

Reflective Count on Leveraging the Affordances of Weblog to Harness the Benefits of Newspaper in Education: The How and Why

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Abstract

This paper draws upon the author's own practice in leveraging the educational affordances of weblogs to harness the benefits of 'Newspaper in Education' (NIE). As such, this paper describes the 'how to' and 'why' deliver NIE through weblog. The "how to" accounts researcher's proposed method in channelling NIE to a group of 1st year pre-service teachers enrolled in a BEd TESL program in Teacher Education Institute in JOHOR. Two fields of thoughts were used as the guiding framework. The first adhered to the notion that pre-service teachers must first be given opportunities to use technologies in their learning in teacher education programs in order for them to practice the use of similar technologies in the classroom. The second was drawn from the theoretical rationale that online communication impacts literacy learning. The second part of this documentation takes a look into 'the why' perspective. This includes the pedagogical affordances that weblog holds to advance the benefits of NIE. As e-paper is emerging with impact, these reflective counts recommends for teachers to go paperless while still incorporating newspaper in classroom. At the receiving end, pre-service teachers demonstrated competency in utilizing the full potential of weblog to improve both their spoken and written English and indicated that this experience simultaneously prepared them to become better practitioners of technology in the classroom.

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Newspaper in Education

"Newspaper in Education" or NIE is a program internationally conceptualized to promote student's literacy by using the newspaper as a teaching resource. Generally, NIE proposes for the use of daily news, editorials, advertisements, cartoons and others as featured in the newspaper for the learning of educational concepts while improving reading and comprehension skills. In Malaysia, NIE, in championing the Education Ministry's goal to improve English language teaching and learning, found its way into English lessons in Malaysian schools in the mid of eighties with mainstream press companies providing copies of their prints directly into student's hands. Currently, almost all schools in Malaysia run this program as evidences on the potentials of newspapers as learning resources are huge. With curriculum guides, nationwide workshops and tours by NIE teams, this program saw dramatic growth. Over the years, the use of newspapers as dynamic textbooks and learning supplements has been extended and incorporated into nearly all classroom subjects. Schools are offered newspapers at a special education rate and with this NIE program has flourished.

Taking a deeper dive into NIE in Malaysia, this program works towards enhancing creativity in both spoken and written English. By analysing the news and media, students are expected to think, write, speak and express fluently in English. NIE aspires to produce students who are able to practice critical thinking, excel in problem solving and stand out as leaders. News on current events and issues as flashed by the print media are used to help inculcate these qualities in them. NIE's activities have taken many forms. Fundamentally, all activities are channelled towards building students' proficiency and confidence in the target language as well as prepare them with higher order thinking skills. While workshops are conducted periodically by the NIE teams, during regular classroom sessions, teachers use articles from the newspaper for reading and for classroom discussions. Beginning with the very basic recall capacity, students are assessed on various learning domains based on Bloom's Taxonomy. As this scenario prevails in the physical classroom per se, how teachers can take NIE to virtual dimension without losing its essence and simultaneously develop a student community which is socially intelligent and fairly fluent in both

spoken and written English, has actually drawn the interest of the authors, thus becoming the impetus for this documentation.

Weblog / Blog

The emerging information and communication technologies, mediating our communication and interaction channels, transforming learning literacy, one need to relook at their stance with regard to educational technology and teaching practices. The interactivity afforded by Web 2.0 applications can be leveraged to improve classroom teaching practices as well as extend those practices beyond the boundaries of the school wall, enabling students to continue to learn long after school has ended for the day. While interactivity and interconnectivity are the salient features of the Web 2.0 applications, one tool from this second generation World Wide Web that stands out with a niche for collaboration is the weblog.

