



Friendship, high adventure, and a crown: A virtual journey of hope in Web 2.0

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Tools of Web 2.0 such as blogs are now shaping the way in which neomillennials wish to engage in sharing and learning. Out of a resolve to not let infirmity, lack of finances, resources, or geographic remoteness get in the way of achieving a shared goal, the undertaking of a 'high adventure' in the form of a virtual walk grew written by a group of contributors. Through additional Web 2.0 social-sharing sites such as *YouTube*, and a growing community of global supporters met along the journey, a blog entitled *Beauty of the journey* (2008-2009) became a metaphor for hope. Viewed as a practical example of connectivist theory, the blog incorporated four facets for engagement in a virtual learning environment: project-based learning, collaboration, informal learning, and the addition of tangible artefacts to enhance the sensory experience to enhance the real within the virtual environment.

Keywords: blogs, virtual learning, project-based learning, collaboration, informal learning, tangible artefacts

Introduction

In her jubilee year, a gifted and passionate educator, and mentor to many, took to wearing a crown. When anyone questioned her, she told them that in this 50th year of her life, she would live like a queen. The crown was worn when teaching, running errands, or even cleaning. In late 2008, tests revealed that this dynamic jubilarian had a rare and inoperable cancer. We had long dreamed of taking a journey together when family and finances permitted. Many hours had been spent planning with our guide by Wainwright (1973, 2003) to walk Britain's *Coast to Coast Path* from St. Bees on the Irish Sea in Cumbria on the west coast to Robin Hood's Bay on the North Sea in Yorkshire on the east coast.

Out of a resolve to not let infirmity, lack of finances, resources, or our geographic remoteness from each other get in the way of achieving our goal, the undertaking of a 'high adventure' in the form of a virtual walk grew. Through a blog spot entitled *Beauty of the journey* (2008-2009), additional Web 2.0 social-sharing sites such as *YouTube*, and a growing community of global supporters met along the journey, this became a metaphor of hope. While a site of informal learning, the blog attracted the attention of colleagues who saw the possibilities for a learner-centric experience within formal education.

Blogs: An opportunity for authentic learning

Beldarrain (2006, p.140) has argued that the second-generation web-tools such as blogs, wikis and podcasts, can provide engaging environments for learning. Straddling "multiple real and virtual communities independent of physical, geographic, institutional and organisational boundaries" (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008, p.641), these web-tools are useful in overcoming such issues as social isolation and geographical remoteness (Boulos et al., 2006, p.3), illness and disabilities, and lack of finances - all faced at the commencement of our virtual journey.

Blogs (web logs) emerged initially as an online electronic diarised form of personal writing, or "online personal journals" (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004, n.p.), and tended to be predominantly text-based as evidenced through such definitions of blogs as "[a] collection of writings...published and accessed via the Internet" (Beldarrain, 2006, p.140). Yet with the continued development of Web 2.0 tools and the rise in

popularity of other social sharing sites, blogs have become much more than 'a collection of writings'. They are often visually-rich and contain embedded multimedia or hyperlinks to other sites. Thus blogs can be written by an individual, or by a group of contributors, as was the case with *Beauty of the journey*. Valenza (2006) suggests that blogs are reflections of the perspectives and personalities of their creators.

Engagement theory (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1999) helps to explain some of the magnetism towards blogs. Engagement theory emphasises the benefits of project-based learning, collaboration, and non-academic interactions to foster authentic learning. In addition, the author also adds tangible artefacts to virtual learning spaces for the purposes of engagement.

Engagement involves project-based learning

Engagement in learning relates to tying the task to a real goal. Project-based learning can be considered as "embedding learning in authentic tasks located within communities of practice" (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008, p.642). Project-based learning via blogs is the "co-constructing of knowledge around a common topic" (Boulos et al., 2006, p.2), problem or task.

The project for this blog was researching aspects of the trek of Britain's *Coast to Coast Path* down to the finest detail. Hyperlinks were used to add greater detail and supportive information. Blood (2002) suggests that the additions of hyperlinks stretch the blog out into cyberspace to bring in related items for the blog's audience. For example, a *YouTube* video was embedded of those walking the start of the *Coast to Coast* around St. Bees Head to enrich the experience. It added sounds and movement to the growing collection of written details, *Google Earth* information, and photographs relating to the specific segment of the walk, sourced through such applications as *Flickr* and via contributed photographs.

