Using Blogs for Teacher-Student Communication

Class blogs in two Swedish public schools

Kalle Räisänen
820109
ABSTRACT

While Swedish public schools are increasingly using social media to communicate with students, there are also concerns about social media being a distraction—especially in the context of one laptop per child classroom. To further the understanding of this apparent conflict between the benefits and risks of social media use in schools, this paper studies how two Swedish public schools use blogs for teacher–student communication.

We conduct an inductive content analysis of research literature, and find that previous work suggests seven uses of blogs in teacher–student communication: 1) Informing and Instructing; 2) Posting supplemental material; 3) Prompting; 4) Blogging as assignment; 5) Community-building; 6) Discussion/Collaboration; and 7) Interacting with external readers/commenters. By using these concepts as a matrix for a deductive content analysis of posts and comments to four class blogs during the fall of 2011, we show that while the studied schools use their blogs for informing and instructing, mainly in the form of recaps and previews of previous and coming lessons, and for posting supplemental material, we find few instances of discussion/collaboration and blogging as assignment, and no instances of interacting with external readers or community-building. Further, we find that schools also use blogs to increase transparency of examinations and to strengthen the student–teacher relationship through what we term social posts.

These results indicate that blogs are, in the schools we studied, used in a fairly narrow way, and that the schools’ use of blogs could benefit from deliberate strategies for encouraging discussion and by engaging external readers, so as to build and further strengthen blog-based communities.

Keywords: Education, Blogs, Communication, Social media.
1 Introduction

Social media are, broadly, web sites and internet-based applications where users create and share content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). One of the earliest web-based applications centred on user-created content, and thus one of the earliest forms of social media, were blogs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Originally a kind of web-based diary, blogs allow users to publish posts and interact with readers through discussion of those posts (Luehmann & Frink, 2009). Since their inception in the late 1990s, blogs have increasingly been used as teaching and learning tools, and there is a growing body of research on the phenomenon (Robertson, 2011).

While Swedish public schools are increasingly using social media to communicate with students, there are also concerns about social media being a distraction (Grönlund et al., 2011). It therefore becomes interesting to investigate how these two, seemingly conflicting trends, relate to each other. Widespread proliferation of computers in classrooms is a novel phenomenon in Sweden, and the easy access to the Internet in general and social media in particular is part of the on-going debate on how to best use ICTs in education (Grönlund et al., 2011).

A first step in understanding this situation is to understand how social media are used by schools, which the present study attempts to do through a case study of two public schools use of class blogs.

1.1 Research aim & Research question

The overarching aim of this study is to investigate how Swedish public schools use blogs for teacher–student communication. To investigate this, we conduct a study of two cases of class blogs in use at Swedish secondary schools. Our study of these schools is based upon the following research question:

RQ1. In which ways are blogs used by Swedish public schools?

To answer this question, we investigate how class blogs are used by the studied schools, how this use compares to the uses suggested by previous research, and which novel uses—not found in our literature review—are found in the studied blogs.

2 Method

We performed this study by collecting data from the research literature and from class blogs, and comparing the uses of blogs described in the literature with the actual uses found in the class blogs. We chose to focus on content analysis of the blog content, because a) the data was readily available; b) it would allow us to analyse a fairly large amount of data effectively; and
c) we are in this study interested in how class blogs are used, not in, e.g., teachers’ or students’ attitudes toward blogs.

The two schools we studied are both secondary (grades 10 through 12) schools from the south of Sweden, and are both 1:1 (one laptop per child) schools and part of the Unosuno research project, which studies the implementation of 1:1 in Sweden.

2.1 Data collection

As alluded to above, we collected data from two sources: 1) posts and comments from class blogs and 2) research literature.

We downloaded a total of 1098 posts and 85 comments from four class blogs at two Swedish secondary schools. Three of the blogs (henceforth, Blog 1A, 1B, and 1C) were from the first school (School 1), while the fourth blog (Blog 2A) was from the second school (School 2).

The blog posts we collected were submitted between January 2010 and April 2012, inclusive. Of those we chose the posts and comments submitted from August 2011 through October 2011, inclusive—242 posts and 37 comments—to analyse in this study. We chose this time span because it was in the beginning of a fall term and also a period when all four blogs were active, and our intuition was that this would be an active period. This intuition was supported by the fact that this period represents 11% of the time but 22% of the total posts and 44% of the total comments. The total blog-data studied consisted of 190,000 characters, with the individual posts varying in length from 2 to 6000 characters, and the average length of a post being approximately 600 characters.