“Weblog” a term coined in 1997 by Jorn Barger, later truncated to “blog” refers to free site on the internet that allows authors to self-publish texts, images and a whole array of digital media organised in reverse chronological order (Paquet, 2003; Ward, 2004). Generally perceived as personal diary or online journal, the weblog or blog provides a means for people to share their experiences and stories with others and allows others to comment or add further information to the postings. Though, a vast majority of teachers relish blogging but in what manner and to what extent it is being used to promote learning is crucial to realise its educational affordances. Teacher bloggers mostly engage in either “informative blogs” or “self-disclosure blog”, providing information and sharing knowledge on multidisciplinary field or channelling personal endeavours and happenings respectively. Weblog with its capacity for collaboration as well as taking a solid ground on nurturing reflective thinking can become a promising instructional tool that enhances learning. Weblog’s educational affordances are not only limited to providing collaborative discussion space but with some element of creativity, teachers can transform weblogs into virtual classrooms that can complement their usual institutional curricular responsibilities and tightly constrained class time.

Blogging, fast establishing itself has the unparalleled digital space for social collaboration as well as being recognised for its pedagogical affordances, has actually conjured up a new set of perspective to enrich the goals of NIE. How would a weblog champion the goals of NIE. Why teachers should start blogging in order to advance the benefits of NIE.

Why Blog for NIE in Teacher Education Program– A Theoretical Rational

The theoretical framework draws on replication perspective, focusing on how knowledge is constructed and transferred through replication and adaptation processes (Williams, 2007). Typically, replication approach in educational research refers to redoing a study that has flawed due to methodological limitations or to generalize the findings to a different set of samples (Marguerite et al, 2010). In other words, replication approach has been pursued to duplicate the past in the present context to document improved findings. However the replication perspective as described here refers to replicating the present in the future. It was hypothesized that present experience contributes to knowledge transfer when replicated in another context which then leads to performance improvements at the receiving end. Another rationale to pursue this study is aligned along the theoretical notion that online communication impacts English literacy and learning. Social interaction and communication, as postulated by Vygotsky and Bandura under the social cognitive dimension is seen fundamental for development of cognition and this theory grounded the pedagogic use of blogging in general.

Curriculum for teacher education programs in Malaysia are well designed with the scope for technology across curriculum. Technology is integrated in the delivery of all domains (language, science, maths, educational technology, religious and moral studies, physical education and etc) as stated in the curriculum. The focus has been on delivering the lesson content using technology as assistive tool rather than on integrating technology to create new learning experiences. A study by Muniandy et al (2010) reported that the ICT curriculum for teacher education in Malaysia has overlooked the current and emerging instructional technologies and focused more on less sophisticated technologies that works at application level. Simply using the medium (technology) does not predict effective and efficient use but innovative teaching ideas are what constitute to the real technology integration in the classroom.

Consistently, Reingold (2006) described that "using new media by point-and-click exploration may come naturally to students but there is nothing innate about knowing how to apply the skills". To paraphrase, teacher educators should exemplify effective and efficient delivery of instruction using technology and let the pre-service teachers understand and gain knowledge on the innovative use of these tools intended to enrich learning experiences. Plausibly, when pre-service teachers get a feel of the use of a particular tool or application for instructional purposes, they will apply (replicate) similar tools during teaching in schools later. Along this probable expectation, Dexter and Reidel (2003) presented that in order for pre-service teachers to use technologies in the classroom, they must first have opportunities to use similar technologies in their learning in teacher education programs. In other word, it is essential to equip the pre-service teachers with skills and strategies to effectively exploit the educational potential of the emerging information and communication technologies. This notion was taken into consideration when deciding on the theoretical framework for the use of weblog to deliver NIE. As newspaper is regarded as a powerful resource for English lessons and also as the modern communication technologies are creating new learning experiences, the best way to prepare pre-service teachers to embrace technology in implementing NIE is by having them explore and work on similar condition as a learning requisite.