Engagement involves collaboration

Collaboration is one of the key features of social spaces in Web 2.0. Ridgway (2007) lists a number of aspects that define collaborative learning networks. These include: they are always connected; there is a democratisation of ownership and control; knowledge derives from networks; moves towards partnership and collaboration; the boundaries between learning, work, and leisure get blurred; and learning occurs everywhere. All these attributes were experienced with the blogging environment. McLoughlin and Lee (2008, p.649) write that the social software tools of Web 2.0 "enable networking, socialisation, communication and engagement with communities of learning". To this I would add, these environments allow the freedom of exploration, yet ground the traveller to a pivot point, averting the problematic of getting lost in cyberspace.

In the era of Web 2.0, blogging has often morphed into a collaborative affair. Collaboration, argues Beldarrain (2006, p.150), fosters connectiveness among members of the social community. While the blog began as a co-written affair between two active authors, collaboration for the trip grew quickly beyond two friends. A number of different blogsites became resources for the virtual journey, as did commercial companies, and local business and industry. Expertise on the route, local geography, history and climate, and technical aspects about the uploading of information was shared sent to us through emails, videos, digital and scanned photos. Additionally, notes of encouragement were frequently received. Being a 24/7 environment, my friend could access her virtual journey when able.

Great care was made to avoid copyright issues with the use of digital media. Images on the blog were those created by the authors, or those shared by others in the knowledge that they would be uploaded onto the *Beauty of the journey* blog. These images were attributed, and the contributors written in to the unfolding and unscripted adventure as if they were met along the path on a physical journey.

Engagement involves non-academic (informal) learning

Valenza (2006, p.2) argues that true blogs are internally motivated and "require audience and action", as opposed to teacher-assigned blogging "that is not really blogging because the true audience for a classroom blog is really the audience of one, the teacher". This leads to the entrance of more informal approaches – non-academic approaches – to blogs so that authentic learning may take place. Non-academic learning is often referred to as informal learning. Australia's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations defines informal education as "the acquisition of knowledge and skills through experience, reading, [and] social contact" (DEEWR, 2008). 'Informal' learning takes place in a wide range of online environments, such as through blogger.com and other popular blogging sites. Valenza (2006, p.2) argues that part of the engaging value of blogs as a learner-centred space is that they

contain a casual nature of communication and free-form writing genre that is characteristic of informal learning environments.

Adding tangible artefacts to virtual learning for engagement

In addition to the virtual aspects of the blog which involve the senses of sight, and sometimes sound, other sensory experiences as touch (with the exception of touch of the computer keyboard, unless a haptics component is involved), taste and smell are usually not activated. Previously Halagao (2004) has expressed the benefits of adding the exploration of artefacts to a multicultural student cohort comprising online distance learners for transforming passive learning into engagement. There is much that can take blogs from beyond a cognitive 'read', 'reflect', 'reformulate', and 'respond' experience through the addition of sensory artefacts.

Tangible artefacts were added to the blog to make the journey more realistic and to help ground the virtual walker. Due to the geographical distance between the co-contributors, these artefacts were sent via mail or delivered in person, and were linked with key aspects or sensory moments of the journey. For example, a tradition on the walk is to pick up a pebble from the ocean at the commencement of the walk, and drop it into the ocean on the other side of Britain at the completion of a walk. A pebble was collected as a tangible artefact that could be held. A teashop had its menu online: this was downloaded, printed, and a sample made to taste and smell. These examples and more helped to enculturate the virtual trekkers. While these enhanced the experience of an informal learning journey, they can easily be applied to a formal learning environment.

Connectivism and blogs

Connectivism is a learning theory that explains the processes occurring in blogs such as *Beauty of the journey*. According to Siemens (2004, n.p.), connectivism "recognize[s] both the impact of new learning tools and the environmental changes in what it means to learn" in the era of digital technology. Learning, according to a connectivist standpoint, is "actionable knowledge" which "is focused on connecting specialized information sets, and the connections that enable us to learn more are important than our current state of knowing" (ibid). For Siemens (ibid), nodes ("fields, ideas, communities") are an important part of these connections, and these may be tangible or intangible (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008, p.646).

Conclusion

As an example of a Web 2.0 tool, blogs may be used as learner-centric spaces fostering engagement through project-based learning, collaboration, and informal learning. With the addition of tangible artefacts to tie the real with the virtual, blogs can be taken to a new level. This poster details the collaborative blogging of a virtual walk which involved all these aspects, exemplifying connectivist theory. This virtual journey of "friendship, high adventure, and a crown" (Van Dyke, 2005, n.p.) paralleled another being played out in real life: a journey through terminal illness.

Dedication

This is dedicated to the life of my friend, Kathleen (Kathy) Flynn (12 August 1957 - 1 June 2009), a talented and passionate educator. She inspired students and colleagues alike, and is missed.

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