WAIKATO JOURNAL OF EDUCATION
TE HAUTAKA MĀTAURANGA O WAIKATO

Waikato Journal Of Education

Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

Volume 16, Issue 1: 2011

Special Section: e-Learning

General Section

Issues and Challenges of Using Web Blogs as a Medium for Research Communication

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Abstract

The advent of web-based technology has initially allowed millions of users to get hold of immense information and to communicate worldwide. In the field of education, for example, web-based technology has brought about significant influence in terms of teaching and learning approaches (Supyan, 2003; Supyan & Roziana, 2001; Zuwati, 2006). In fact, web-based technology is also now popular as a medium for data collection among researchers (C. Cooper, Cooper, Del Junco, Shipp, Whitworth, & Cooper, 2006; White, Carey, & Dailey, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to report on both issues that need addressing, and challenges in using web blogs as a medium for communicating with respondents for research purposes. The issues and challenges discussed in the paper were based on the researchers' own experience in conducting data collection using a qualitative approach through web blog discussions. With the socio-cultural approach in view, some recommendations are also included as guidelines for those planning to use such web-based technology as a medium of data collection in research.

Keywords

Computer, internet, online, technology, web-based technology, web blog discussions, issues, challenges, data collection, socio-cultural approach, research

Introduction

Computer and internet technology has brought about tremendous changes in life and everyday practice. In educational settings, for example, teaching is no longer confined within four walls and obviously has gone far beyond the chalk and talk approach. From

blackboard teaching we have now moved to using the SMART board, the interactive whiteboard, online teaching and interacting. In keeping up-to-date, teachers or educators are not only required to master or become well versed in their teaching methods and content areas but also "to learn how to make the most effective instructional use of new technologies" (Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007, p. 575). This has somehow shown the technological effect on pedagogy. Another obvious influence of computer and internet technology in teaching is the medium for interaction or communication. Teacher-student and student-student interactions and communication have further extended outside the classroom setting. Moving from educational settings, apparently these technological advances have also triggered and promoted the use of computer and internet technologies for research purposes (Kanzaki, Makimoto, Takemura, & Ashida, 2004). The use of the internet for data collection is quite popular, especially for quantitative research. According to Lefever, Dal, and Matthiasdottir (2007), "online data collection in academic research might be replacing paper-and-pencil surveys or questionnaires in the near future" (p. 574). Online data collection is used widely in quantitative research (Tilghman & Johnson, 2006), while according to Kanzaki et al. (2004), "the use of internet for qualitative research is limited" (p. 229). Nonetheless, the use of online data collection for qualitative data is gradually becoming prevalent, as we could find more researchers have started using online or web-based technology as a tool for their research data collection.

Recently we notice that more researchers, who conduct qualitative research, integrate internet technology in their research design. Horvarth, Beadnell, and Bowen (2007), in their research on sexual behaviours among individuals at risk for HIV, for instance, have included the use of web diaries as part of their data collection method and found that "web diaries appear to be a promising tool for collecting information on health behaviors" (p. 537). Interviews, which are normally conducted face-to-face, can now be done virtually in a one-to-one approach or a focus group. Apparently, more and more researchers have now started to make full use of computer and internet technologies by means of which both quantitative and qualitative data are collected.

In this paper, we discuss the use of online technology, specifically the use of web blogs, as a tool for qualitative data collection.

Web blogs: An overview

A web blog, usually known as a "blog", is a website that allows individuals to create and log journal entries or experiences which can be shared by anyone the writer gives access to. According to August (2005), blogs are "essentially online diaries with dated entries, displayed in reverse chronological order on a simple website" (p. 25). A blog is also claimed to be a "collaborative space" for the worldwide community. The most common free blog websites are Wordpress, Thoughts.com and Blogger.

Wordpress, Thoughts.com and Blogger provide a free platform for individuals to create their own blog site with several useful features. Among the features are

- providing ready-made templates which can be useful for beginners to start setting-up their blog;
- allowing writers to manage access control, which enables them to control and select their readers—with this feature, writers are able to determine or invite their prospective readers;

- providing a column where readers could share their thoughts or comments on the related issues posted on the blog;
- allowing writers to modify the ready-made template by changing the colours, inserting pictures or photos, changing the fonts and the font sizes;
- allowing writers to immediately send email to their selected readers or other bloggers about their new posts; and
- allowing writers to actually send their posts to their blog via email or via their mobiles.

