments". However, Hanan acknowledges the potential of blogging as a means of interaction: "For me, having a small space on the world wide web and not limited only to the environment of DWC, but having global opinions and ideas about your ... opinions".

Hanan discusses two main principles that guided her blog design: "Yes, from its creation people will know your personality. For myself also. If I open it and see that it's nice, I will be more happy. I create this one and how beautiful it is".

Hanan notes another possible use for the blog and suggests that this is a good reason for the college to encourage its use: "maybe I will use it to support my CV for my career future, so it will be nice if we make it educational for the all DWC, not only the Foundations".

Summary

For each blog, a content analysis provided an overview and evidence of the author's efforts to establish social presence and to engage in knowledge

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construction. Finally, a summary of each author's responses in the focus groups detailed the author's purposes for blogging in the context of her educational activities.

CHAPTER 6

Discussion of the Findings

Introduction

The goal of the current study was to explore post-secondary students' purposes for blogging with particular attention to the social and instructional purposes. To achieve this goal, I performed a content analysis on eight blogs using previously tested instruments to identify social presence (Rourke et al., 2001) and knowledge construction (Gunawardena et al., 1997). I also conducted focus group discussions with the authors of the blogs. In the previous chapter I presented descriptive profiles of the blogs based on content analyses of the blog postings and summaries of the focus group responses.

My discussion of the findings in this chapter is organized according to the social and instructional purposes for blogging. In general, I look at how the students used blogging for social and instructional purposes. Each of these purposes is discussed in relation to the relevant literature. Following the discussion, I present the current study's conclusions and limitations. I end with implications for research and practice.

Blogging for Social Purposes

To be selected as a sample for inclusion in the current study, a blog had to contain evidence of 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.

Consequently, all blogs selected as samples for the current study contain evidence of social interaction in the form of comments from readers. The content analysis and the focus group discussions subsequently demonstrated an effort on the part of participants to establish social presence.

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, para. 1). However, there were very few comments or replies 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, para. 1). The more prolific writers seemed to be those who made the widest use of these social conventions. However, a number of students 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. Or, perhaps 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 didn't know, she emailed these students to follow up with them rather than reply through the blog.

Self-Disclosure in Blogging

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, para. 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 current study's participants disclosed personal information concerning either their private life or their public, college life. Additionally, in the focus group discussions, respondents referred to "posting about our lives", "sharing happiness", and "used as a diary" when discussing their purposes for blogging. This change in purpose appears to be an autonomous reaction to the blogging environment. Students in the current study commented that they found sharing personal information much more compelling than sharing factual information.

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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.

Harper and Harper (2006) stated that the nature of the information being shared through self-disclosure can be divided into three main types: descriptive, evaluative, and topical (p. 252). Descriptive self-disclosure includes information about the individual, such as age, personal activities, or how they are feeling on a particular day. A number of students in the current study shared descriptive information concerning diverse topics such as how they spent their weekend, presents they received for their birthday, or their favourite 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 (e.g., Du & Wagner, 2005; Freeman et al., 2006; Hernandez-Ramos, 2004). Aside from educational purposes, other studies found that one of the predominant styles of personal blogging was a personal journal (Herring et al., 2004; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004).

In the current study, 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. However, despite the fact that students made diary-style entries, 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).

In the current study, the comments of one student indicate that the rewards of maintaining a diary may require the passage of time to become evident. This student related how she was interested to read her blog after a month had passed and became very excited by viewing her blog after almost one year. Similarly, Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004) gave the example of a student who said she blogged to "document [her] life" (p. 43). However, these observations came after a lengthy period of time engaged with blogging.

Such enthusiasm may not develop in a project that only spans a short period of time.

All students in the current study also engaged in evaluative self-disclosure, which is the second type of self-disclosure discussed by Harper and Harper (2006). It includes information pertaining to judgments about external phenomena such as personal events or more public issues such as projects or instructors. 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. The more widespread willingness amongst participants to share this type of personal information may indicate that it is a more widely accepted form of self-disclosure than the sharing of personal details.

Topical information is the third category of self-disclosure discussed by Harper and Harper (2006) and refers to opinions about potentially sensitive or divisive subjects. Some students reported that they offered opinions on how others might improve their blog design and also reported that they received similar comments. However, while opinions were offered in the blogs about the college, the computer course and the e-portfolio project, none of these topics or opinions would be considered sensitive, although negative opinions might have been divisive.