The second rationale that blogging possibly induce English proficiency proliferated from the concept of literacy, communication and technology. Literacy is defined as the ability to read for knowledge and write coherently and think critically about the written word (Wikipedia) whereas the term "online communication" refers to reading, writing, and communication via networked computers. The internet has emerged as the present generation's defining technology for literacy (Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Leu et al, 2007) and blogging has been agreed as the most exciting online activity that fosters communication and collaboration (Herring et al, 2004). According to Warschauer (2001), online activities that fosters interactivity, collaboration and connectivity supports important language learning objectives. Research findings documented that computer assisted conversation were able to shift the focus from language form to language use in meaningful context and thereby increase student motivation. Online communication that fosters rapid written interaction, according to Ortega (1997) and Warschauer (1999) provides better opportunities to process and try out new lexical or syntactic patterns as compared to oral interaction. This greatly impacts linguistic benefits. Consistently, Castek et al, (2007) claimed that both writing and reading comprehension goes hand in hand when users are online. When interacting with others through online communication channels, readers do not just grasp information as it is but tend to analyze, critically evaluate and synthesize the information across multiple texts (Leu et al, 2007). These practices, preceding information gathering process, pave way for higher order thinking skills and thus attribute to the benefits of using online collaboration platforms, especially blog, as language learning medium.

How to Channel NIE through Weblog

Before going into why NIE can excel in the weblog, let's look into how to channel learning objects, newspaper in precise, via this environment. The elaborated ideas are drawn from authors' own pedagogical practices and as such are intended to provide some practice options for educators on ways to channel newspaper in the classroom. With this, practitioners of NIE, while going paperless, certainly will not lose out in bringing the essence of newspaper as a learning resource for English lessons. Weblog can be integrated in a multifaceted manner for instructional purposes. Weblog for pedagogical purposes comes in two distinct genres namely;

- (i) class blogs in the form of learning blog, response blog or showcase blog and
- (ii) self expression blog in the form mirror blog or personal blog.

The NIE blog falls into the former genre, incorporating the features of learning and response blog. Hence, the NIE blog consists of learning materials and resources as well as allow students to respond to postings and comments. With these features the NIE blog can help to scaffold student learning profoundly. The NIE blog was created for 1st year Bachelor of Education TESL program pre-service teachers in Teacher Education Institute in Johor, Malaysia. Weekly two postings on issues that garnered much attention from the public and debated hotly in the newspaper were published in the class blog. With this, discussion and brain storming were initiated. The students were encouraged to analyze, reflect and comment on the highlighted newspaper section or posts of the week. Articles on a wide array of topics, extracted from newspaper were scanned and organized into categories and added as resources for discussion. With

weblog, resources for reading are not limited to local news but can be extended to a broader spectrum covering news as printed in foreign media. To enhance sense of ownership to the NIE blog, students were encouraged to source for issues relevant to the highlighted posting, from foreign media, and add them as links in their comments.

Apart from textual postings, other forms of digital media were also embedded in the NIE blog. Materials delivered via multimedia can easily capture and engage auditory and visual learners who are otherwise uneasy at textual information. The use of audiovisual tools gave the students a real life experience on events and happenings. In the traditional NIE scope, digital audiovisual references are very unlikely. Cloud computing services were used to embed the audiovisual materials. For example; PhotoCloud services such as Flickr was used to publish collection of photos on related issues in the blog. YouTube videos and audio files via podcasting technology were also embedded. Videos of discussion sessions in the classroom, captured through mobile phones were embedded and this gave students and opportunity to revisit their classroom learning. E-books were added for students' references.

Other websites with resources that are potentially useful for student learning were added as links. For example; to help refine students' vocabulary and to improve students' understandings on the contextual use of the learned word before writing their post, online dictionaries (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org> or <http://www.merriam-webster.com>) and vocabulary resources (<http://wordhippo.com>) were added as links respectively. Google Custom Search (GCS) tool was added to ease search while still in the blog environment. Directing learners to specific sites via search tool can save their time on searching for information. In addition to these, lesson content, homework and assignments were published for students' readings and response. Quizzes and tests that were created by using third party tools (eg. Wufoo) were added as links. Unlike, other forms of web components (web forums / conferencing) which may last only for a certain period, weblog has a relatively permanent presence and therefore over time the collection of learning objects can transform weblog into a viable resource centre.

