Homework Assignment Blogs

David Woo
Wootangnd@yahoo.com

Abstract
This paper reviews the use of Blogs as homework assignment books; that is, websites specifically designed to deliver homework assignment information to a small community. The advantages in disseminating homework using Blogs is enumerated, leading to further analysis of the advantages of using Blogs. The paper also examines the implications of adopting and using Blog technology; particularly, the impact in skills and senses: Blogs bring certain biases, which are explained, to the user’s experience, transforming reality in a profound and oftentimes subtle way. Finally, this paper features practical examples of Blogs used by both teachers and students, in a homework assignment context. Teachers and students provide commentary regarding both the purpose of their Blogs and their findings in the daily use of Blogs as homework assignment books.

Introduction to Blogs
A Blog is a website where entries are made in a journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order (Blog, 2006). Although Blogs originated as simple web diaries, they have evolved into interactive, multimedia websites with powerful communication features. Bloggers – people who use Blogs – often utilize text, hyperlinks, pictures, and graphics in their Blog posts (Ho, 2005). Paquet (2003) lists five features that a representative Blog exhibits: personal editorship; a hyperlinked posting structure; frequent updates; free public access to the content via the Internet; and archived postings.

Blogs has become the backbone for technology-driven education and support. Before the advent of the Internet, professional, pedagogical and personal support for educational stakeholders was limited and tended to come from local sources; the dissemination of information, including best practices, was slow in spreading to different school districts and geographic regions. Even with the advent of the Internet, before the explosion of Blogs and other web-based resources in recent years, rich educational information was still difficult to come by because information was difficult to organize into a useful fashion. Blogs has provided a new platform for education stakeholders – students, teachers, parents, administrators and the public - to express and develop themselves; Blogs presents an opportunity for stakeholders around the world to share pertinent information - their expertise and experience - in order to mold a more rewarding learning environment; Blogs is a growing medium for a variety of educational activities.

The most common use of Blogs in education is the class Blog, where a community Blog is used both by the educator to deliver news, resources, engender discussion, and by students to collaborate and discuss (Mason, 2005). One of the classes at Methodist College, Hong Kong has created a class Blog - http://www.xanga.com/Family_2B_0607. It was conceived by the class teacher, and implemented by the homework secretary, Annie Yip, a form two student (Yip, personal communication, November 1, 2006). The Blog is intriguing because it is a student-maintained class Blog with a highly specialized purpose: to deliver homework assignments to a small community, the class’ students and teachers. The Blog as an assignment book has far-reaching educational implications.

The Advantages of Web 2.0
The individual assignment book could face obsolescence as the world wide web continues to develop itself. The web is evolving and it has reached a new stage, Web 2.0. This term means that users of the web are also contributors to the Web. In education, that means educators and students have the capability of providing content to the Web. The web is now transforming itself into a fully interactive space (Asmus, 2005). Web 2.0 mediums such as Blogs and Wikis are increasingly being used to store and disseminate homework information. They offer communication and accessibility functionality that assignment books do not offer. Web-based mediums also provide other tangible benefits such as reducing information redundancy and increasing time-efficiency. Web 2.0 technology is at the forefront of creating a paperless classroom.

As only one person is required to post homework on a Blog or discussion forum for an entire class to view, the information becomes more efficient as its redundancy is reduced; the information is stored in a central location where it can be accessed; the information does not need to be written by every student in the class to achieve its maximum effectiveness. This process also saves class time. Internet technology indeed lends itself to creating greater efficiency in disseminating homework information.

Web-based communication technologies provide the functionality necessary to answer queries and rectify potential information discrepancies. On a Blog, readers can leave comments regarding Blog entries, and the administrator can respond to these comments by editing the information and making it clearer; the administrator can also post comments on the changes made. In fact, Wiki users are both readers and writers; open-editing allows anyone accessing a Wiki to change and improve the information presented. Students can also use asynchronous communication tools, such as e-mail and discussion forum threads to contact each other; synchronous tools such as instant messaging programs [Instant messaging is, as its name suggests, a means of communicating in real-time via the Internet. It is achieved by means of a software client, for example AOL's Instant Messenger (Mason, 2005)] or mobile phones, allow students immediate access to others.