With these features, the web blog has served more than a social communication between writers and the readers. It has also succeeded as a useful tool for qualitative data gathering (Atkins, 2009). Due to the technological advancements, web blog technology is said to offer a number of potentials for qualitative researchers (August, 2005). In fact, with the opportunity to restrict access, where content can only be viewed by nominated participants, web blogs are surely a feasible tool for data collection, especially for qualitative researchers.

Web blogs as a tool for qualitative data collection: Research background

This research involved two Malaysian English as Second Language (ESL) educators and 48 of their writing students. We conducted our research to explore the educators' perspectives on the use of formative assessment in enhancing ESL undergraduates' communicative writing competency at the tertiary level in a higher-learning institution in Malaysia. We carried out the study in two tiers whereby the first tier explored current practices and perspectives on the ESL writing assessment. Related issues arising from reviewing the current practices were identified and this led to the second tier of the study whereby alternatives were constructed and designed as a collaboratively developed intervention. This second tier of the study involved action research that focused on the implementation, evaluation, and modification (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) of the collaboratively developed intervention. This research is a collaborative action research project between the researchers and two selected ESL educators who are teaching writing to ESL undergraduates. Collaborative action research project is the term used when a researcher conducts an action research project with individual teachers, a small group of teachers, or schoolwide (Gordon, 2008). Gordon (2008) indicates that collaborative action research "can empower educators, transform school cultures, and most importantly, dramatically improves student learning" (p. 1). Hence, a collaborative action research approach was adopted due to the fact that it encourages the sharing of problems and ideas between researchers and educators.

What we are going to share in this paper is our experience of the first tier of the study, which involved qualitative data collection via a web blog. At this level, data were collected in the form of interviews with two selected ESL educators and document analysis. We selected a web blog as the platform to conduct our interviews for several reasons, the main reason being that researchers and research participants were geographically divided: the researchers were in New Zealand, whereas the two selected educators (E1 and E2) were in Malaysia. In addition, we believed that by using the web blog we could promote flexibility in the discussion and accommodate the participants' time and space. We also decided to conduct the interviews with E1 and E2 on a web

blog believing that the discussions would be more informal, which could reduce any anxiety while at the same time encouraging us to discuss and share related ideas freely (Pena-Shaff, Altman, & Stephenson, 2005). Another reason for choosing the web blog medium for discussions and interviews was to develop flexible collaborative work in which each of us could respond, view and reflect on the ideas given by everyone involved in the interview sessions and discussions at any time. In the field of teaching, the use of web blogs is acknowledged as a tool for facilitating learning and discussions (Betts & Glogoff, 2004) and has been shown to increase interactivity and exchange of information (Williams & Jacob, 2004). Hence, blogs are seen as an advantage that can be expanded from teaching and learning contexts towards research development and processes.

The researchers monitored the web blogs (one for each participant) and the ESL educator participants were made aware that they needed to log into the discussions at least once a day. In protecting the participants' anonymity, the blog was made available only to the researchers and E1 and E2. For the purpose of this research, two web blogs were created, one for E1 and the other for E2, so as to ensure that the responses given by E1 were not influenced by E2's responses, and vice versa. These blogs were also set for invited readers, which meant only the researchers could determine who could view the blog and who would be invited to join the blog.

Advantages of using web blogs for qualitative research

Qualitative data collection through web blog is relatively new and is little explored among educational researchers as opposed to online surveys. We found that web blogs were convenient and practical to use as a medium for qualitative data collection. Availability of more than one free web blog platform meant we had the ability to choose which worked best, at the same time saving the costs of travelling and printing. Web blogs as an online qualitative research tool offer several advantages like many other online technologies such as email and web-based surveys. They are practical and offer flexibility in qualitative data gathering.

Balden and Wittman (2009) point to two of the common advantages of online qualitative data collection. First is the ability to connect with respondents from different geographical areas, which reduces the need to travel, and second is the ability to make respondents more at ease, as the environment is less intimidating. We agree with this claim as we found that the respondents were very comfortable and open in discussing the relevant topics through the web blog. We also found that interviews on the web blog created an informal setting, thus reducing the level of anxiety and allowing respondents to write their thoughts and responses freely. Joinson (2001) also claims that the use of computer-mediated communication preserves the respondent's anonymity. As such, "interviewees feel less inhibited in a more anonymous virtual environment" (Evans, Elford, & Wiggins, 2008, p. 320).

Another advantage of web blogs is that they allow flexible, collaborative work between researchers and participants; the technology allows us to view, reflect, and respond at any time and duration since communication was done asynchronously. Web blogs also provided flexibility for respondents so the discussions could accommodate their time and space; participants could answer the interview questions whenever they were ready.