Well, the amount of effort needed to get those components functioning may sound enormous for the technophobic. Some may manifest apprehensiveness towards blogging due to the technological knowledge needed. To enlighten those, creating weblog does not require complex development code or complicated HTML programming knowledge. It is a technology that most of us will have little trouble starting. Access edublogs.org (though *wordpress* is preferred for specific customization and personalization) and teachers can create their own blog as easy as ABC. As weblogs do not require plug-ins or high-bandwidth connections, it is easily accessible at any time.

Why Weblog for NIE: A Look at the Features of Weblog

Having gone through on how to channel NIE via weblog, lets' get into the essence of this reflective count; why weblog for NIE. The discussion is aligned along features as exhibited by a weblog namely; a space for reading and writing, collaboration of ideas, reflective thinking, archived information, equal opportunity to express ideas and sense of ownership. Figure 1 depicts the features of weblog in relation with goals of NIE.

NIE's main goal is enhancing creativity in both spoken and written English. The process of writing in blogs naturally nurtures writing skills in the target language. The interactive nature of the blog creates enthusiasm for writing. Going through this journey continuously certainly helped the pre-service teachers to improve their command of English. Kennedy (2003) reported that integrating web publications (blog) into English lessons allows students to give and receive feedback from real audience, mirroring the way professional writers use a workshop environment to hone their craft. When the pre-service students realised that their posting are viewed publically by real audience, they exerted extra effort to produce better writing.

This was an advantage compared to having the lecturer as the only audience. Research indicated that writing to a potentially infinite audience will make students to put more effort in their thinking and writing that eventually leads to noticeable improvement in language learning (Kennedy, 2003; Ward, 2004). One of NIE activities is developing students' confidence in public speaking. Writing in blogs is as good as speaking in front of a bigger group of audience minus being pulled down by the fear of being teased at. Having instant audiences for posting can help students develop social skills. When the pre-

service teachers posted comments on a chosen topic and reciprocated peers' comments, they learned to value and respect others' beliefs and opinions. This improved their interpersonal communication, making them more socially intelligent. Consistently research reported that reciprocal information interchange yields much psychological benefits for bloggers (Asako, 2007). In sum, the evolution of writing as afforded by weblog was great for raising the students' proficiency in the target language.