Online information mediums such as Blogs and Wikis provide stakeholders with transparency and accessibility. The public can access these websites to view homework assignments. Parents, teachers, students, administrators and the general public can use these websites to discover what students are learning in their classes. The technologies’ accessibility creates a new measure to keep students on task and accountable for their work as the information is in the public domain. In fact, the public, sharing nature of these mediums allows anyone to access this information and benefit from it in their own teaching and learning.

Using public access mediums such as Blogs and Wikis may increase the likelihood that the homework information will be posted in a timely, reliable manner. The author is not just writing for himself, but for an audience that depends on the information; the author can’t shirk his duties. Students have the ability to write for an audience that may include the entire world. Public mediums such as Blogs can be beneficial because they tend to motivate students to produce their best work (Asmus, 2005). Indeed, self-publishing encourages ownership and responsibility on the part of students, who may be more thoughtful (in content and structure) if they know they are writing for a real audience (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

The Advantages of Homework Assignment Blogs
Of the emerging Web 2.0 platforms, Blogs possesses numerous advantages in hosting homework assignment information. The medium provides the right balance of security and features, giving it advantages over older technologies and newer, competing Web 2.0 technologies.
The security of emerging public technologies is an issue that must be taken seriously. The Blog meets four basic security requirements to which all real-world requirements can be traced: secrecy; integrity; availability; and non-repudiation (Weippe 2005). Blogs can be viewed by the public, but only authorized users with passwords can modify the Blog's data; usually, there is one author, although group authorship of Blogs is possible. The Blog is an ideal place to host homework information as the information is kept secure, and only one author is required to post the information. If that author is unable to complete his task, it is always possible to allow another author to publish the information. All changes to the Blog are logged for future reference. The secure nature of the Blog as an assignment book stands in contrast to that of the Wiki. Anyone can access a public Wiki to contribute, share and exchange knowledge. A risk of using a public Wiki as a resource is that one can never be completely sure whether or not the information being viewed is credible. This allows much room for mischief and vandalism within the site (Asmus, 2005). Even if information is being edited without malicious intent, the quality of the information on a Wiki may suffer as readers may modify the information as they see fit, not according to any generally accepted standard.

Blogs conveniently organizes information both chronologically and by content. Blogs also offers the ability to search through older posts. By default, Blog posts are in reverse chronological order; a Blog will display the most recent post first. There is no need to search for the most recent, up-to-date information on the website. Blogs uses an interface that allows users to browse archives by year, month, and date. Blogs also utilizes search functions; readers can look for information based on keywords. Blogs also has the ability to organize posts by content. Posts with information in common, about a similar topic, can be grouped together. Therefore, in a school homework assignment context, all of the Maths posts can be put together and all of the History posts can be put together for simple navigation by topic. The organizational convenience afforded by the Blog gives it an advantage over other mediums.

Ideally, Blogs serves as one core aspect of a revolutionary virtual learning environment. To maximize the potential of a Blog as a homework assignment book, it should be used in combination with other information and communication technologies. Blogs can employ RSS - really simple syndication - technology to syndicate its information (All About, 2004). RSS creates a feed of information from posts, a list of items, usually consisting of the title of a post, its summary and link. It is possible to include other items as well. This information feed can be accessed and read from different RSS aggregators such as Bloglines - http://www.Bloglines.com - and My Yahoo! - http://my.yahoo.com. In fact, new posts can be e-mailed to students. Consequently, a student isn't required to go to the Blog website to view the homework information; there are numerous ways in which a student can access the information from the Blog.

The Impact of Homework Assignment Blogs

The expansion of technology - from the computer to the Internet to the Blog - has been the driving force of change in society. Indeed, "technological determinism" as coined by the sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen refers to the common assumption that technology is the primary cause of social change, on macrosocial and microsocial levels.

Technology affects the way people experience reality. As Don Ihde (1979, p. 53) put it: "Technologies organize, select and focus the environment through various transformational structures". Technology shapes and channels one's worldview. The consequences of using technology are profound and oftentimes, they are subtle. Technology shifts society's vantage point, but at the same time, older perspectives, previous ways of viewing the world, are lost and forgotten.