In addition to textual self-disclosure, 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

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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, para. 1). Other studies of blogging have also reported that students have used their blogs to share personal information (e.g., Brooks et al., 2004; Dickey, 2004). The focus group discussions and blog analysis in the current study indicate that students spent considerable time projecting themselves into the online community through self-disclosure.

Emotional Responses to Learning

Students also 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). In the current study, students demonstrated that they were beginning to exploit their blogs for emotional support. Many of the blogs were used to express fear or anxiety regarding

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difficulty learning the new software or meeting deadlines. Students were able to invite supportive responses from other students and in a few instances students even 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, para. 2).

Although the expression of emotions is discussed within the context of social purposes for blogging, such expression may also serve an instructional purpose. The quantity of affective responses found in the current 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, para. 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). However, the importance of emotional expression in relation to learning has only recently begun to be considered more seriously (e.g., Cleveland-Innes & Ally, 2004; Lehman, 2006).

Blogging for Instructional Purposes

The content analysis revealed that, in many cases, students wrote journal-style posts comprised of reflections about their progress on the e-portfolio. In this regard, one of the purposes students had for their blogs was to reflect on and react to their learning. Despite the limited directions students received for the blogging activity, they all wrote reflective posts about their progress and successes.

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. However, most posts contained very 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.

However, 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

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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) stated in their study 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.

Boud and Walker (1991) noted that "the reflective process needs to be linked to the event which is unfolding" (p. 19). Writing reflective posts in a blog as part of a project could potentially increase student learning by giving students a place where they can immediately record their reflections. Reducing the amount of time between actions and reflections can help students to consider in greater details the experiences they had, potentially resulting in a "more creative and effective" experience (Boud & Walker, 1991, p. 19).

Sharing ideas through blogging provides opportunities for students to leave comments in which they ask questions, challenge an idea, or demonstrate some form of constructive interaction with knowledge. Gunawardena et al. (1997) called this type of interaction the "exploration of dissonance" (p. 414). In theory, exploring differences of opinion might lead to the "collective understanding" (Freeman et al., 2006, Introduction, para. 1) of a topic by allowing students to

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interact with others and "[revisit] some of the materials ... from different conceptual perspectives" (Spiro et al., 1996). However, the content analysis in the current study revealed that in only a few instances 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 in which she openly disagreed with a particular issue.

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, para. 15). Their explanation for this behaviour 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, para. 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. Thus, students may be hesitant to openly challenge or contradict another student in a public forum. Students stated in the focus group discussions that in certain cases they contacted other students directly to discuss something they saw in their blog rather than leave a comment.

Gunawardena et al. (1997) also found that the predominant level of response in their study was at the level of sharing information. They compared this situation to the interactions that take place during "social activities at face-to-face conferences" (p. 427). They stated that while this interaction is valuable, it is

"not congruent with the active construction of new knowledge" (p. 427). In the current study, the shared reflections about students' work may have been very useful to others, but may not have resulted in new understandings.

An additional factor accounting for the lack of statements of dissonance may be the fact that the students in the current study were working in a second language. Some may have lacked the linguistic ability to explain themselves in written language and so simply limited their replies to thanking each other for the posts and comments. They may then have sought each other out in person to explore dissonance and try to reconcile their differences verbally and in their own language.

Anderson and Kanuka (1998) suggested that "it may also be possible that the construction of knowledge is not an observable activity" (Discussion, para. 5). One potential source for learning arises when students read others' posts and compare them with their own experiences. Then, 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) support this notion, by noting 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 is likely related to the lack of teaching

presence in the current study. Garrison (2006) commented that in order for online communities to succeed, students must feel secure and free to discuss topics openly. In order for this to happen, "Social presence must move beyond simply establishing socio-emotional presence and personal relationships. Cohesion requires the intellectual focus (i.e., open and purposeful communication) and respect" (p. 2), which comes from teaching presence. Garrison et al. (2000) emphasized the importance of teaching presence by stating that, "the binding element in creating a community of inquiry for educational purposes is that of teaching presence" (p. 96). Within a community of inquiry, "learning occurs through the interaction of three core components: cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence" (Rourke et al., 2001, The Community of Inquiry Model, para. 1). Thus, teaching presence is critical to the establishment of cognitive presence and deeper learning, which may be considered the main goal of any educational activity.

Teaching presence can be defined as the presence of three components, or roles, in a community of inquiry: the design of the content and interactions; the facilitation of the interactions; and subject matter expertise (e.g., Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison, 2006). In terms of the design and content, the blogging activity in the current study had only a limited set of instructions, including the selection of the blogging software. 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. When the

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students began the activity, they followed the directions to record their experiences.

