

Blogging to Disseminate Best Online Learning Practices and Technology News

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Introduction

Participants will leave the session with an understanding of web log (blog) technology and potential, including RSS syndication. They will examine the use of this technology to disseminate best practices and emerging trends via the Online Learning Update and other news blogs. They will be able to further filter these items to share the most relevant ones with their colleagues. Participants also will be able to create their own blogs through which they can effectively disseminate best practices and new concepts to their colleagues. Participants will be able to aggregate RSS feeds from multiple sources to more completely track developments in their areas of interest. Those attending will be pointed to relevant blogs, free blog-creation software, and RSS aggregators. Using the tools, techniques and links presented in the session, participants will be able to join into the emerging “blogosphere” to help establish effective practices in the use of this new technology.

The Challenge of Tracking Best Practices and Emerging Trends in Online Learning

The technologies and applications in the field of distance teaching and learning continue to rapidly proliferate and evolve. Best practices in employing these technologies are changing just as rapidly. Faculty members are far too busy with discipline-area research and teaching to keep up with the changes in this evolving area of best practices in online and distance learning. Likewise, tech support staff members are overwhelmed with keeping up with installing and maintaining the technology infrastructure, leaving them little time to follow the current developments in the educational technology field. We are confronted with the challenge of finding ways to efficiently collect and disseminate relevant information to faculty and staff on a daily basis.

Blogs as an Information Dissemination Tool

With roots dating back to 1997 and 1998, web logs have been around for roughly half of the history of the World Wide Web. Simply put, they are web pages that are organized according to the date and time that the information was posted. Most blogs are presented in reverse-chronological order of postings. Most are also updated on at least a weekly basis. The term “blog” seems to have originated in a compression of the words “web” and “log.” The Oxford English Dictionary is even considering including the term “blog” (<http://www.oed.com/public/news/0206.htm#naeu>).

Rebecca Blood, editor of the popular “Rebecca’s Pocket” blog chronicles the history of the blog in an essay on Web Logs a History and Perspective (http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html). Blood points out that the original blogs were “link-driven sites” that served a valuable filtering function for readers. As the blogging process became automated through the release of multiple publishing tools, a wider variety of blogs emerged spanning the range of text and image, voice and music, personal reflection and hyperbole.

Yet, the original function of blogs remains viable. Countless examples of this use of blogging technologies exist across an array of disciplines and fields. Because many of these blogs are link-driven and updated frequently, search engines are currently giving blogs favorable rankings. And, it is the focus

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and The Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning

<http://www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/>

of this session to explore the potential to use web logs in just this way to disseminate best practices, news and associated information to a campus or a broader audience.

Blog Editing and Publishing Tools

A growing variety of blog development and publishing tools are available. None is better known than the online service of <http://blogger.com> (recently purchased by Google). Blogger self-reports that more than one million blogs have been published using their tool. The blogger approach is a wholly online editor with auto-FTP function. Users edit, compose and submit their updates using the online tool. Other blogging tools use desktop-based editors that reside on the user's computer rather than online. Postings are composed off-line prior to submission. Radio UserLand (<http://radio.userland.com/>) is a popular example of this approach to publishing blogs. Yet another approach is one that generates a web site that includes a blog among the pages. The <http://www.bloki.com> community uses this approach to offer nearly instant set-up and publishing of a blog. As with Blogger, all pages, including the blog, are created using an online editor.

The Online Learning Update

As director of the Office of Technology-Enhanced Learning at the University of Illinois at Springfield, one of my tasks is to track the technologies, best practices, and trends in online learning. This is essential to planning and implementing an effective online learning program in the evolving competitive environment of online higher education. Each morning, beginning at 5:30 a.m., I scour a rather lengthy list of online journals and news search engines for articles that may be relevant in our field. This helps keep me up-to-date. Yet, just tracking the information is not enough, it must be shared with our administrators, faculty and staff members who are engaged in setting related policies and launching online learning courses and programs.

For a number of years, I used a listserv as the primary dissemination tool. Those on the list would receive multiple emails with links to articles seven days a week. But, over time, I found that in the growing crush of email, many of the subscribers never got around to opening the messages. Only the most hardy subscribers were disciplined enough to read each daily email. I had not enabled the awkward archiving function, so once messages had been deleted, all record was lost. Subscribers would come up to me (or email me), noting that I had "sent something out about a year ago" and asking if I would re-send the item. With each request, I would have to perform a rather long search process.