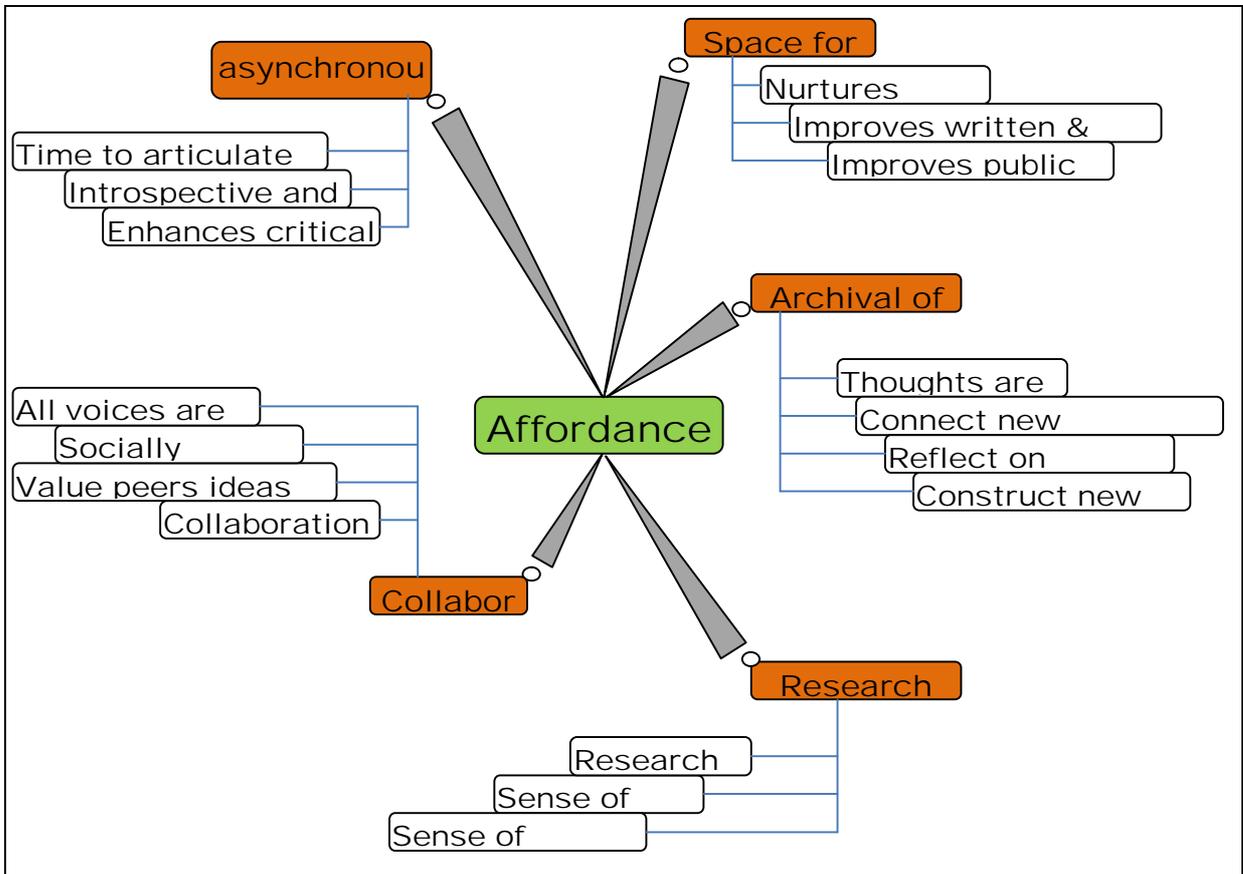


Figure 1 Affordance of weblog in relation to goals of NIE

One shortfall in the current practice of NIE is the lack of time for students to think deeply before presenting their arguments. Time constraint is a ubiquitous problem in any classroom settings. During regular classroom discussions, students' arguments may not reflect deep thinking because the limited time afforded often lead them to respond without much thought. Students need enough time to mentally 'chew over' new ideas in order to produce more critical responses. With weblogs, instructors can address and easily manage this shortcoming. Weblog affords asynchronous mode of communication. This feature of the weblog makes it an ideal tool for instructors to throw in critical thinking skills challenges to their students (Law et al, 2003). Students were not pressured to present their arguments at an instant but rather encouraged to be more introspective and analytical, giving them time and space to articulate more structured and thought out ideas (Tiene, 2000) before submitting their post. This promoted the art of deliberating and enhanced critical thinking among them, as envisaged by NIE. Of course, real time interaction has its own merits but in the context of NIE, delayed response as afforded by weblog built students' critical thinking ability.

Another feature of the weblog that contributes to learning improvement is the way entries are organized. Blog entries are organized in reverse chronological order and are archived. The distinct archival feature has been defined as having a niche for facilitating reflective activities (Hall & Davison, 2007). Posts are automatically archived and are easily searchable and retrievable. By going through the archived postings the pre-service teachers were able to connect new knowledge with the previous one. Unlike in regular classroom where the tendency to recall the substance of their earlier discussion is almost nil if not recorded in writings, the NIE blog allowed the pre-service teachers to keep track of their recorded thoughts, reflect on their previous thoughts, construct meanings, distinguish the relevant from the

irrelevant and eventually build a personal concept and understanding on the learned material. The weblog's way of capturing the learning process helped the students to reflect on their progress and gave them a better ability at identifying and solving their own shortcomings in the learning process. Consistently, Stilter and Phileo (2003) who explored blog applications in pre-service education program reported that weblogs are able to enhance the depth and breadth of students' reflectivity. Writing reflections using blogs has been found to impact students' writing skills and increase their critical thinking (Kajder & Bull, 2004; Wang, 2005).

