

The Challenges of Using Weblogs for Learning in Tertiary Settings in Africa¹

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Introduction

The emergence of Web 2.0 as a new technological phenomenon has been envisaged by many academics as offering exciting opportunities for higher education –particularly, student empowerment through the affordances that online personal websites (weblogs contracted as blogs) offer for collaborative authorship. Web 2.0 is a term used to describe the new and innovative use of a variety of web based applications for accessing, as well as reorganising and editing, of the content of such applications by both users and developers. Investigating the opportunities for student learning inherent in weblogs has been an exciting arena for intellectual discourse in the last five years.² Walker first used weblogs to recruit and develop a focused and consistent voice of his own in the writing of his doctoral thesis, as he engaged daily with other bloggers who constituted his research network. Dickey investigated the impact of blogging on reducing the sense of isolation among distance learners and found out that weblogs supported the emergence of a research community by offering learners the opportunity to “socialise, interact and enter into dialogue, seek support and assistance, and express feelings and emotions.”³ Sessums’ study concluded that weblogs enhance reflection at both an individual and group level by allowing bloggers to tap into a network that gives back something more than the good feeling of simply articulating what is in one’s brain when writing.⁴

While collaborative argumentation, heightened reflexivity, and online publishing are the perceived benefits that weblogs offer through collaborative engagement, the contradictions inherent in anonymous collaborative discourse have not received commensurate academic attention. Moreover, there is insufficient evidence to support the claim that weblogs nurture a breed of active flexible authors who ride on the technological affordances of collaborative engagement, egalitarian opportunities for self expression of thought processes and self-regulation. Ironically, there is a gap in literature that discusses the contradictions inherent in computer mediated communication (CMC), like weblogs, which potentially complicate the realisation of the foresaid lofty ideals. These contradictions will be defined, characterised and how they manifest will be discussed substantively in this article.

Research context

The University of Cape Town (UCT) is a middle-sized international university whose student population is drawn not only from African nations, but the world over. The South African national policies on inclusive education, the tremendous demand for higher education, increased class sizes, and the general massification of learning have exposed the limits of direct instruction owing to the difficulties of one-on-one lecturer-student interaction. While learning management systems

(LMS), like Vula,⁵ have expedited delivery of educational resources to students, the limited interactive nature of such LMS, and the need for a 'cool' and informal space for new knowledge generation and sharing by students, have demonstrated the need to do more.

Blogging particularly, collaborative blogging has been sought as a supplement to Vula by innovative lecturers, who strive to promote interactive learning environments where the educator's instructive role in knowledge production is diminished significantly. Since formal contexts for knowledge dissemination, such as scheduled classes and laboratory sessions (where a learner's behaviour is modelled according to university class time table) are limited, an informal interactive learning environment that engages the learner beyond the classroom learning context is paramount.⁶ Blogging (this includes mobile blogging thus enabling interaction anywhere and at anytime), in addition to providing an informal user-friendly environment for collaborative knowledge production with knowledgeable peers, is conceived as useful. As one-to-one lecturer-student interaction through questions and queries becomes operationally difficult, web supplemented knowledge generation through collaborative blogging could prove to be a useful complement. Yet the use of weblogs is laced with contradictions that could constrain its effective complementation of face to face delivery. The gist of this paper is anchored in an examination of such contradictions.

