

A Modern Technology in the Leadership Classroom: Using B logs for Critical Thinking Development

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Abstract

Web-based resources are increasing both in number and conventionality. In particular, blogs have become a popular method for self-expression. Educators have been encouraged to utilize blogs in the classroom. This paper presents a model for effectively using blogs in the leadership classroom to enhance critical thinking capacity and provide leadership students with more effective reflection opportunities.

Introduction

New media provide prospects for leadership educators to utilize computer software and hardware to enhance classroom pedagogy. Educators' use of internet tools will enhance teaching and learning with a generation of students who are increasingly using the internet as a primary source of information (Gupta & Meglick, 2008). Leadership educators may find adaptation of pedagogy to meet this shift toward the internet to be a particularly useful and effective method for meeting the learning styles of today's students (Pittinsky, 2003). Proserpio and Gioia (2007) labeled today's student "V-Gen" or the virtual generation and argued that V-Gen students are far more skilled in the technology arena than their educators.

Internet resources continue to grow in both number and variation. Many classrooms in higher education use online classroom portals such as Blackboard or WebCT. Blogs, wikis, and podcasts have grown in popularity in recent years (Richardson, 2006). Blogs, originally known as Web Logs, are instantly updateable websites that allow the author or authors to publish personal thoughts and comments in the same manner as a personal journal or diary (Blood, 2002).

Scholars have commented on the integration of blogs into teaching and learning, developed specific strategies for utilizing blogs in the classroom, and have suggested using blogs for the dissemination of information from teacher to learner (Gupta & Meglich, 2008; Pittinsky, 2003; Richardson, 2006).

Moving beyond the discussion of the importance of modern technologies in the classroom, this application brief describes a specific framework by which blogs can effectively contribute to the educational experience in leadership education. A framework is presented with which educators can structure student blogs to enhance critical thinking capabilities of students and provide more effective reflection opportunities. Two pedagogical models were tested. One sample from students using simple guiding questions was used and another involved a sample from student blogs utilizing a more integrative reflection framework. Comparisons and contrasts are made between the two models for blogging and recommendations are discussed.

Blogs

The term blog is a shortened form of the term web log. A blog refers to a website where an author is able to publish information (i.e., text, pictures, and videos) electronically without the use of complex knowledge for website design. Unlike more typical websites, blogs are not static content and are frequently updated and encourage the response of readers (Richardson, 2006). Carroll (2003) argued that blogs add an element of democracy to the internet by allowing users to comment on information presented by others. Ferdig and Trammell (2004) suggested that blogs create an intellectual cyberspace with the ability to share and integrate knowledge. The ability to develop and maintain a blog has become increasingly uncomplicated and popular (Blood, 2002).

Leadership Education and Blogging

Reflection is a key component in the development of leadership capacity (Guthrie & King, 2004). The use of critical thinking skills provides an in-depth and forward thinking reflection process (Rudd, Baker & Hoover, 2000). Stedman (2009) argued that leadership classrooms should seek to develop the cognitive capabilities of students by enhancing critical thinking skills. Facione (1990) referred to critical thinking as “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment, which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations” (p. 2). Norris and Ennis (1989) suggested that critical thinking is “reasonable and reflective thinking that is focused upon deciding what to believe

or do” (p. 18). Huitt (1998) argued that the development of critical thinking capacity is a process and that students develop more thorough skills when critical thinking is linked to a specific domain of knowledge and an outcome is pursued. The development of critical thinking capacity allows for a more purposeful and effective reflection process in leadership development (Stedman, 2009).

Many organizational leaders publicly discuss decision-making processes and thoughts about their organization by keeping blogs. In an article titled, *If you want to lead, blog*, Sun Microsystems CEO, Jonathan Schwartz stated, “For executives, having a blog is not going to be a matter of choice, any more than using e-mail is today. If you’re not part of the conversation, others will speak on your behalf—and I’m not talking about your employees” (Schwartz, 2005, p. 30). For organizational leaders, blogs efficiently disseminate information, provide an opportunity to communicate directly with constituencies, and allow employees and customers to provide direct feedback and input (Fraser & Dutta, 2009). Students of leadership may benefit from the practice of developing insightful, informative, and appropriate blogs.

What?–So What?–Now What? Model

Guthrie and King (2004) urged that meaningful reflection activities be included in any leadership development experience. Watson (2001) stated that reflection activities allow for integration, awareness and engagement following developmental activities. Similarly, Van Velsor, Moxley, and Bunker (2004) contended that reflection creates self-awareness of individual development and should integrate facts, emotions and other situational components. Watson (2001) developed a model of reflection for the Northwest Service Academy (a component of the Americorps national service program) titled the What?–So What?–Now What? model. This tripartite model allows for a more thorough reflection process and encourages critical thinking based upon the experience.

Utilization of Watson’s (2001) model for reflection assists students in the development of critical thinking skills and moves beyond standard blogging practices of simply reporting facts and expressing opinion. Rudd, Baker, and Hoover (2000) argued that critical thinking must be taught to students because critical thinking involves the skills of reasoning, reflecting, introspection, assigning purpose, and offering solutions.