Curricular pressures and tightly constrained class time often lead teachers to overlook some students during classroom interaction. Teachers tend to focus their classroom interaction on a minority of student who mostly consists of better performers, depriving the less shining an opportunity to voice their thoughts. The low ability students are more concerned about avoiding mistakes and embarrassment than about learning (Brophy, 1996). These students are usually contained by insecure feelings that further suppress their learning. This is quite disturbing as the ones who are most in need of engagement are least likely considered. All students regardless of their cognitive and psychological profile should be afforded equal opportunity to interact with the lesson content, their teacher and with their peers. In situations like this, weblog becomes a saviour, giving students a new perspective on the meaning of voice.

All students irrespective of their personal variables can equally participate in weblog discussions thus having equal voice. According to Anne (2007), as students explore their own learning and thinking, their distinctive voices emerge. Student voices are deemed necessary for learning conversations. The NIE blog gave the pre-service teachers opportunity to comfortably record their thoughts without feeling the pressure of speaking in front of class. Mistakes and errors in writing, if any, done by these students, only reflected their real progress and were treated as learning process. The lecturer while playing a managerial role, posted mentoring advice that further motivated the teachers and built a sense of confidence in their ability. Unlike in regular NIE scope, there are occasions where the instructor may not have even heard from the lower ability group of students in the classroom.

Research culture is necessary for knowledge enhancement and weblog has provision to inculcate this among students. In addition to engaging in discussion and collaboration of ideas on a posted issue in the NIE blog, the pre-service teachers were encouraged to create their own weblog in which they choose and write about something that interests them. Anne (2007) stated that blogging leads students away from finding what the teacher wants in terms of answer and pursue along what they want to learn. According to Ferdig and Trammel (2004), writing regularly on a preferred topic, over time can help students develop into a subject expert. The pre-service teachers were encouraged to write on multidisciplinary subjects of interest (eg. moral studies, art and drawing, language, social studies, mathematics, science, music and etc). In doing so, they were encouraged to search for relevant information, analyse and generate new ideas and conclusions before publishing. Also, when the students created their own weblog, they developed a sense of ownership to their blogs. Managing their own weblog gave them a feeling of control and a sense of responsibility to their writing. Research indicates that having freedom to control allows students to explore beyond the norm and take more responsibility in their writing (Wang & Cheung, 2003). Blogging in their preferred topic, externalizing their thoughts through writing and visual representation in an ongoing manner certainly helped to develop their research skills and subsequently raised their proficiency in the target language.

Recommendation

Teachers need to learn new skills and strategies in using the continuously changing technologies throughout their curriculum. Curriculum for teacher education program should be devised in such a way that the delivery of instruction using technology can be replicated by student teachers later upon graduation. Instructional practices by lectures during preparation program can be copied by the trainee teachers during their practicum sessions. Consistently, Dexter and Reidel (2008) proposed for the design and delivery of instruction within teacher education program to give the pre-service teachers opportunity to learn how to operate and teach with technology and set expectations that students demonstrate their integration abilities during internship and practicum sessions.

Conclusion

With social networking media rapidly changing the way students communicate and interact, NIE via weblog is certainly highly viable. Newspaper channelled through weblog potentially helped to advance the benefits of NIE. The pre service teachers, interacting and collaborating in the NIE blog demonstrated improved ability to speak, write and think excellently in English. Creating and managing their own blog helped them to hone research skills, exhibiting enhanced problem solving and critical thinking ability. Simultaneously, the use of the NIE blog in the preparation program helped the teachers to explore ways and means of delivering instruction using technology. The pre-service teachers demonstrated sound knowledge in exploiting the pedagogical affordances of weblogs to create new learning experiences.

To conclude, NIE channelled through weblog can extend and expand students' communication horizon, allowing them to interact virtually to a larger and distributed group of readers. Students' perspectives can be stretched and meanings can be construed, building better critical thinking ability. When, all is said and done, one should realise that technology, independently may not bring changes to our teaching and learning practices. Pragmatic instructors and pro active students are essential to spell out the success of weblog as a vehicle to advance the benefits of NIE.

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