The evolution of experience is not neutral. Technology itself is biased. Neil Postman (1993, p.13) comments that "embedded in every tool is an ideological bias, a predisposition to construct the world as one thing rather than another, to value one thing over another, to amplify one sense or skill or attitude more loudly than another". Daniel Chandler (1996, para. 2) reiterates this point by stating "it is a mistake to regard any tools as 'general-purpose' or 'content-free': all tools and media - from language to the computer - embody basic biases towards one kind of use or mode of experience rather than another". Technology gives greater weight to certain aspects of experience, while it suggests that other aspects of experience are unimportant or irrelevant.

It is important to not only examine how people use Blog technology, but how Blog technology uses people to transform reality, to see how the Blog amplifies and reduces different aspects of experience. It would be wise not to ignore the positive and negative impact of Blogs on a user's experience, especially as societies adjust themselves to using them and increasingly take Blogs for granted.

Using a Blog creates sensory biases, which lead to skill biases. These biases are particularly conspicuous when the Blog is compared to a notebook, the preferred medium for jotting down homework assignments before the advent of computer-based information mediums. The Blog is a visually-oriented tool. Consequently, like other computer-based mediums for presenting information such as PowerPoint, the Blog focuses exclusively on one's ability to read the information presented - these new information mediums are selecting for effective, intelligent readers. There is no need for any auditory processing. Hand-eye coordination and motor-skills are necessary only to move a mouse precisely and to click a button. While the notebook also has a visual bias, its normal usage also incorporates listening and writing skills. One must be able to listen to, and process auditory information before being able to write it down, which itself requires a particular set of cognitive-motor skills, the one necessary to create written language. The increasing use of the Blog as a homework assignment platform decreases a student's capacity to distinguish pertinent information from the vast quantities of information that students encounter on a daily basis in the classroom; this phenomenon is abetted by the concise information presented on Blogs and PowerPoint slides: students are only exposed to important information that doesn't require any further cognitive filtering. For the sake of simplifying information processing, students are losing their ability to visually and aurally discriminate useful information and to write it down in an efficient, intelligible manner.

Blogs create a new paradigm in techno-emotional attachment. A Blog as a homework assignment book is a reason to trust, and depend on others rather than one's self. As one person processes and presents information for mass consumption, others stop processing information on their own; a student learns to trust someone else's work as the student is freed from having to organize the information individually, as in writing the homework himself in his assignment book. Certainly, the convenience of information leads one to depend not only on the author of the information, but the medium in which it is housed, the Blog on the computer. People must be able to check the Blog and therefore must have access to computers because they have been freed from writing their homework in a notebook, which they can keep, and most likely afford themselves. The Blog has made information convenient for those individuals who can afford access to its convenience, regardless of the reality that some people depend on the Blog for information, but cannot pay for the convenience.

According to Chandler (1996), technology cannot be detached from certain social contexts. It opens particular social options while closing others. The Blog has significant social biases, many of which are inherent in the Internet technology that spawned Blogs. Using a Blog as a homework assignment book opens the door to an impersonal, anonymous experience. One interacts with a machine to access information. There are no human
faces on the Internet, although there are many visual representations. There is no need to interact with humans; nor is it necessary to reveal any information about oneself. In fact, one can manipulate the type of information that is revealed when using the Internet. The reality of the Internet is the possibility of total information awareness, and total information secrecy, devoid of human social experience.

However, dystopian visions of anti-social individuals have been assuaged as Internet users have opted to walk down a different path opened by Blogs: creating human interaction, albeit virtually, to form collaborative learning communities. Communication tools such as instant messages and e-mails seamlessly blend with community platforms such as Blogs and Wikis to create rich community experiences, full of individuals working together to achieve goals. The team spirit is present in the homework assignment Blog created by my 2B class. Although one person is responsible for posting the information, this person is aided by the numerous instant messages and comments that both inquire and inform. Students frequently use comments and instant messages to inform the author of amendments and additions to the homework assignments. Students post comments informing the author that the information presented is incomplete; there is more work to be added. Others inquire as to whether there is any more homework. The author responds to comments and messages and adjusts the work accordingly. The people in this community are harnessing technology to communicate with each other. Students are working together to present the most accurate homework information for the written record.