What? Many blogs follow common reporting guidelines and record the facts of events. The first component of the proposed model allows for this common practice. Watson’s (2001) model described the *What?* component as the objective report of the event. This section asks students to withhold judgment or

interpretation of the event and simply describe who, what, when, where, why, and how.

So What? The second component of this model encourages students to assign and interpret meanings and discuss the impact of the event. Students should describe their emotions and reactions. In addition, students should consider how their initial expectations were either met or not and discuss why this was the case. Students should also be encouraged to discuss whether the experience was enjoyable and worthwhile but, more importantly, describe why they came to such a conclusion.

Now What? The final component of this model encourages students to consider the broader implications of the event or experience. Students are encouraged to consider how their individual behaviors or reactions will change in the future based upon the experience. In addition, students should set realistic goals for improving leadership capabilities based upon the experience. Students should also reflect on how the experience impacts the community in which the event took place. Students might reflect upon how their reactions and behaviors have impacted others and consider how that impact may change those future behaviors and reactions.

Methods

This study was conducted during the fall 2007 and spring 2008 semesters at a large land grant institution. Participants were selected via their enrollment in a moderately sized introductory leadership course with a standard enrollment of 25 students. This particular course is required by students enrolled in a major, other majors within the land grant institution, and students seeking a minor. A total of 125 students enrolled in various sections of the course during the semesters in which data were collected. To ensure parsimony and standardization, one section of the course was utilized for this experiment in the fall 2007 semester and included 21 subjects and one section was included in the spring 2008 semester and included 24 subjects. In each semester, students participated in a 20-hour service-learning project outside of, and in addition, to the classroom requirement. Students from both semesters were assigned to write a series of leadership blogs to reflect upon their service-learning project and integrate concepts learned in the classroom with the experiences at the project site.

Students who took the class during the fall 2007 semester were simply required to write a blog and were prompted by questions provided by the instructor which referred to weekly topics. An example prompting question was, “What

experiences did you notice during your time at the service-learning project this week that would be considered active listening?”

Students who took the class during the spring 2008 semester were also required to write a series of blogs, but were specifically assigned to use the what?–so what?–now what? model in their writing. Similar prompting questions were utilized as with the previous semester, but were adjusted to incorporate the use of the model described above. An example prompting question was, “Using the what – so what – now what model, describe situations at the service project site where active listening was either utilized or could have been utilized more effectively.”

Results

The objective of this study was to analyze the use of a blogging model that provided an opportunity for students to enhance critical thinking capabilities versus a more unstructured approach to blogging which allowed students to simply respond to prompting questions provided by the instructor.

Blogs were graded on a 10-point scale with 10 being perfect and 1 representing poor. Student scores represented the average of the two grades given by the teaching assistants. Students in the spring 2008 course who utilized the what?–so what?–now what? model scored an average of 9.25 on each blog while students in the fall 2007 course who simply responded to prompts scored an average of 7.76 (Table 1). This difference was not statistically significant, but does represent an increase in the total points earned by students throughout the semester. Also of note is the relatively large standard deviation in the fall 2007 sample as compared with the spring 2008 sample. Students who did not use Watson’s (2001) model were more likely to have widely varying grades. Students using Watson’s model were more consistently earning the same grade. This finding is of note because students using the what?–so what?–now what? framework were more consistently meeting the objectives and expectations of the blogging assignment when compared to students who did not use the framework. Results indicate that utilization of Watson’s framework for reflection produces higher scores overall with more students consistently earning scores near the top of the scale.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Leadership educators are increasingly using technological applications in teaching methods. Technology itself is an integral part of the lives of today’s students and these same students feel comfortable using technological applications in ways that their educators do not. Meanwhile, the integration of technology into the

leadership classroom continues to be an important component for teaching and learning. While technology continues to influence pedagogy, instructors continue to need effective methods by which technology can supplement content.

The reflection model presented in this paper can be used to enhance critical thinking of leadership students through blogging reflections. An experiment conducted over the course of two academic semesters demonstrated that students using the Watson (2001) what?–so what?–now what? model for a blogging reflection exercise averaged higher grades and more consistently met the objectives of the assignment. In comparison, all students using the what?–so what?–now what? model more consistently scored higher grades when compared with students who were only given guiding questions for the blogging activity. Students in the fall 2007 semester wrote shorter blogs, which seemingly lacked both depth and integration of the experiential service project with classroom content. Students in the spring 2008 semester critically examined situations in their experiential service project and more successfully integrated classroom concepts with experiences at the service agency. For these particular reflection exercises, students were not required to interact with blogs posted by their colleagues. However, students were provided with blog addresses for all students in the course and were encouraged to read and comment on others' blogs. Instructors may consider how to more effectively encourage interaction between students perhaps with blogs on social networking websites such as Facebook or Ning.

Websites providing free hosting services for blogs are common and frequently used (i.e., Wordpress, Blogspot, and Blogger). Leadership educators may consider integrating this technology into the learning experience for students by replacing handwritten or hard copy journals with online blogs. Evidence from this experiment suggests that using the Watson's (2001) what?–so what?–now what? model provided a more effective framework for student reflection in online blogs. Educators should consider adopting the model presented in this paper for blogs or other individual reflection activities in the leadership classroom.

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