Literature was gathered through a search of the Education database of Web of Knowledge\(^1\). We did an initial search using the keyword blog, and found further keywords from the top results of that search. These keywords were (teaching OR education OR learning) AND blog*, (teacher* AND student* AND blog*), and (class blog*). These searches yielded 44 research papers (4 conference papers and 40 journal papers), whose titles or abstracts mentioned blogs. We excluded those papers which did not concern the use of blogs for teacher–student communication—papers concerned with, e.g., using blogs for teacher–teacher communication. After this, 30 papers remained for analysis.

2.2 Analysis

Data from the blogs and from the literature was analysed using content analysis, in the form of inductive (literature and blog posts) and deductive (blog posts) content analysis. Inductive

\(^1\)http://apps.webofknowledge.com/.
content analysis is characterised by using open coding to find a concept matrix from a set of texts, while deductive content analysis codes a set of texts according to an existing conceptual matrix (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Research papers were read through and open-coded by highlighting and categorising sections concerning concrete examples of uses or advantages of blogs in education. These codes were collated in a concept matrix, showing which concepts (blog-uses) appeared in which papers; of these we chose the concepts that were mentioned in more than two of the reviewed papers as a basis for a deductive content analysis of the blog posts.

Blog posts were analysed by gathering them into a qualitative data analysis tool, and reading through them and coding sections according to the concepts found in literature review. We also coded sections which expressed concepts not occurring in the literature. Thus the analysis of the posts was both deductive and inductive.

We used the results of these analyses to draw conclusions about how blogs are used in the studied schools, and to make recommendations about how this use could be improved.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Literature review

Since their introduction in the late 1990s, blogs have received increasing attention as teaching and learning tools (Robertson, 2011). To find how blogs have been used and in which ways they can enhance learning, we conducted a review of research papers on the use of blogs in education. From this review we uncovered seven sub-uses of blogs (see Table 3.1): 1) Informing and Instructing; 2) Posting supplemental material; 3) Prompting; 4) Blogging as assignment; 5) Community-building; 6) Discussion/Collaboration; and 7) Interacting with external readers/commenters.

3.1.1 Informing and Instructing

One of the most commonly discussed uses of blogs in the literature (explicitly mentioned in a third of the studied papers) is informing and instructing, that is, using blogs to post information about (non-blog) assignments, schedule, syllabus, and so on. E.g., Hungerford-Kresser, Wiggins, and Amaro-Jimenez (2011, p. 332), who report that their students found helpful the posting of “sample assignments, class information, PowerPoint presentations, and notes for class”.

June 26, 2012 Kalle Raisänен
3.1.2 Posting supplemental material

Connected with informing and instructing, is the use of blogs by teachers and students to post supplemental information: links to other blogs and web sites, videos, and so on, which offer deeper or alternative information on studied topics. For example, (Duda & Garrett, 2008, p. 1) who used their class blog for physics students to link to “real-world applications of physics” and engage “students in discussion and thinking outside of class”.

Table 3.1: Literature review concept matrix (n = 30).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>Inform</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Suppl.</th>
<th>Discuss</th>
<th>Assign</th>
<th>External</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baets (2005)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boling et al. (2008)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chan and Ridgway (2005)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chu et al. (2012)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cobanoglu and Berezina (2011)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis and McGrail (2009)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deng and Yuen (2011)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dippold (2009)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duda and Garrett (2008)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ehrlich (2008)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellner and Apple (2006)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernheimer and Nelson (2005)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fessakis et al. (2008)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hourigan and Murray (2010)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungerford-Kresser et al. (2011)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurlburt (2008)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson (2004)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kang et al. (2011)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim (2008)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luehmann and Frink (2009)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mompean (2010)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potter and Banaji (2012)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robertson (2011)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almeida Soares (2008)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun and Chang (2012)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top et al. (2010)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top (2012)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West (2008)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu (2005)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yang and Chang (2012)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 4 | 10 | 8 | 10 | 23 | 16 | 6 |
3.1.3 Prompting

To facilitate discussion and community-building (see below, sections 3.1.5 and 3.1.6), teachers may need to solicit comments through prompting (either directly or indirectly). Davis and McGrail (2009, p. 75), for example, write of giving their fifth grade students “comment starters such as ‘I wonder . . . ,’ ‘After reflecting on your post . . . ’” to encourage discussion, and Hungerford-Kresser et al. (2011, pp. 332–333) report that in interviews the university students they studied often suggested the use of prompts to help get conversations started.