There is a paucity of research that has looked at the Web 2.0 technology with a specific focus of contradictions in web-based applications, like weblogs. Richardson has investigated the use of Facebook and its implications on the management of personal relations. In particular, she notes the fictitious nature of identities created through Facebook, and how Facebook users experiment with multiple identities through their posts and screen names. Richardson does not however provide a theoretical framework that informs the study, nor does she anchor her study around the possible contradictions which lie in the multiple personae she discusses.⁷ Chen et al have investigated how weblogs and wikis⁸ coupled with folio thinking (a couched process of creating portfolios and supporting reflection), aided reflective learning in an introductory Engineering course at Stanford University.⁹ Their study concluded that innovative pedagogy along with 'social software' can be used to positively support students' knowledge, awareness, and skills in design engineering. Although Chen et al. discussed how weblogs 'scaffold' learning, contradictions as manifested in and through these learning relations did not foreground the study. Jarrett engaged with the interactive nature of Web 2.0 technologies (weblogs, wikis, Flickr, del.icio.us, and other participatory media) and how such technologies leads to collective social production of artefacts as well as how the interactive process can indeed function as a disciplining technology.¹⁰ Although, the study did examine the contradictions that underpin the concept of interactivity in Web 2.0 technologies, the study did not engage with blogging per se, nor did it employ an activity theory conceptualisation of blogging. This study therefore interrogates the experiences of individual bloggers who maintained individual weblogs while also taking advantage of collaborative engagement in blogging (collaborative blogging). Theoretically, the study draws on Engeström's concept of

'contradictions' to discuss how meaningful engagement of collaborative bloggers could be constrained by the tensions embedded in these subjects (i.e. the bloggers) as well as in these interactive environments.¹¹

An activity theory perspective of 'contradictions'

It is important to characterise the term "contradictions" so that one can better understand how the term is applied in the context of a discussion of Web 2.0 phenomenon. Engeström notes that "Contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems."¹² Contradictions thus embody some disjuncture or misfit within and between the basic elements of the activity system, which could be subjects, the goals that they strive to realise, and the tool or artefact 'mediating' the actions aimed at achieving certain objectives. Mediation explains the intervening facilitative role tools play in transforming a cognitive behaviour, activities and processes. Wertsch and others define mediation as "a process involving the potential of cultural tools to shape action, on the one hand, and the unique use of tools on the other."¹³ Similarly, Kuutti notes that "activity theory uses the term *contradiction* to indicate a misfit within elements, between them, between different activities, or between different developmental phases of a single activity."¹⁴ If blogging is to be taken as an activity system, the object of which is meaningful social interaction and collaborative bouncing of ideas which activate useful outcomes (learning and new knowledge production), then the tensions (personal and interpersonal) that underlie the bloggers, influenced by their socio-historical contexts is indeed worthy of study. The effective functioning of the weblog for new knowledge generation and negotiation of meaning presupposes that the bloggers (learners) commonly share perspectives and views for the smooth running of the activity system (blogging). However this line of thinking is utopian as the bloggers' experiences, motivations and cultural values can activate inherently conflictual interests and views, within each blogger as well as between and among bloggers. When such contradictions arise they destabilise part or the whole activity system(s) resulting in disturbances that can instigate innovative change. Indeed, "Activity theory regards contradictions as moving forces of change and development in the innovation process."¹⁵

Contradictions have been characterised by Engeström as primary, secondary, tertiary and quaternary (external).¹⁶ Blin notes that *the primary contradiction* in capitalist societies is between the use value and the exchange value of commodities.¹⁷ She elaborates by quoting Engeström who suggests that "this primary contradiction pervades all elements of our activity systems."¹⁸ In the context of this study, emphasis will be placed on the cognitive conflict that occasions the act of blogging by the individual blogger as an element of the activity systems and conflicts that happen within themselves as they engage with the other bloggers. Blin elaborates the notion of primary contradictions by relating the concept to the work of a physician:

The primary contradiction in [the] object of the doctor's work activity takes the form of patient as person to be helped and healed versus

patient as source of revenue and profit (or on the flip side, as opportunity to profit by cutting costs).¹⁹

To elaborate the point, Blin quotes Leontiev who highlights the following with regards contradictions:

The doctor who buys a practice in some little provincial place may be very seriously trying to reduce his fellow citizens' suffering from illness, and may see his calling in just that. He must, however, want the number of the sick to increase, because his life and practical opportunity to follow his calling depend on that²⁰

In academic blogging students may be assigned by their lecturer to do a critical review of certain readings or articles by collaboratively engaging with their peers, and post their review on a collaborative weblog. In line with Leontiev, what motivates the student to post their review on the weblog may be riddled by contradictions. At the individual level, the motivation on one hand may be the need to broaden understanding of the subject matter under review – hence meaningful learning. On the other, it could be inspired by the desire for approval by the lecturer through contributing cogent views on the subject, and thus boosts that individuals' own self-esteem. At the most basic level, it could simply be an attempt by the student to pass the course upon evaluation. The combination of these motivations thus constitutes the primary contradictions, which the lecturer should strive to explore so that the object of blogging (collaborative engagement and social interaction) could nurture the realisation of the desirable outcome (new knowledge generation, and deeper learning).