However, once the activity began, students were given only limited direction and guidance in class time and there was very little teacher interaction in individual blogs. Consequently, most students in the current study quickly began to write posts about a wide variety of topics outside of the directions. Other studies discussed in the review of the literature (e.g., Freeman et al., 2006; Hernandez-Ramos, 2004) also noted in their findings that 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). In the context of formal education, the "subject matter expert is expected to provide direct instruction by interjecting comments, referring students to information resources, and organizing activities that allow the students to construct the content in their own minds and personal contexts" (p. 9). Since the instructors involved with the blogging activity did not provide direct instruction, or the subject matter expertise through the online community, the students were missing a component of a community of inquiry that might have allowed them to move beyond social interactions and the sharing of information.

The role of facilitator in the blogging activity for the current study can be, in part, attributed to the more prolific writers, including students in the study sample, and others in the original cohort of 266 students who did not fit the sampling

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criteria but nevertheless produced a significant quantity of posts. One method of community blogging facilitation could include providing examples of blogging through the very act, and thus also providing some degree of motivation.

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). Furthermore, teachers are needed to "make the links among contributed ideas, to diagnose misconceptions, and to inject knowledge from diverse sources such as textbooks, published articles, and internet-based resources" (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 102).

Blogging for Social and Instructional Purposes

The blogging activity was intended to provide a forum in which students could share their experiences with the e-portfolio project and so was intended to be an instructional tool. However, while students used blogging for a variety of instructional purposes, they primarily used blogging for social purposes. These two purposes are not necessarily inconsistent with each other, nor are they exclusive to each other. Furthermore, the distinction between social purposes and instructional purposes is often not clear.

Study participants noted that blogging had a "social purpose". One student remarked that in general, "more freedom, more posts". This might indicate that if students were given fewer instructions, and perhaps given more socially-oriented tasks, they would find blogging more enticing. Another student noted that "if it is

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social, it will work", while a third commented that her blogging "became social" after her first few posts. Thus, the general view among students seemed to be that blogging should be a social activity and that they viewed it as such, even though the blogging was being conducted in the context of their course.

Since the social possibilities of blogging were never discussed in the classroom, it may be that blogging lends itself naturally to social interaction through the ability of students to control the environment and make comments to individuals through their blogs. Anderson (2005) stated that the greatest benefit delivered to education by the internet is the "freedom to control one's learning experience in a number of dimensions" (p. 3). Furthermore, blogging gives students a sense of ownership and freedom of expression that they may not get from a discussion board or other social software.

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 in the current study 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). In this sense, blogging for a social purpose may be seen to overlap with blogging for an instructional purpose.

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However, perhaps the first, natural inclination of students was to use their blogs for social purposes. In the current study, the initial cohort of students had an enrollment of over 300 students. In more than one instance, participants indicated in the focus group discussions that they had contact with students that they did not know and with whom they might not otherwise have the chance to meet. These interactions may indicate both a primarily social purpose for blogging, but one that may extend to provide an instructional purpose as well through providing a greater range of participants.

Students may have recognized and tried to capitalize on this opportunity to meet people through blogging. In all but one instance, students noted that attracting people to make comments on their blog was one of the key blogging activities. In the focus group discussion, 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). However, they also found 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).

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In the current study, students did want to attract more comments, but perhaps were satisfied with confirmation that someone was reading their blog and so did not feel compelled to pursue any further communications. From this evidence, the students demonstrated that they valued comments not particularly for their content but mainly for the attention that the comments represent. This attention may be both social and instructional in nature because the attention itself is social, but the interaction is motivational and may serve an instructional purpose.

The fact that students felt they had to compete for comments may indicate that getting comments became one measure of acceptance in the learning community, both face-to-face and online. In comparison, in the context of distance education, Dickey (2004) stated that students find that knowing other people are viewing their blog entries "may help ease feelings of isolation and alienation" (p. 289). Even in face-to-face environments, the attention received through blogging can facilitate social interaction and help students have more positive feelings about their studies.

Downes (2004) discussed how students use blogs to "get to know each other better by visiting and reading blogs from other students" (para. 22). In the current study, students did visit each others' blogs, meet new people through the blogs and learned about each other. The fact that students visited each others' blogs supports the suggestion that blogging provides an 'address' for students to use in their studies. By designing their blogs to be unique from each others', they can create their 'home' and express their individuality. By trying to attract as

many people as possible to their blogs, the students are attempting to interact to a degree that may not always be available in a face-to-face environment.