3.1.4 Blogging as assignment

Connected with prompting, is the use of blogs as a medium for creating and submitting assignments—when posting blog posts and comments are required and graded course assignments. Ehrlich (2008, p. 277), for example, writes that instructing students to post on specific topics can “harness the inherent structured utility of a blog” and “resist passivity”. This idea, that obligatory posting overcomes passivity returns in, e.g., Fessakis et al. (2008, p. 205), where the students were less active in discussions where there was not a required minimum number of posts or comments.

3.1.5 Community-building

Blogs can help build a sense of community within a class and also connect that community to the larger blogging community. Top (2012, p. 27), for example, reports that the undergraduate students he studied felt that blogging helped them build a sense of community, while Kim (2008, p. 1348) writes that ability of blogs to facilitate connection with a wider audience than the “traditional student–teacher relationship is more likely to reinforce collaboration and feedback”. The community-building aspect of blogs, naturally, connects very much with Discussion/Collaboration (3.1.6) and Interacting with external readers/commenters (3.1.7).

3.1.6 Discussion/Collaboration

The overwhelmingly most common feature of blogs, mentioned in over two thirds of the studied papers, is the ability to facilitate discussion and collaboration among students, and between teachers and students. For example, Dippold (2009, p. 31) reports that the undergraduate students she studied enjoyed the feedback blogs enabled them to receive from both other student and from teachers, while Fellner and Apple (2006, p. 19) argue that blog-based discussion can increase student motivation.
3.1.7 Interacting with external readers/commenters

As mentioned above (3.1.5), blogs can be used to create a sense of community within a class. This sense of community can also be extended beyond the class, by inviting external readers and commenters. By having an external audience, students can feel that their blogging is more “authentic” (Fellner & Apple, 2006, p. 17), and gives them access to other perspectives on the topics they study (Luehmann & Frink, 2009, pp. 276–277). For example, Davis and McGrail (2009, p. 76) recruited university students, students from other classes, and retired teachers to comment on the posts of their primary school students, and Almeida Soares (2008, p. 521) reports that her English-language students “were thrilled when they realized they had real English speakers reading their texts.”

3.2 Blog posts

Through our content analysis of the blog posts, we found 1) in which ways the blog-uses found in the literature were implemented in the studied blogs, and 2) “novel” uses which were not found in our literature review. These two classes of uses are summarised in figures 3.1 and 3.2, and explained and exemplified in the following two subsections.

![Fig. 3.1: Literature-review concepts found in blog posts/comments.](image1)

![Fig. 3.2: Novel concepts found in blog posts/comments.](image2)

3.2.1 Literature-review concepts

Table 3.2 shows to which extent the concepts and uses we found in the literature appear in the studied blog posts.

More specifically, the concepts appeared in the following ways:
Table 3.2: Literature-review concepts found in blogs (n = 242).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informing</th>
<th>Suppl. material</th>
<th>Blog assign.</th>
<th>Prompting</th>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>External readers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>238</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Informing & Instructing** The vast majority of the posts we analysed (238 of 242) were used by teachers to *inform & instruct*: the teachers posted assignments, recaps of previous lessons, and lesson plans for coming lessons. See subsection 3.2.2 for examples of ways in which teachers in the studied schools used blog posts for informing and instructing, under the headings “Review and Recap” and “Transparency”.

**Supplemental material** Another common blog-use found in our study, was the use blogs to post supplemental material: this included links to other websites (e.g., Wikipedia or other online encyclopedias, newspapers), as well as documents containing more in-depth descriptions of assignments and presentation-slides from previous lessons.

**Blog assignments and Prompting** During the time period we studied, the teachers used blogging assignments only in a handful of cases\(^1\), and those cases consisted of asking students to, e.g., chose topics for an upcoming presentation. In general, the posts we analysed did not prompt students to discuss topics within the blog or to post assignments to the blog. The prompts/“assignments” we found asked students to, e.g., pick a topic for a presentation or to chose a time for instruction.

**Discussion** There was very little discussion in the class blogs during the time period we studied, but what discussion there was mostly consisted of students asking questions about assignments or procedure. Interestingly, there were three times as many student questions (9) as there were teacher answers (3). An example is a comment from a student on Blog 1B, to a post about an assignment (*Blog 1B*, September 9, 2011; the post consists of a series of questions about ancient Rome), asking “what’s this got to do with film?”\(^2\) (*Blog 1B*, September 11, 2011), which was answered by the teacher with “Nothing, but it does have to do with ancient Rome, which will help when you have a lesson about that next week :))” (*Blog 1B*, September 11, 2011).