Engeström identifies *secondary contradictions* as appearing between elements of the activity system as a result of new elements entering the activity system from the outside and thus creating an imbalance.²¹ In the blogging activity system, the incorporation of new members or more senior peers into the group with higher knowledge of blogging, or online publishing experience, could destabilise the system thus constituting a secondary contradiction. Tensions may arise which may be motivated by the different levels of maturity in these students, their educational needs as inspired by their confidence with the web technology (weblogs), and what they strive to achieve in collaborative blogging. *Tertiary contradictions* arise “when a culturally more advanced object and motive is introduced into the activity”²² Consistent with Engeström, is the idea that the introduction by the lecturer of some linkages and partnerships of her class with another blogging class situated in other academic or cultural settings could introduce a new cultural dimension to student experiences of blogging. The argument is that these contradictions, though imaginably subtle to be apparent immediately, are fundamental in determining the texture and quality of interactions (object of activity), and how blogging can mediate the learning experiences of students (outcome). Since students draw on their historical experiences and their social context when making meaning of their blogging interactions, the introduction of other bloggers situated in other cultural contexts bring further complex interactional dynamics to bear on that learning trajectory. The resultant cognitive conflict – the contradiction – can either instigate the

innovative use of weblogs by students (in thesis writing, for example), or may destabilize the systems as students become disengaged due to failure to conceptualise and negotiate meaning across different cultural settings. Most importantly, these contradictions also impact on the discretion participants exercise with regards to learning resources to appropriate for knowledge generation. It is important therefore to characterise the affordances of Web 2.0 as a precursor to the need for understanding and managing the contradictions inherent in collaborative blogging.

Web 2.0 and the blogging phenomenon

The term Web 2.0 was coined at the first O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 Conference in 2004.²³ The concept itself is difficult to define precisely because of the lack of specified standards or implications with regards what it actually entails or means. Wikipedia, the online open-source encyclopaedia, defines this phenomenon as “a perceived second generation of web based communities and hosted services-such as social networking sites, wikis, folksonomies which aim to facilitate collaboration and sharing between users.”²⁴

The term does not represent an update of web based technical applications, but refers to changes in the way web developers and users use the Web as a platform. Critics of Web 2.0, like Berners-Lee, have queried the meaningful use of the term since many of the technology components of Web 2.0 have existed since the early days of the Web.²⁵ This study however, argues that the perceived opportunities for reflective authorship in Web 2.0 are unique experiences. To this end Web 2.0 applications constitute a new phenomenon worth investigating in educational circles. However, it is the tapping of these opportunities for effective learning which this paper examines and queries, particularly in light of the inherent contradictions that anonymous CMC entails.

O'Reilly elaborates that Web 2.0 has its emphasis “on services and not pre-packaged software, architecture of participation, cost effective scalability, remixable data sources and data transformations, software above the level of a single device and harnessing collective intelligence.”²⁶ O'Reilly's observations summarise the fact that the overarching goal of Web 2.0 is to provide web based technology applications that optimise learning opportunities. Such opportunities may be optimised by creating a power brokering deal between technology designers and users through sharing of roles in learning and broadening social interaction under the banner of social software. This is realised by broadening users' participation through increased access and rewriting (editing) of text; instead of accepting pre-packed software and their active involvement in online writing and publishing through personal websites (blogging). This scenario subverts the principles of mainstream publishing, which typically demands a process of peer review before official publication.