In relation to cultural differences, using a web blog as a medium for data collection minimises the issue of improper or culturally inappropriate gestures being used. This helped reduce the anxiety and self-conscious feelings of both the researchers and the participants. Presenting appropriate behaviour to accommodate different cultural perspectives can be quite significant when we are dealing with respondents from diverse cultures.

Issues and challenges in using web blog

The blog was fully developed on 2nd April 2008 and made accessible to E1 and E2 after consents were received by all required parties. As such, it was launched on Wednesday 7th May 2008, when we finally received consent from the Vice-Chancellor of the institution. Despite the advantages outlined above, there are some challenges and issues that are worth addressing.

First is the participants' technology literacy background. We experienced a delay in response from E1 and E2 because they were not sure of how to go into the blog even though a website address was given to each respondent. They seemed unfamiliar with the medium. We responded immediately with a guideline of how to join and access the web blog. As happens often in other research, sometimes what we planned did not turn out as it was supposed to. Two weeks after the blog was launched, E1 requested she be withdrawn from the research. Being inexperienced in the computer skills was the main reason for her withdrawal.

Since we were left with only E2 as our participant, we then had to search for another educator who would willingly participate in our research. With the help of the head of the department, we managed to find one and continued to identify her as E1. Having given her the information and the consent form, we then registered her name and invited her to join the web blog. As part of our selection process, we made sure that the new participant had the necessary computer and internet skills. Having to find and recruit another participant had taken a week of the allotted time for the interview session, not to mention that the participants had already taken two weeks to get into the blog. Unfamiliarity with the web blog technology delayed the interviewees' response to the web blog discussions. We, therefore, in relation to computer literacy and familiarity, have identified "time" as another issue.

A further issue that needs to be pointed out is "internet accessibility". We found this was also a factor that delayed responses and communication between the respondents and us. Our respondents had limited access to the internet as they could only access the web blog when they were at their workplace. Not only that, the quality of the internet connection also links to this internetaccessibility issue, whereby narrow bandwidth of internet connection reduces and disrupts the flow of communication. There were times where we had to wait a few days for the participants to respond due to the internet connection problem.

Kollock and Smith (1996) pointed out that one weakness of using web blogs or online interview collection is the absence of facial expressions and aural cues. In some studies, the importance of facial expressions and aural cues are quite major. However, our research required us to gather background and detailed information on how writing is taught and how assessment is exercised. Hence, facial expressions and aural cues were not significant. What was important was the content, as we were not investigating

communication strategies, and the questions that we put on the blog were direct questions. For example, we asked questions like "how are assessment *for* and *of* learning viewed?", "what do you think of your students' writing ability?", "have you used any of the assessment results or information for planning towards your teaching?" and "how do you use the assessment information in your planning for teaching?".

Recommendations

In using a web blog as a research communication tool, particularly to conduct interviews, we would like to suggest, based on our experience, that proper monitoring procedures are required to ensure that data collection could be completed within the timeframe set. On top of this, researchers should also consider their participants' backgrounds. This will help them in dealing with the socio-cultural issues, such as how to address each participant, what is the best way to ask questions and how to give prompts and reminders, so as to avoid being impolite. Also, to ensure anonymity, researchers should instruct participants to use pseudonyms and use a special email address just for blogging purposes. In using web blogs to conduct interviews, researchers also need to allow ample time for participants to respond to each question posted. This is to accommodate the time difference (if the respondents are geographically diverse) and to allow them to think and reflect on the addressed issues or topics.

Deciding on and rationalising how many questions at a time to post on the web blog are also important and should be looked into. In our research, we decided earlier to post one question at a time. Since we had five main questions and more than 10 sub-questions for each main interview question, we felt that it would be appropriate to ask a question at a time to prevent the respondents from being confused and demotivated to participate. Generally, researchers need to strategise the procedures in the way that suits their research and purpose.

In dealing with the issue of computer literacy, perhaps it would be good for a researcher to set certain criteria for selecting participants. If possible, researchers should provide step-by-step guidelines and procedures to the respondents on how to participate in the web blog discussions or interviews. As well as participants' computer literacy, researchers also need to confirm that there is internet facility available to our prospective participants.

Conclusion

Web blogs are a potential tool for qualitative data collection. They have been used widely in clinical and medical fields of research and are becoming popular in the social sciences as well. Just like many other data collection techniques, web blogs provide several advantages and challenges. However, depending on the research purpose and procedures, we believe that web blogs could assist in qualitative data collection, as they provide researchers with the opportunity to be flexible and at the same time create positive environments for research participants.

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