Keith Burnett: Blogs in Further Education

'...the street finds its own uses for things' - William Gibson, Burning Chrome

'...the future is already here. It's just not very evenly distributed.' - William Gibson, NPR interview, November 1999

I have worked as an ILT Champion and latterly an ILT DEvelopment coordinator at Sutton College for some years now. I started to use 'class diaries' some years ago published with Front Page. When blogging systems came along, I started to use these ready to hand systems to support my own part time and evening students. I then spotted the staff development potential - how to encourage staff in the Adult Learning section of the College to dip a toe into e-learning. Some teachers saw the potential and have used blogs as a stepping stone to VLE use, some have found that a self-published blog is all they need to support a part time group. I have published a personal site using blog scripts for some years (Moveable Type and then WordPress) and I definitely a convert to the use of database driven sites with templating. One thing I have not yet cracked is how to build an online learning community via a blog. I am interested to hear of the experiences of anyone who is using VLE based blogs to keep 'reflective journals' or as a space for students to write.

Blogging tools provide a simple way for teachers to publish on the Web. The date based metaphor lends itself to publishing a 'class diary' for each class or cohort. Categories or tags allow posts to be indexed for later revision, and most blog tools include a free text search function. The comment facility allows students to ask questions that can be answered by the tutor or by other course members, and it is relatively straight forward to provide a form for sending a private message to the tutor of the course.

The content of posts can include links to carefully chosen Web sites that provide interactive content (examples include BBC Skillswise, the Web sites provided by many professional organisations such as the Chartered Institute of Marketing, and to content provided by other teachers). If the tutor adds at least one link each week, the result by the end of the year is effectively a scheme of work with Web links. This resource can be checked and reused, and can often (depending on the blogging tool used) be exported for use in a VLE.

A blog post can also act as a container for multimedia content of various kinds so that students can review a point. The term 'Web 2.0' is applied to a range of Web services that encourage 'user generated content' and that allow comment on resources that are offered. Examples include YouTube, most of the podcasting services including iTunes and tagging sites such as Technorati. I have used a simple screen cam program to record the appearance of my computer screen while talking through a PowerPoint presentation. The results have been packaged as YouTube videos and

have helped a number of students. I have also experimented with audio files - just downloadable MP3s. Most recently, I have started to use SlideShare.net to embed clickable PowerPoints into blog posts without a sound track. Non-text material like this may help some students access information more efficiently. I am not sure that students understand that they can add to blogs in the form of comments or by tagging. Perhaps students who can use the Web to find information would benefit from a structured introduction to using the other affordances provided by many Web sites.

The Hot Potatoes software provides a simple way for tutors to add formative assessment to blog posts. The software can produce quizzes in various forms, including multiple choice quizzes, crosswords, cloze tests and statement matching exercises. Quizzes can be 'exported' as Web pages, or in a format that allows upload into popular VLEs. Many blogging tools allow file upload so that the Web page format quizzes can be linked to from a blog post. In this way, students can learn something from (say) an embedded YouTube, and then test their knowledge of the subject using a linked Hot Potatoes quiz. A comment left on the blog could alert the tutor to a difficulty that the student has encountered - and possibly another student may reply and clarify the point. The only thing missing from this scenario is tracking of student outcomes - that is a function for the College VLE.

Examples of these uses of blogging from colleagues at Sutton Coldfield college include David Cox's Chemistry blog, and Fiona Williams' use of blogspot hosted blogs to support AAT students. David has used his blog for two years now, and has found that it is possible to recycle the contents, checking that Web links are working. He is planning to use a Moodle course with tracked multiple choice quizzes for each week next year to ensure that students spend some time solving Chemistry problems between evening class lessons. David has found that students use the feedback form (a form that sends an e-mail to David, not a comment form) to raise issues with the material that can then be dealt with in the next lesson. David added the following comments by e-mail when I mentioned that I was featuring his work in this online conference

"Blogs are easy to use and can be updated from home [!]. As a means of communicating with students they are invaluableâ€¦for example on the very snowy day in February I was able to advise students that I could not get in to college therby saving them difficult and unnecessary journeys. They also provide a means of contact during the rest of the week. Uploading [how I hate jargon!] files is dead easy, including word documents, pictures and home-taken snapshot photos - makes for an interesting visit. To ensure students keep coming back it is of course essential to keep posting new stuff. This is a little time consuming in the first instance, but once the material is "on" it is simplicity itself to save it for next year - just remember to change the dates! You can then convince people you are working hard when all you are doing really is recycling last year's notes"

David is working very much with a single group of students for the year, and his posts include in-jokes that the group will understand, and such social currency as requests for sponsorship on fund raising runs by students with links to the charity site. Fiona Williams and her colleagues who teach a

range of finance qualifications in the College took a different approach for the AAT at Sutton blog. The blogger hosted blog page is used for quick notices for the whole AAT cohort - hundereds of students. As you can see there are links, and suggestions, and there is a link to the College Moodle that is used to hold more substantial resources and some quizzes and exercises. Fiona and her colleagues have used the blog page as a 'stepping stone' to use of the Moodle VLE. Students will be using more of the VLE features next year as the AAT themselves move towards e-portfolios through a hosted system available to all AAT students on the AAT Web site within a year or two (the system is in pilot from September).

GCSE Maths Help is a blog that I use to support GCSE Maths students in FE. I was hoping to 'complete the circle' on this blog by encouraging students to ask questions about posts and possibly support each other. I did not build in any special activities or book an IT room to demonstrate the blog to the students. There were no comments left at all over the year, with the exception of some worried youngsters (not at our college) who were trying to spot topics for the second exam paper. Most of our part time and evening students have access to an Internet connected computer and can search for Web pages using Google. I think that students may be less well informed about what we can call 'Web 2.0', the world of responsive Web sites where you can leave comments and tag articles with your own tags to build a set of categories for yourself. I shall be continuing the GCSE Maths blog next year, and I will be booking an IT room early and devising an activity that has students posting to the blog. We shall see what difference that makes, and I am hoping for some reflective use of the blog.

Some questions

1. What blog platforms are we all using?
2. Does your VLE afford blogs to students? If so, can these blogs be private to the student and tutor? (Moodle blogs are not by design)
3. Do you see yourself using a class blog mainly to provide information (Web links, embedded resources) or to invite interaction (quizzes, puzzles, activities)
4. Is 'ownership' an issue for you? Some of my colleagues like the fact that they can publish to their students using a system that is not a College system.

Keith Burnett

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