O'Reilly's reflections can be interpreted as a testimony to the democratisation of access, use, and functionality of technological applications, which has the propensity to empower interactants in such online engagements as authorial authority becomes more decentralised. Advocates of Web 2.0 concur that it is a

social phenomenon embracing an approach to generating and distributing web content, and which is characterised by open communication, decentralisation of authority, freedom to share and reuse software, and embodies the concept of the “market as a conversation” for example, Wikipedia, Skype, del.icio.us.²⁷ While social software, like weblogs, open the aforementioned learning opportunities, the realisation of such opportunities should be conceived in light of the contradictions that this broadened participation (in CMC) entails. For example, situations where any user can be an author or publisher may significantly diminish the quality of published material as there is no extensive peer review of writing by established academics before literature is published.

Weblogs as spaces for personal reflection

Blogs, a commonly used contraction of weblogs, are one example of the new tools which fall under the category of social software. At the most basic level a weblog can be defined by its format as a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order with the most recent posting appearing first.²⁸ For Downes, a weblog is often referred to as a Web-based public diary with dated entries, usually by a single author, often accompanied by links to other weblogs that the author of the site visits on a regular basis.²⁹ They have been compared to online personal journals, and are noted for being the “unedited, published voice of the people”³⁰ Walker notes that in weblogs, backtracking allow students as readers *and writers* to be linked bi-directionally (linking them to other bloggers and vice versa) giving them access to what others have written and allowing exploration in a networked discussion.³¹ Walker further argues that weblogs provide a chance for students to experience writing in the public sphere where their work can have real value for both for their classmates and for the wider community. Implied in this thinking is the view that contributing ideas to a weblog allows the blogger to “listen” to their thoughts as they engage with the thoughts of other bloggers, thereby constantly refining their thoughts as they continue to interact in this way. While bloggers appear to think as individuals, their ideas are sharpened as they network with other interactants whose identities could be known, or anonymous. Yet in academic circles, the canons of academic expression value information depending on disclosure of its source and students often prize information’s authenticity depending on its source.

Contradictions of authorial erasure and authorial accountability

The empirical research for this paper was conducted at a contact university in South Africa (the University of Cape Town), which combines direct instruction and web-based courses. Participants were individual bloggers who had personal weblogs, which run on the university network; but had the opportunities for collaborative blogging with peers as part of their course assessment. This is important to note as student blogging could be different from real-life blogger blogging in their individual capacity. Ten bloggers, who were honours students in one department, were interviewed in-depth on their experiences of collaborative blogging. The students reported the aim of the course as to improve student learning experiences through the generation of their own content and collaborative development of new ideas and reviews of scholarly literature.

Students had the option to use pseudonyms or their real names on their weblog; this choice was communicated to the lecturer for assessment.

In computer mediated communication (CMC) using weblogs, collaborative partners exercise discretion with regards disclosing their identities or remaining anonymous. In the case of the interviewed students, they could choose to contribute to the weblogs using pseudonyms or their real names for easy accessibility by the lecturer. When asked how important in blogging issues of accountability, professional integrity and trust were, one blogger noted:

Partly important. I mean weblogs by nature do not carry that much seriousness, they are supposed to be light-hearted often non-academic in nature.... Although, because of my journalism background one will tend to find that my sources are credible and real and honest. But in terms of my weblog – I do not care about professional integrity and trust – I simply write what I like when I feel like it on whatever I feel like writing.³²

While the above demonstrates that CMC is egalitarian, democratic and enhances autonomous expression of thought – particularly if the posts are posted anonymously – blogging as a genre of academic writing needs further consideration especially where sentimental value is afforded to responsible scholarship and accountability through verification of sources. In this case far from being a trivial issue, it could carry a sense of seriousness in academic settings. This could manifest as a primary contradiction – a contradiction within in the elements of the activity system. I wish to argue here that student participation in blogging could be motivated by the need to vent out personal critical comments on an issue of academic concern (like a review of a read article or a critique of stories published in the print media). This could be arguably a paragon of liberty and democratic expression. Computer mediated discourse (CMD) has been reported to allow multiple participants to communicate simultaneously in ways that are difficult if not impossible to achieve with other media, due to cognitive limits on participant capacity to attend to more than one exchange at a time.³³ The concealment of identities through the use of pseudonyms is conceivably the most empowering attribute in virtual communicative interaction. This is particularly so, in South African university settings, where underprivileged learning backgrounds and lack of fluency in English language preclude some students, for example, certain black students, from making active contributions and raising questions in traditional modes of delivery, like lectures and tutorials.