Blogging, as a social software, can provide a means of sharing knowledge, which then has the potential to change learning from a "personal activity to a social activity" (Anderson and Kanuka, 1998, Conclusion, para. 1). Other studies have noted the social possibilities of social software and blogging in particular (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Betts & Glogoff, 2004; Brooks, et al., 2004). Additionally, Gergen (2001) emphasizes the "social significance of dialogue" (Introduction, para. 7) in education. In the current study, students quickly grasped the social potential of blogging and exploited it.

The fact that students made extensive efforts just to be noticed and attract attention highlights the importance of both individuality and interaction. Glogoff (2005) argued that "learner-centered blogging acknowledges the important attributes of learners as individuals and as a group," and that as an example of social software, blogging "expresses the importance of social and peer interaction as foci of the learning community" (Blogging as E-Learning Tool, para. 4). From the students' perspective, blogging appears to have provided a predominantly social purpose, with the instructional potential of blogging not fully realized due to the lack of teaching presence.

Conclusions

The current study found that while students did use blogging for instructional purposes, their primary use of blogging was for social purposes. The

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current study also confirms the conclusions of other studies (e.g., Lehman, 2006; Oregan, 2003; 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 project-related information through blogging, which is the first step towards the social construction of knowledge. However, I hypothesize that, due to the lack of a strong teaching presence, there was only very 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 the current study. Joinson and Paine (n.d.) also noted that, "Self-disclosure is one of the few widely replicated and noted media effects of online interaction" (p. 29). Joinson (2001) has noted that self-disclosure is more prevalent 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 their frustrations. They also found motivation in the knowledge that they were not the only ones experiencing difficulties with the project.

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 the current 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) argued 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). The current 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 the current 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 according to the criteria set by Rourke et al. (2001).

Limitations of the Study

A greater teaching presence may have provided more direction to students on what to do with their blogs and may have influenced their purpose for blogging. The instructions to students were deliberately simple: write a log of your experiences so that other people can read them. However, given these limited

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instructions, students used blogging for a variety of purposes other than for keeping a log. In a study of a distance learning course where students were given more detailed instructions, such as to make specific types of entries, Dickey (2004) commented,

Initial observations of the learning community blog activity revealed that learners used the blogs in various ways. They predictably used the blogs to respond to their assignments, but also evident in the postings were elements of socialization, reports of activities and events, signs of support, and reports of feelings and emotions (p. 283).

In Dickey's study, while students still found social purposes for their blogs, the greater teaching presence encouraged them to make a greater instructional use of their blogs. Hernandez-Ramos (2004) also provided a greater degree of teaching presence, including detailed questions for students to answer, and so found that his students discovered an instructional purpose for their blogs. He noted that students came to the realization that "their student peers could be seen as valuable sources of information and ideas" (p. 10).

Another of the current study's limitations was the fact that all participants were women. This was because all education is segregated by gender in the culture in which the current study was conducted. 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 current study prevents most students from socializing outside of their college campus. This restriction may also have affected their purposes for blogging. All participants

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were non-native English speakers and were writing in a second language. In some instances, students wrote comments in their native, Arabic language. It is possible that working in a second language may have affected their purposes for blogging.

The small size of the focus groups may have affected students' responses. While the students did engage with each other and the interviewer, the focus groups were conducted by a male. The participants may be been inhibited from speaking as freely as they might have with a female interviewer.

In the current the study, 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. Students may have felt inhibited by this public exposure and so limited their level of self-disclosure and social interaction.

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.

The current study was conducted with post-secondary, first year college students, compared to many other studies which are conducted with graduate students (e.g., 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. Another limitation is

the small number of participants in the current study's sample. 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.

A further limitation of note in the current study is the time frame of the e-portfolio project and the blogging activity. All participants were first-time bloggers and had only eight weeks in which to learn how to blog and discover what to do with their blogs. A longer time frame would have allowed students to experience blogging further and may have relieved the pressure they felt to complete the e-portfolio project. Some studies noted a similar time frame (e.g., Dickey, 2004; Hernandez-Ramos, 2004). However, other studies reported a longer time frame of three months (Freeman et al., 2005) or one to two semesters (e.g., Betts & Glogoff, 2004; Du & Wagner, 2005). A longer time frame may have resulted in the identification of different purposes.