Having previously experimented with blogging as part of my graduate seminar on New Technologies in the Electronic Media, I decided to apply the technology to this challenge. The blog provided online archives, so no posting would be lost over time. I added a search feature so that users could search the mounting list of links by key words. Eventually, I began tracking page views through <http://www.sitemeter.com>.

As the hundreds of blog postings grew into thousands, I discovered some interesting patterns emerged. More and more associations, colleges and universities began linking to the blog to share the postings with their faculty and staff (<http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&q=link%3Ahttp%3A%2F%2Fpeople.uis.edu%2Frschr1%2Fonlinelearning%2Fblogger.html>). The search engine ranking of the blog rose significantly (as of this writing if one enters the words "online learning" into the Google search engine, the blog appears as the eighth unpaid listing). And, using the site meter tool, I have been able to determine that the blog is accessed daily from most of the time zones spanning the populated world (<http://www.sitemeter.com/default.asp?action=stats&site=s10learning&report=30>). The blog is listed as

an effective practice at Educause (http://www.educause.edu/ep/ep_item_detail.asp?ITEM_ID=120) and the Sloan Consortium (http://www.sloan-c.org/effective/details4.asp?FS_ID=11).

The Techno-News Blog

My first postings on the Techno-News blog came in February of 2000. I was sharing the emerging technology for discussion purposes in my graduate seminar in new technologies. It was not until the following year that I began using the blog to disseminate information related to higher education technologies in earnest. The process is the same as described above for the Online Learning Update, but the focus is on new technologies and trends that affect higher education. I have not tracked the visitors to this blog as I have for the Online Learning Update, but I have found a nearly equal number of remote sites linking to the blog.

The Educational Technology Blog

Most recently, in the spring of 2002, I began blogging items of interest to technology coordinators in K/12 schools. The intent was to provide resources and to track developments in the application of technology to elementary and secondary education. With no fanfare and little promotion, the blog has been discovered by thousands of educators and is now linked to from hundreds of sites (<http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&lr=&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&q=link%3Ahttp%3A%2F%2Fpeople.uis.edu%2Frschr1%2Fet%2Fblogger.html&btnG=Google+Search>). I am currently experimenting with the Squawkbbox comment feature (<http://www.squawkbbox.tv>) to enable easy feedback and on-going discussions on the blog.

Rich Site Summary (RSS)

No discussion of blogging would be complete without mention of Rich Site Summary, or as it is more commonly known, RSS. The technology has been around since the early days of Netscape when it was used to create custom news feeds for those visiting the Netscape site. This is a method of syndicating the distribution of the contents of web pages, such as blogs. RSS is generated in xml format so that it can easily be integrated into other web pages and applications. Aggregators serve to collect the latest RSS content into a convenient format. News Is Free (<http://www.newsisfree.com>) provides an online aggregation of RSS. One can create a customized list of RSS feeds that can be visited online or emailed, for example <http://people.uis.edu/rschr1/blogboxnews.htm>.

Disseminating, Facilitating and Encouraging Best Practices through Blogs

The use of blogs and associated RSS technologies offer an opportunity to share local, national and international technologies and practices to an audience that can be as local as a department, or as broad as the world. The many varieties and features of blogs make them most appealing for the application of disseminating the evolving best practices in our rapidly changing field.

Blogs, of course, can reside behind password authentication to limit their viewing. And nearly all blog editors offer “team authoring” options so that groups of participants may submit items to the blogs. Two-way communication through the use of “comment” features expands the use of blogs into a more robust communication tool. The favorable ranking of blogs in popular search engines further extends their reach. And, the RSS features built into many blog publishing software packages serves to provide ready access on the desktop, through email, or via the Web.

I encourage all in our field to take full advantage of the blogs I have described to better inform themselves and others. And, I encourage all to take the opportunity to experiment with creating their own blogs to meet their campus technology information dissemination needs.

Biographical Sketch

Ray Schroeder is Professor Emeritus of Communication, Director of the Office of Technology-Enhanced Learning at the University of Illinois at Springfield and Faculty Associate at the University of Illinois Online. He has taught more than a dozen online classes. As Director of Technology-Enhanced Learning he leads the campus online initiative. As Faculty Associate, Schroeder is engaged in the formation of online learning policy for the University of Illinois. He is a Sloan Consortium Distinguished Scholar in Online Learning and the recipient of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Most Outstanding Achievement in ALN by an Individual Award 2002.

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