On the other hand, blogging could be inspired by the need to create a sense of personal indulgence and moulding identities that garner self-worthiness. This could create tensions with the academic focus of learning thus creating a primary contradiction. This quest for self-worthiness in virtual interactions using weblogs can lead to erosion of responsibility and accountability. While it is unchallengeable that in cyberspace we can transform and control even the identity that others ascribe to us it is equally undeniable that the gravitation

towards unethical behaviour is heightened where online interaction involves concealed identities.³⁴ There is a possibility that weblogs may not be immune to the problems that plague anonymous CMD like ritual insults, sexual pursuits of females for males, aggression³⁵ and flaming.³⁶

Another blogger, asked how he ensured that his views are balanced and that bias is kept to the minimum in his writing, noted:

Personally I don't. I merely write what's my views – which will obviously be subjective. I do not go out to write an objective weblog article. It's like a diary really. I'm not writing for an editor or getting paid to blog or blogging to please anyone. So what I write is usually unbalanced and heavily bias although I do try keep an objective lens when writing things like reviews or art shows or events on my weblog. But that's unnecessary.³⁷

The above also highlights the contradictions that occasion the need to keep an independent voice for expression of personal thoughts and the desire to be objective, through verification of sources and scholarly articulation of ideas. More often when this primary contradiction is not negotiated and managed there is often an easy route to resort to an expression of personal views at the expense of being accountable to an audience.

Contradictions of individual autonomy and maintenance of group norms

The bloggers interviewed in most cases expressed their desire to be original, autonomous and less constrained by their audience in their writings. One blogger who maintained a personal weblog but also engaged in collaborative blogging for his class has this to say:

The weblog is mine and I write what I like on it. Readers are not invited or required to read it – they read at their own peril. If they like what they read – good. If they don't like what they read – then bad for them.³⁸

The above hints at the fact that some of the most cherished values, particularly for western democratic educational systems, are independent expression and self-exposition. Blogging provides an arena for the experimentation with creative thought and the negotiation of different identities in prose. The advent of the Internet is renowned for providing its users with a platform for the realisation of Habermasian ideals of conducting potentially open discussion, debate, exchange of information, equal opportunity for participation, as well as liberation of participants from the constraints of power relations³⁹. These affordances make social software, like weblogs, democratic as they allow users to have increased authority over what they write, as well as to broaden their roles from mere readers of text to writers, information synthesisers, decision makers and interpreters of postings from other bloggers. The same blogger when asked about how he ensures that values of trust and integrity are safeguarded in publications openly acknowledged:

I don't. I just blog/write. Such values do not take precedence in my weblog and many other weblogs in general, unless you're not writing in your own capacity and have a mandate to follow on your weblog.⁴⁰

What is clear from this statement is that the value that is attached to personal opinion at the expense of collective view reflects the principle of individual freedom cherished in modern democracies. Yet, purely democratic virtual contexts for collaborative engagement that simultaneously allow unrestrained individual self-expression rarely, if at all. There could be some tensions and contradictions between the desire for self-expression and the quest for collective expression of opinion where the educators require students to contribute ideas to a weblog collectively. For example, reviews of scholarly articles can be done in collaborative ways. This is because online interactions like weblogs, if used in classroom contexts, will not be insulated from group influences or norms. As one blogger mentioned:

I know people who have published collaboratively in a weblog. I helped them get started. An example being the... [citing the name of the weblog] on the UCT Student Blog server.⁴¹

When questioned how they ensured that the views they publish are representative of the contributors' perspectives, one blogger pointed out that:

It's more of an academic weblog where the contributors are required to source course-related material and post it on the weblog. I am not a fan of anonymous blogging so each of the bloggers takes responsibility of the contribution. All the collaborative bloggers are fully registered on the weblog with their real names and every time they contribute – they title their contribution with their name. So we can always know who contributed what and when.⁴²

While this case demonstrates a sense of responsibility in contributors regarding their postings, in CMC implicit group norms can constrain individual free will. Kiesler et al with reference to Festinger, Pepitone and Newcomb argue that CMC embodies some conditions that are also part of the deindividuation concept: anonymity, lower self-awareness and reduced self-regulation. In a state of deindividuation, people show more extreme behaviour – for example, deviation from the norm – after being submerged in a crowd.⁴³ Sassenberg and Boos elaborate that out of reduced self-awareness behaviour, individuals are predicted to become de-regulated, more extreme, and less guided by social norms.⁴⁴ Kiesler et al. complement this position by noting that less inhibited behaviour leads to extreme group decisions and a stronger shift of group members' attitudes during a discussion in CMC.⁴⁵ While the polarisation of decisions is not an immediate case for adjudication in this work, the dissolution or suppression of some individuals' views under the influence of group norms is suggestive of how democracy can mutate into "mobocracy". This term describes an unfortunate but

perceivably “democratic” scenario where the majority imposes its autocratic decisions and views on the minority, painfully sacrificing individual initiative, emasculating creativity, and disregarding a respect for dissenting views.

The same blogger also noted the complexity of accountability in collaborative publishing where their contributors contribute to a weblog:

In collaborative blogging environments this might be hard to achieve and I guess some level of consensus has to be reached before the actual weblog is posted. In cases where the contributors are known and have their names to their contributions then I guess their own perspective is clearly defined from other perspectives on the weblog.⁴⁶

The first part of the response relates to the problem of retaining a personal voice in collaborative engagement and publishing. The individual seems to submit to the demands of group norms. This could be perceived as a primary contradiction within the blogger as a subject of the activity system. The latter view would demand someone who has more experience in web-based publishing to follow this up for authentication.

Trade-off between self regulation and expert guidance

Students interviewed were self-regulated amateur writers, who had once participated in collaborative blogging. Their engagement with bloggers of the same educational level and blogging experience meant that the activity system was kept in a balance. Studies on computer supported collaborative work (CSCW) have overemphasised the concept of “centredness” especially student-centredness in learning environments. Weblogs as social software when used in classroom contexts can arguably be conceived as a variant of CSCW as it draws on the participation and collaboration of all interactants with computers mediating this interaction. This focus on self-regulation of learners – the centeredness concept – has resulted in oversight of the critical supportive role instructors play for the sustenance of this self-regulation. Dimitracopoulou quotes Brown who characterises self-regulation as one of meta-cognitive skills that allows the learner to concentrate on his or her thinking process, successfully controlling it in order to independently achieve his or her own goals.⁴⁷ It can thus be argued that self regulation is a constitutive element of the broad concept of autonomy particularly because of its focus on adjustment and self control of cognitive processes. Systems that contribute in this direction are not those that reflect interactions (“mirroring systems”)⁴⁸ but those that mirror the state of interaction by providing the collaborator with literal information or visualisations that can subsequently be used to self-diagnose and self-regulate interaction.⁴⁹

In situations where the lecturer or senior student peer takes a mediating role by moderating bloggers’ posts, he can potentially unseat the equilibrium of the activity system. I reiterate Engeström’s model that identifies *secondary contradictions* as appearing between elements of the activity system as a result of new elements entering the activity system from the outside and creating an

imbalance. Context awareness and consciousness of the presence of such a new entrant may create some contradictions as the entrant is conceived as an embodiment of prior expertise and superior knowledge. One blogger, when asked about the mediation of learning where the educator is involved, pointed to the suppression of other views, which was noted as an anathema to free will:

No. I do not encourage any suppression of any sorts in the blogosphere or collaborative publishing environment. That defeats the purpose and freedom of weblogs. In rare cases where one voice becomes a radical or diverges from the original views then maybe steps can be taken to get that voice to follow whatever set mandate there is on that collaborative environment.⁵⁰

Implied in the thinking above, is the tension that predicates the involvement of new players emerging especially from hierarchical layers of the interactive processes. While increasing complexity of learning activities in weblogs (for example, validating the authenticity of views raised by other bloggers) could necessitate the support of the lecturer, his involvement potentially unseats the knowledge equation of the interactants.