The focus group discussions were conducted in groups of two and three. Different sized groups may have altered the amount and nature of information that students revealed. Since these focus group discussions were conducted in English, the students' second language, students may have been limited in their ability to express themselves. Furthermore, the focus group discussions were conducted by a male instructor, although accompanied by an Arabic female instructor. Given that all the students were female, cultural inhibitions may have also limited the amount and nature of information divulged by the students.

Implications for Practice

In the current study, I found that participants primarily used the blogs for social purposes. Furthermore, in focus group discussions, they clearly expressed a preference for social activities in their blogs. Although I cannot generalize on the basis of only eight students, this finding suggests that social presence may play an important role in students' learning experiences. Instructors incorporating blogging into instructional contexts may wish to establish a balance between ensuring teaching presence and social presence. If these two elements are present, students may be more able to create and sustain a community of inquiry in which they are able to construct new knowledge.

Fun and Wagner (2005) recommended that curriculum design incorporating blogs must be considered from the needs of the student rather than the institution. The current study supports this argument in part, in terms of the desire for students to express themselves socially and attract attention to themselves. Additionally, the efforts made to personalize the blogs add weight to the argument that blogging needs to consider students' purposes. From these indications, it maybe suggested that blogging activities should allow room for students to pursue their own purposes within the framework of the blogging activity.

Similarly, students can 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.

Implications for Research

The current study found that 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, n.d.). In the current study, 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.

In acts of self-disclosure, students often reveal emotional feelings about their studies. In the current study, focus group discussions indicated that the students felt safe in doing so. The effects of emotional responses to learning on students is an area which several researchers have commented need further investigation (e.g., Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Oregan, 2005; Wosnitza & Volet, 2005). The use of blogging for expressing emotions related to the learning process might constitute a promising area of inquiry.

Various researchers (e.g., Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht & Swartz, 2004) have found that outside of educational contexts, many people use blogging for personal journals. In the current study, a number of students also used their blogs to record diary-style entries. Students noted surprise at the fact that others liked to read their entries. Additionally, at least one student indicated that she liked to read her own entries. Researchers may wish to inquire into the role that blogging as public diaries might play in the teaching and learning process.

In this study, the blogs were located on the open internet. The effects of this public exposure on students' degree self-disclosure are unknown. Another area of study may include determining the effects of limiting access to student blogs to only those students in the learning community.

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). In the current study, students spent considerable time establishing a social presence through their blogs. 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).

Summary

The purpose of the current study was to explore students' purposes for blogging in the context of their post-secondary studies, with particular attention to the social versus instructional purposes. Students used various means to establish a social presence including interactive and cohesive responses.

However, the most notable similarity in the blogs and in students' attempts to establish social presence was in the affective response of self-disclosure. Examples of three types of self-disclosure: descriptive, evaluative, and topical, as noted by Harper and Harper (2006), are provided including blogging as a journal or diary for descriptive self-disclosure, and sharing comments about the college or course as examples of evaluative self-disclosure. It was noted that little topical self-disclosure was attempted. Students also used the technical features of the blog to disclose their personalities.

Expressing and viewing emotional responses to learning may provide students comfort and motivation from the knowledge that others are experiencing

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similar anxieties. However, the scarcity of relevant literature indicates that the importance of emotional input has only recently begun to be considered more seriously.

Students also used their blogs for instructional purposes. While they shared information about their course and the e-portfolio project, they exhibited little evidence of what Gunawardena et al. (1997) called the "exploration of dissonance" (p. 414). I attributed this lack of dissonance to a lack of teaching presence.

Blogging for social or instructional purposes are interrelated and overlap with each other. In fact, the distinction between these two purposes is often blurred. The social purposes of blogging may allow students to interact more freely, thus enhancing their ability to interact for instructional purposes.

While students did use blogging for instructional purposes, their primary use of blogging was for social purposes. This confirms the conclusions of other studies (e.g., Lehman, 2006; Oregan, 2003; Wosnitza & Volet, 2005), which have noted the importance of emotions in learning. Additionally, all students shared information through blogging. However, there was only very limited progression towards the discovery of dissonance, knowledge construction, and the establishment of a cognitive presence.

Limitations of the current study include the observation that a greater teaching presence may have provided greater direction for students. Other limitations relate to the fact that the study included only female, non-native English speaking participants in their first year of study. The public exposure of

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the students' blogs may have inhibited their level of self-disclosure. The relatively short time span of the current study and the limited size of the focus groups are also noted as limitations.