**Homework Assignment Blogs In Use**

My students' class Blog - [http://www.xanga.com/Family_2B_0607](http://www.xanga.com/Family_2B_0607) - has existed since the beginning of the 2006-2007 academic year. It is a colorful, easily navigable website. Keeping in mind that Annie, the administrator, is only 13 years old, Blog templates have made it easy for her to change the aesthetic of the website, while retaining a simple interface for the end user (Personal communication, November 1, 2006). Students from other classes regularly visit the website and have commented on the colorful nature of the Blog, particularly the prominently featured class logos.

Once the Blog has been created, maintaining the Blog becomes a matter of routine. Annie usually takes five minutes every day to post the day's homework assignments on the Blog. She subsequently checks the Blog once or twice in the evening for comments, which are always immediately answered. Most posts garner comments from students who want to amend the homework assignments, either by adding more information or clarifying the information that is already written. If students cannot reach Annie through posts, they usually use instant messages to contact her.

Besides offering a comment option, Blogs also conveniently allow for permanent hyperlinks to websites of interest. In this instance, the class Blog lists links to the Blogs of other students in the class, creating an easy way to find information about other students and contact them. The class Blog also has links to Blogrings. A Blogring connects a circle of Blogs with a common focus or theme. Xanga - the site that hosts the class Blog - allows users to create a new Blogring or join existing ones (Blog, 2006).

The original idea for the Blog came from Mr. Ho, the class teacher (Ho, personal communication, December 4, 2006). He noticed the dynamic of the class could be improved - it was fragmented and lacked cohesion. He stated, "In order to create a family atmosphere, I asked them (the students) if they would like to create a Blog for communication. The Blog can achieve several purposes such as reminding students about homework and announcements, and providing a channel of communication between teachers and students, and amongst the students themselves. The Blog is also linked to several students' personal Blogs." He hopes the students will continue to use the Blog as a communication center during the school year, and he is pleased with its development in that regard.

As Annie is capable of independently running the Blog, Mr. Ho does not check the Blog very often. He aims to check the Blog at least once a week. However, he continues to ask his students to make use of the Blog on a daily basis, particularly for notices concerning upcoming events.

Teachers' homework blogs, such as the one that I use - [http://misterwoo.blogspot.com](http://misterwoo.blogspot.com) - are capable of providing more content-specific information and assistance, allowing the administrator to fully exploit Blog technology to enable students to complete homework efficiently. As the Blog is run by the teacher, the homework information provided is exactly how it should be interpreted; there is less room for the misrepresentation of information that could potentially occur as a student transcribes the teacher's homework assignment and then places it on the Blog.

My homework posts contain all the necessary instructions and information to complete the assignment. This includes the hyperlinks to online resources that the students will need to utilize. As well as providing these homework-specific weblinks, I also provide permanent links to useful web-resources that my students may require in completing work such as our class Wiki - [http://mckln.wikispaces.com](http://mckln.wikispaces.com) and Google Documents - [http://docs.google.com](http://docs.google.com). The Blog also links to a list of our students' e-mail and Blog information, as well as the class Blog, thereby expanding our online virtual community. These links to my students' websites provide functionality similar to Xanga's Blogrings.

If a student has difficulty completing the homework assignment, the student can use the comment feature to contact the teacher. Blogger, my Blog host, allows for an e-mail to be sent to me every time a comment is posted so I do not need to check my Blog for comments. Students are also freed from the necessity of going directly to the Blog for information. My Blog is RSS and Atom (another competing syndication technology) enabled so students can access Blog posts from different aggregators.

Mitchell Smith's Blog - [http://mcollege.Blogspot.com](http://mcollege.Blogspot.com) - is a virtual learning environment that provides open-ended homework assignments, and a vast expanse of resources that students can use to complete the assignments. Mr. Smith's Blog is an example of a growing trend of Blogs being used to enable students to be independent, self-directed learners.

The focus of assignments is to encourage students to search for information and use it for independent learning. In explaining his homework policy, Mr. Smith (Personal communication, December 1, 2006) said, "My assignments are recurring. In this case, there are two major assignments in the English class that are recurring. Each one has to be done four times a month."

Mr. Smith provides a variety of resources that enable his students both to complete assignments and study independently. He commented, "Basically, the resources I provide are links, on the Blog, to some websites that I have very carefully chosen that are resourceful and suitable for their proficiency in English." Since his form six students are preparing for their Hong Kong advanced-level examinations, Mr. Smith has provided a number of useful links to websites that can enhance the reading, writing, listening and speaking skills that students will need on their public exams. He tries to encourage his students to browse the websites.