Contradiction of fluid identities and demands for trust

The co-operative quest for truth in academic discourse is premised on academic integrity and persistent trust among academics with regards to conduct. Academics' claims about their findings can only be validated by the credibility of their research instruments, authenticity and systematic rigor of the methodological processes employed, and the logicity of the data collection processes. Besides, research outcomes (knowledge and information generated) have to be dependable and believable if social science is to remain a relevant discipline. All of the above processes invoke the noble values of trust and accountability. Peer review has ensured that academics are increasingly accountable in their writing and that quality assurance is maintained. Noveck reiterates that trust is the foundation upon which society and *indeed knowledge generation* is based and in turn trust depends on secure, reliable, and persistent identity.⁵¹ Anonymous CMC through blogging however, subverts the canons upon which trust is premised because "the medium undermines the connection between online pseudonym and offline identity, for we have no assurance who stands behind an online persona or avatar, it may be one person, it may be more."⁵² One blogger noted this with regards anonymous blogging among his colleagues:

Bloggers who blog anonymously tend to write more personal accounts of their lives. Speak about divorces, childhood abuses, hating their employers, et cetera. Blogger have no one to account to but themselves – so matters of credibility aren't a heavy issue in the blogosphere. Those who blog anonymously are freer or find it easier to delve into issue other known bloggers wouldn't write about. Being anonymous does however become annoying and can be abused to push lies. Like the Sex Blogger – who once blogged about his

encounters with famous South African celebrities – there credibility was an issue because he was making heavy claims that bordered on defamation. So the question one has to ask is where do you draw the line on these anonymous bloggers.⁵³

The fact that anonymous bloggers tend to abuse the privilege by writing lies demonstrate the primary contradictions between the needs to project an honest personal account of a subject matter under debate, and the quest for fantasy which could result in bloggers peddling unauthentic or malicious stories. As a result of the possibilities for fictitious identities created in blogging, the amount of credit and confidence (trust) that interactants can put in the information generated in such as set up could somewhat be problematic. The assumption of multiple personalities in blogging has been facilitated by the ease with which one can publish or disclose information about themselves.⁵⁴ This socio-technical fact often gives rise to concerns about lack of accountability and authenticity that often results from the ease of interacting anonymously in cyberspace.⁵⁵ The scenario of blogging where any blogger can become a writer and can publish her work without peer review compromises the quality of information in weblogs

Wither blogging in university classrooms?

The obvious question to pose, then, is: in light of the aforementioned contradictions in CMD, in which weblogs are also implicated, should weblogs be defaced in university learning? What is at stake if blogging is abolished in university settings? My answer to the first question is a resounding no! Weblogs remain fundamentally important for university learners – if established in enriched learning environments that are steered by supportive, flexible and multiple pedagogical possibilities. Students' meaningful engagement in CMD is the building block as well as the launch pad for grooming apprentices to become professional collaborative authors. The answer to the second question has been pre-empted by the response to the first one: a great deal of opportunities will have been needlessly sacrificed if blogging is abandoned. The search for treatment of these contradictions should therefore be the next port of call. In what follows, I suggest a series of pragmatic guidelines or proposition that are open to debate and adjustment.