Implications for practice include ensuring that there is a balance of teaching and social presence in blogging activities. Additionally, activities may need to be designed from the perspective of the student and may need to allow students room to pursue social activities within the educational framework of any blogging activity.

One area of further study might be to investigate the use of blogging for expressing emotions related to the learning process. Another area for study might include the role of blogging for keeping public diaries. Researchers may also want to study the effects of limiting access to blogs on self-disclosure. The role of blogging in attracting attention to oneself and establishing ownership over learning may provide an avenue for research. A final area of study could be to investigate how to facilitate the accumulation of social capital within an online community.

Case Study: Indicators of Social Presence based on Rourke, L., Anderson, T., Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. (2001).

Affective Responses	Examples
use of emoticons	I just can't stand it when... !!!!!
Humor	The banana crop in Edmonton is looking good this year
self-disclosure	"Where I work, this is what we do". or "I just don't understand this question."

Interactive Responses	Examples
Continuing a thread	Software dependent e.g., "Subject: Re" or "Branch from"
quoting others' comments	Software dependent e.g., "Martha writes" or text prefaced by less-than symbol "<"
referring to others' comments	"In your message, you talked about Moore's distinction between..."
agreeing with others' comments	"I was thinking the same thing. You really hit the nail on the head."
complimenting others or their comments	"I really like your interpretation of the reading."
asking questions	"Anyone else had experience with WebCT?"

Cohesive Responses	Examples
use of phatics (standard, social comments and greetings)	"Hi all", "That's it for now", "We are having the most beautiful weather here."
using inclusive pronouns	"Our textbook refers to...", "I think we veered off track..."

| use of vocatives (addressing someone by their name or nickname) | "I think John made a good point". or "John, what do you think?" |

APPENDIX B

Interaction Analysis Model for Examining Social Construction of Knowledge in Computer Conferencing. (Gunawardena, Lowe and Anderson; 1997).

Phase	Description
Phase I	Sharing / Comparing of Information
Phase II	The Discovery and Exploration of Dissonance or Inconsistency Among Ideas, Concepts or Statements
Phase III	Negotiation of Meaning / Co-construction of Knowledge
Phase IV	Testing and Modification of Proposed Synthesis or Co-construction
Phase V	Agreement Statement(s) / Applications of Newly-Constructed Meaning

APPENDIX C

Quantitative Analysis of Selected Blogs.

User ID	# of posts	Word Count	Personalization	Photos?	# of Comments
H00019107	12	1076	Yes	Yes	57
H00020072	11	827	Yes	Yes	52
H00019167	9	400	Yes	Yes	29
H00019177	8	777	Yes	Yes	4
H00019219	8	358	Yes	Yes	16
H00019438	6	420	Yes	Yes	6
H00019490	5	286	Yes	Yes	3
H00019544	5	436	No	No	5

APPENDIX D

Questions for Focus Group Discussion

1. What was your purpose, or purposes, for using the blog?

2. Would you qualify these purposes as social or educational?

3. Are the two related to each other in any way in your blogging?

4. What affected your choices in terms of the character you gave to the blog? For example, why did you select the pictures and images or fonts colours? What were you trying to accomplish or convey?

5. Some of you wrote more posts and comments than others. What motivated you to post? What affected your decision to post?

6. Many of you commented on others' blogs. Why? If you did not comment on others' blogs, why not?

7. What was your reaction to the comments of others? How useful or not useful were these comments to you. What role, if any, did they play?

8. Would you like to see blogging used more in the context of learning? Why?

APPENDIX E

Emoticons Found in the Student Blogs.

Emoticon	Description	Emotion conveyed
=D :D	open-mouthed smile	very happy
:) :-)	happy face	happy
^_^	raised eyebrows and straight mouth	surprised, seriousness
!_!	big eyes with straight mouth	unpleasantly surprised
^^	raised eyebrows	surprised
,	starry eyes and nose	surprised
^.* ^*	starry eye with raised eyebrow	pleasantly surprised
O.O	wide eyes with nose	amazed
><	narrowed eyes	angry / upset
:P =P	face with tongue sticking out	helplessness
=/	big eyes with confused mouth	confused

1. Emoticons come from a variety of sources including instant messaging

   software programs (e.g., MSN Messenger, n.d.; Yahoo Messenger, n.d.).

   Others are made up by individuals or derived from high circulation emails.

2. The emotions conveyed are general descriptions. In many cases, students may be trying to express a slightly different emotion.

3. There is overlap between some of the emoticons and students may use some of them interchangeably.

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