Most of Mr. Smith's students have been able to complete the homework assignments posted on the Blog, but there are still some difficulties. Mr. Smith stated, "I'm surprised at the number of students who are not (able to complete assignments). Students still don't put the material in the proper
order. They still don't include components of assignments.” Over the course of the first two months of using the Blog, Mr. Smith has noticed that students can't follow detailed, explicit instructions and this is a significant gap in their proficiency. He attributes students' incorrect homework assignments to their inability to pay attention to instructions

In fact, Mr. Smith's main purpose in using a Blog as a homework platform is to teach kids how to follow instructions. "My purpose in using the Blog is that it allows me to give detailed instructions, and that is a large part of the lesson I'm teaching." He also feels that putting written instructions on the Blog is an important reminder for students "of how important it is to stay on task; how important it is in their exams to stay on task or they may lose significant marks.”

Conclusion

Technology continues to evolve and create new opportunities for its use in education. The rise of the Internet, and in particular, Web 2.0 technologies (e.g., Blogs, Wikis, social bookmarking, RSS), have enabled teachers and students to foster individual expression and create cohesive learning communities. Indeed, new technologies provide a chance for educational stakeholders to shape their students’ perspectives on technology, to prepare them for the future. There is every incentive to adopt technology, as growing numbers of teachers and students abandon old practices to embrace it.

Teachers and students must continue to integrate technology into their lives, to be ready to live in a rapidly changing world. Using a Blog as an educational tool will certainly help educators face the future since Blogs will continue to be adopted as a means of conveying homework information. With the creation of additional techniques and technologies, expanding the Web 2.0 world, Bloggers will be able to further exploit Blogs as a homework platform. It will be interesting to see how new technologies will further the learning experience. Technology also creates new risks whose long-term effects on society are yet unknown. But potentially new technologies will overcome some of the sensory and skill biases of Blogs.

References


Bindata:

David Woo is a secondary school teacher in Hong Kong. He has a BBA from the University of Notre Dame (U.S.A.) and a PGDE from the University of Hong Kong; and he is currently pursuing an M.Ed. in educational administration and management from the University of Hong Kong. His teaching blog is available at http://misterwoo.blogspot.com; and his teaching videos can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/meckIn or http://video.google.com/videosearch?q=methodist+college?2b&hl=en.
Appendix A – A comparison of media for hosting homework assignment information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Notebook</th>
<th>Blog</th>
<th>Wiki</th>
<th>Intranet Discussion Forum</th>
<th>E-Mail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Target Audience**    | one stakeholder (a student) | A) public - anyone can view the information  
B) limiting the audience is possible | A) public - anyone can view the information  
B) limiting the audience is possible | A) semi-public - anyone within the Intranet can view the information  
B) further limiting the audience is possible | one stakeholder |
| **Authorship**         | one author (a student) | A) one author  
B) group authorship is possible | A) many authors - open-editing allows anyone to edit the information  
B) disabling open-editing is possible | one author | one author |
| **Information Redundancy** | the information is written once by every student in the class | information is written once by the author and accessed by users | information is written once by the author and accessed by users | information is written once by the author and accessed by users | the information must be e-mailed to each individual |
| **Interactivity**      | no interactivity | comment feature allows author and audience to communicate | A) open-editing allows for group collaboration, and permits all readers to become writers  
B) comment feature allows author and audience to communicate | author and readers can communicate with each other by responding to threads | students use the medium to communicate |
| **Security**           | the book can be lost or stolen | password protection for authors | A) potential for vandalism as users must obey group writing norms  
B) information presented may not be credible | password protection to access Intranet | password protection to keep e-mails private |
| **Special Features and Intangibles** | A) requires writing  
B) writers may lack personal responsibility and fail to write assignments in book | A) hyperlinks to online resources can be included  
B) scope of audience may improve author's self-monitoring and quality of writing  
C) templates allow authors to easily change the website's appearance  
D) paperless  
E) information is chronologically organized  
F) information can be grouped by content | A) hyperlinks to online resources can be included  
B) scope of audience may improve author's self-monitoring and quality of writing  
C) information can be organized both chronologically and by content  
D) paperless | A) hyperlinks to online resources can be included  
B) paperless  
C) information can be downloaded and referred to offline |