Make blogging real, powerful and rewarding

Students need disciplined initial training on engagement in critical thought and argumentation, as well as responsible authorship, and need constant reminding that autonomous authorship should always be backed by persistent authorial accountability. It is imperative that blogging as a kind of anonymous collaborative authorship should be taught in manner that lifts it from a casual practice to a profession of writing-in-the-making. This necessitates that the process becomes goal-driven, activity-oriented, and embeds some of the ethos of scholarly authorship (like sincerity in the projection of ideas). Moral values, like the search for truth and academic integrity through quality of the argument, its defence, as well as its clear articulation, should be maintained. Persuading the critical mass in such concerns will help transform anonymous or pseudonymous writing to a level where collective publication in university journals of quality

student work becomes a reality. In this way, weblogs will be transformed from being sites of persistent contradictions to arenas of profitable intellectual controversy and debate. Publication of quality student work generated in such interactions can become a simulating incentive for students to desist from unproductive unethical practices, like flaming, and turn to responsible scribing – a solution to the first contradiction of authorial erasure and accountability.

Substitute authors in collaborative pseudonymous writing

Deindividuation has been noted as a challenge of individual cognitive properties being suppressed under group influences or norms. Individual traits can be retained in weblogs through training bloggers to develop unique, constructive but critical voices. This is made possible when such students are made conscious of the necessity of developing a unique personal voice that allows their personal arguments and inputs stand out so that such ideas and concepts can be acknowledged as their contributions. In scenarios where contributors to publications and the contributions they make are specified in journals this becomes a deterrent to irresponsible authorship and as well as an incentive for quality authorship as students are made conscious of the implications of their writing. Implied in this proposition is a subsequent shift from anonymity (during online interactions) to disclosure of identities (in university publications) if the instructor finds the group's writing scholarly and intelligible and worth publishing. Sorensen acknowledges that global democratic citizens have some of the following characteristics: tolerance and support for fellow human beings, openness to new ideas and alternative solutions, emphasis on the initiative of the learner and create a sense of ownership, a rejection of initiatives designed to control others, a respect for the quality of the argument, and a rejection of the power of authority.⁵⁶ In university learning this means support for the constructivist way of learning where engagement in collaborative interactions helps sharpen individual thoughts for creativity. A respect for the power of the argument, and the simultaneous objection of the desire to control others, will help reduce chances of deindividuation in blogging.

Establish connections to relevant authoritative web sites and online journals

Web-based technologies, like anonymous collaborative discussions and weblogs have been reported to be notorious for creating participants who possess multiple identities which potentially compromise trust in such interactions. Hyper textual links connecting interactants in weblogs to important authoritative websites and related scholarly journals could greatly enrich the profile of engagements, as well as create reference points that can help authenticate the information generated. This way trust can be recouped as misinterpretations and confusions that often characterise posts in weblogs are cleared up by these authoritative writings. Such reference points can also compliment the moderating role of the instructor as it is untenable for her to comment on all queries raised by students in anonymous interactions. Besides, important sites can also improve the quality and credibility of arguments thereby enhancing the much needed practice of trust in weblog posts.

Conclusion

Drawing on empirical research conducted at the University of Cape Town, this paper has discussed the challenges that plague weblogs both as pedagogical and learning tools. It has exposed the contradictions that occasion collaborative blogging in tertiary settings and argued that understanding the contradictions inherent in weblogs could be the entry point for appropriating the new opportunities available in CMC in general. An activity theoretical perspective of contradictions is arguably a useful tool for understanding the tensions and conflicts that could be activated by student use of weblogs. Managing these contradictions could greatly impact the educational usefulness not only of weblogs but related social software in general. This is particularly cardinal in light of the challenges of increasing the knowledge generation capacity of students. This paper has argued that bestowing a networked learning infrastructure *per se* does not make learning automatic, nor does it by itself activate quality knowledge generation. A careful dissection of the contradictions inherent in CMD can be refreshing point of departure yet durable liberating imperative for the guarantee of meaningful learning in social software.

Notes

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³ Dickey, "The Impact of Weblogs," p. 288.

⁴ See Sessums, *Teaching, Learning and Computing*.

⁵ Vula is UCT's version of the international open source software Sakai. It constitutes the mainstream Learning Management System (LMS) upon which all web supplemented courses at UCT are hosted, and can be accessed for teaching and learning by students, educators and the local academia.

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