

Educational uses of wiki's and blogs

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Summary: three different software types were used to support an in-person class; threaded discussion, wiki, and blog. Each is defined and use described. Observations include the need for concentrated use in one software system but the promise of each in it's own manner.

- This paper is an examination of the use of 'new' tools in teaching a blended online/non-line course in a seminar examining design theory. While much of the course work was done in person and via a 'traditional' threaded discussion group, the innovative features were the use of 'social software'; that is wikis and blogs to encourage and develop discussion on the various topics in the course. Examples from all three software main software methods [threaded discussion, wiki, and blog] will be presented and available for examination.

- **Threaded discussion group.** I have been the instructor for six courses solely by threaded discussion over the past year and have substantial interest in this medium for communication. Perhaps the best argument for inclusion of this pedagogical method in a discussion course is this simple aphorism: participation is attendance. Only through written commentary can each student be counted as attending the class session.

I began with the intent that my traditionally presented course would benefit from a change of venue; it was a course based on examining electronic design, and therefore it should be taught using electronic media. The first component to be added to the traditional seminar course was an extensive online threaded discussion group presented through WebCT/Vista 2.0. Most course management systems [such as Blackboard, Learn2Learn, and WebCT] have available a threaded discussion feature, and within our College at the University of Minnesota, separate software for a threaded discussion was also available. I chose to use the newest version of WebCT even though it was only available as a beta test; the new features of the software made it most worthwhile.

For eleven weeks out of sixteen, the first class meeting of the week was held in this online environment. In a fairly traditional use of the software, two or three questions were posed to the students, with postings and responses required over the week before class. Students participated in writing the questions, and helped lead the in-person discussion each week. It may be viewed at <http://hokanson.che.umn.edu/5399/alldiscussion.html>. [Archived version]

- **Wikis** are a new internet based software type. Wiki comes from the Hawaiian word for quick. The most well known wiki [wikipedia] is at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page an online dictionary that is written and edited by participant-users. Writings and ideas are posted to a wiki site and other registered users build upon and share information. Over use, the knowledge embodied in a wiki site develops to a substantial level, supporting learning and exploration for knowledge. As with many online activities, the value comes from participation, not from mere reading.

I used a piece of free software available from <http://courseforum.com> that runs in the background on my office computer. This software, while exceptionally easy to install and run did not include many of the fuller features available from more developed wiki software such as twiki, available at <http://www.twiki.org> or pmwiki from <http://www.pmwiki.org>. See also <http://wiki.etdguide.org/> for a more educationally oriented site. Clearly, wiki's are best undertaken with the support of your technical staff or with such ability in your own hands and the operation of your own server. I'm using a Mac G4 acting as a server in my own office at the University, but our College tech support has expressed interest and support in the concept of wikis.

One exceptional example of wiki's in education has been developed by MC Morgan at Bemidji State: http://199.17.178.148/~morgan/cgi-bin/blogsAndWiki.pl?Entry_Point and http://biro.bemidjistate.edu/cgi/notebook.pl?Morgan's_Notebook.

Students in my course were given a series of small tasks such as developing definitions or making informal proposals for paper topics using the wiki. Substantial editing and organizational effort was needed in the use of the wiki compared to the level of input. Editing and authorship after editing was unclear with this type of the software. My site can be accessed through <http://hokanson.che.umn.edu:3455/> using a username of "guest" and a password of "isanti04". [deleted from the online posting of this paper]. Here you will see a series of writings that are non-linear, non-sequential and only roughly organized.

- **Blogs** are personalized web-logs that record and display writings of the owner. Comments can be made to another's blog and links to the blog can also be made. A great leap of effectiveness comes with the use of a *aggregator*, a collector of selected blogs, tailored for the individual user or use. My blog, not well updated, links to all the student pages and is at <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~bhokanso/blogg.html>.

Blogs are relatively popular form of online journaling and communication. In our use, the blog site, <http://www.blogger.com> allowed easy and free set up for each student. As each student had 20 megs of free storage available at the University of Minnesota, storage of the final written material was available and no additional arrangements with other parties was needed. Training was presented in class on use of blogs and to work through initial log on and posting efforts.

Students were often asked to reflect on the previous class session in their blog, hopefully extending and enhancing the learning activity. The written group "midterm" of the class was conducted on blogs.

There are a wide range of blog support sites available, some free and some paying. One additional site that was found after setting up at blogger.com is <http://www.livejournal.com>. Many blog sites allow groups to have a communal blog, sharing the authoring and editing privileges.

- **Annotated PDFs** were also used as a means to encourage discussion about a specific article. In this case, an article in PDF format was emailed between students and commented on through the use of Adobe Acrobat. Drawing from the Memex of Vannevar Bush, the goal was to build upon the written comments of each individual in turn. The example is available at <http://hokanson.che.umn.edu/5399/NewEconomyFinal.pdf>.

- **Observations:** There are two principal observations. First, that the use of multiple systems was not as beneficial as would be hoped. As with the adoption of any educational technology, there were transactional costs. All of us had to learn the software, and learn what the software did well. Most students are accustomed to working in a traditional structure, lecture or studio, lab or seminar. Given new forms of interaction, some time and effort was lost in early use. I would recommend that only one system be used, and that that concentration would allow skilled use by the instructor: concentrating on a discussion seminar also required the development of certain skill and a level of instructor concentration and effort.

Second, there was a perception among the students that the 'work of the class' was never done; that the class was constant concern. With an in-person, face-to-face class, the student comes to class, participates, and then leaves; time is segregated and compartmentalized. The online course, in this case with digital materials due Friday, Sunday, and Monday, required constant participation.

Specifically, each of the software types holds much promise. Wikis with full technical capability for editing and tracking of edits are very well suited for case studies or problem based learning. They integrate the positive aspects of collaboration and active learning. The blogs also support those efforts, and while they are easier to implement, the strict format and linear quality applies limits to some learning activities. Threaded discussion groups work very well in a question and response type of format, but are more controlled and teacher oriented.