**Community-building and External commenters** Except for the use discussed below under the heading “Social”, we found no posts or comments explicitely geared toward community-building.

---

\(^1\)While we did not find many uses of blogging assignments during the period we studied, we know from personal communication with the teachers that they have used assignments where students were tasked with creating blogs about, e.g., their home towns. This, however, is outside the scope of our study.

\(^2\)All quotes from blog posts were translated from Swedish by the present author, unless otherwise noted.
building within the classes. Nor did we find any instances of inviting external readers or commenters.

3.2.2 “Novel” concepts

In addition to the concepts we found through our literature review, we also found a number of concepts and sub-concepts in the blogs, which we had not found in the literature—and which we thus term “novel”—namely (see Table 3.3 for statistics):

| Preview Recap Social Google Docs Transparency |
|------|------|------|--------|--------|
| 98   | 83   | 51   | 43     | 12     |

**Preview and Recap:** A large number of the studied blog posts were used to recap what had been done in the previous lesson and preview the plan for the next lesson—an application of the informing & instructing use from the literature. These posts often take the form recap-paragraph, preview-paragraph, e.g., “The class was given some time to read and discuss the questions for the text. […] Next time we’ll finish the list and focus on states as actors” (Blog 1A, August 8, 2011).

**Social:** We also found quite a large number of what we term social statements in teachers’ blog posts (and a couple of student comments)—statements to do with informal, social relationships between teachers and students. This includes everything from information about class trips to teachers thanking or praising the students for their work, or encouraging them to try harder. In a sense this is connected to the community-building concept above, but whereas community-building concerns the building or strengthening of connections between students, the social statements we found in the blogs have more to do with the teacher–student relationship. An example of this teacher–student-relationship-building is a post from a teacher entitled “THANK YOU!!”, which begins “I just wanted to say that you make me very happy :D I always enjoy seeing you and I always look forward to our classes (it’s OK if you don’t always;)!” (Blog 1A, October 25, 2011). This post illustrates the informal and personal characteristics of these social posts.

**Google Docs:** While the studied blogs did not include any in-blog collaboration, we found numerous references to the use of Google Docs—Google’s free, web-based suite of office tools. The studied schools, then, appear to use social media for student collaboration, but they do it, at least in the time period we studied, outside of the blogs themselves.
Transparency: One use which we did not find in the literature, but which seems obvious in hindsight, is the use of class blogs to improve transparency. More specifically, teachers at the schools we studied used their class blogs to explain grading criteria, course syllabi, and so on. E.g., a post entitled “A long-winded explanation of the criteria for the film analysis”, which explains criteria for different grades, viz.: “Pass: The student sees and understands excerpts and whole films about ancient Rome and explicates connections and differences. Only the first part, emphasised [sic] of this criterion is applicable for this assignment” (Blog 1B, September 2, 2011). This post shows the general structure of these posts: excerpts from official grading criteria followed by explanations of how the teacher applies them to specific assignments, exams, or classes.

4 Conclusions

This study set out to answer how class blogs are used in two public schools. The results above show that blogs are, in the schools we studied, used mainly for informing and instructing—chiefly in the form of recaps and previews of previous and coming lessons—and for posting supplemental material. We found few instances of discussion/collaboration and blogging as assignment, and no instances of interacting with external readers or community-building.

Compared to the uses shown by previous work, then, the studied schools use blogs in a fairly narrow way. However, we found also that schools use blogs to increase transparency of examinations and to strengthen the student–teacher relationship through what we term social posts.

The use of blogs to increase transparency is interesting, and, together with their use of class blogs for social communication, indicates a desire on the part of teachers to connect to students and an inclusive approach toward education. This approach could benefit from more deliberate strategies for encouraging discussion, so as to build and further strengthen blog-based communities. Engaging external readers could—as reported by, e.g., Davis and McGrail (2009)—motivate students to participate more in discussion, and give students access to other perspectives and other voices.

While this study is based on fairly many blog posts, those posts only represent three months of use at two schools, both of which are in the same city. Thus, our results are hardly generalisable. The literature review could benefit from being broadened to gain a more general view of ICT-use in education, and also from re-analysing the literature with the novel uses from the blogs, to see if those uses were present in the literature but were missed or misunderstood in the first analysis of the papers.

We will continue this research by doing a more complete study of the two schools in this
study, including more blogs and a longer time period. Other future research directions which may be interesting would be to broaden the study by interviewing the teachers and students involved and by including more schools.
REFERENCES


