To what extent could "Weblog" be the tools of learning, sharing and assessing?

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Weblog is being initiated as a personal organized diary. Resources uploaded are arranged chronologically. The trackback will provide easy review of the previous posts and pages in the digital repository. It has some multi function. People can share and interact among the community. The ideas from this social networking provoke deeper thinking and reflection. Thus, weblog, not only provides owners to post their personal daily accounts, reflections and experiences, also provides chances for metadata exchange. To support learning and teaching, this paper will try to investigate how can weblog create a new learning landscape? To what extent it will provide opportunity of sharing, interacting reflecting among learners? Moreover, how can it be used as a webfolios of recording learner's process of learning?

Introduction

During the past decades, invention of information communication technology (ICT) brought tremendous changes in our mode of teaching and learning, learning assessments and daily life.

Firstly, we have to consider about the mode of teaching and learning. The emerging technologies such as podcasts, blogs and vlogs, information publishing and, broadcasting and dissemination are far more easy and interactive. To the young people, these technologies are considered as personal linked devices which are easy to use and more interactive. "Small segments of learning content could be available at the point of need. The added value of these technologies is in the development of knowledge through sharing and discussing ideas" (Wall, 2006, pp29). Thus, teachers are not the only sources of information. Modes of teaching and learning have to be changed accordingly.

Secondly, with the change of learning mode, how can students be assessed of their performance? Instead of the final outcomes of academic result, the process of learning has

been considered more important and critical. But keeping track about the student's progress and processes of learning is not an easy task. From many research reviews, even though the e-portfolio has been a tool of keeping track, it does not sustain student's interest in using this kind of tool after the completion of their studying. How can teachers solve this problem?

Thirdly, ICT brought changes in our daily life. Recording the accounts of daily life in the past, people kept their daily accounts in their diaries. The diary was usually considered as something privacy and it would be kept locked in their own drawers. But nowadays, people use "Weblog" to record their daily events.

Weblog is an organized diary in which the resources uploaded are arranged in chronologically order. It, not only provides owners to post their personal daily accounts, reflections and experience, also provides changes for metadata exchange. People can share and interact among the community. The ideas from this social networking provoke deeper thinking and reflection. Furthermore, the trackback link will provide easy review of the previous posts and pages in the digital repository. Besides personal daily account record, weblog has some multi function. As Batson (2002), Barrett (2004) and Tosh (2004) made discussion of the e-portfolios, they raised the possibility of webfolios as the tool of trackback of learning processes. Other researchers claimed that weblog can be an *individual e-portfolio, enhances communication and reinforces collective group learning.*

Considering the potential value of weblog in teaching and learning, an action research project would be undertaken to investigate the question: To what extent could "Weblog" be the tools of learning, sharing and assessing?

Background of study group

Territory-Wide Assessment (TSA) for all primary schools had been introduced four years ago in Hong Kong. Students have to take assessments in Chinese, English and Mathematics. The result of English language is far more unsatisfactory than other subjects. Their performance of TSA for all primary schools in Hong Kong is the most unsatisfactory.

In Hong Kong, English is one of the Key Learning Areas (KLA) from grade 1. Though Native English Teacher (NET) scheme is being implemented in primary schools, both motivation of English reading and writing is still very low in most schools. Students, especially boys, like to play online computer games during their leisure time.

Observing that the motivation and academic performance of English learning is not favourable in schools, in order to find out if there would be a possibility in using weblog as a tool of learning, sharing and assessing, an action research for a small group of twenty students in grade 6 would be explored. The action research was undertaken in a primary subsidized

co-educational school with student population of about 300 from grade 1 to 6. Students mostly come from low-income family. They hardly get any guidance or assistance from their parents when they have any difficulties in learning English.

The paper would try to investigate to what extent the weblog can be used as a tool for learning, sharing and assessing for the target group. Besides that, the processes involved, difficulties may be confronted, solution incurred, and the trackback and management of student's performance would be presented.

The approach and plan

An action research approach is determined for that consideration of its flexibility and suitability in school setting; its

> reflective process that allows for inquiry and discussion as components of the "research.";… a collaborative activity among colleagues searching for solutions to everyday, real problems experienced in schools, or looking for ways to improve instruction and increase student achievement
>
> (Ferrance, 2000)

A five-month research project for twenty-five grade 6 students would be started from February, 2007 after Chinese New Year and ended up in Mid-June before the final examination. The focus of this project would be on English language writing and sharing only. Thus the evaluation of the project would be mainly on skills of writing, posting and responding.

At the beginning of the second term this year, the target group of students was guided to set up an account; format the page; write, edit and publish post; link to other blog or websites;…Since the target group comes from primary school, they usually have e-mail accounts at "Yahoo". So all data and analysis would base on the platform and facilities provided by "Yahoo".

The project would involve guided and free writing: guided writing tasks; diary and book report writing. For the guided writing tasks, teacher posted some guiding questions or resources in her blog. Students read the guidance and post their writing in their own blog. On the other hand, in order to motivate their independent writing, they would be requested to do some diary writing and reading journal as week-end assignments. Students would be free to write, share and interact with other group members.
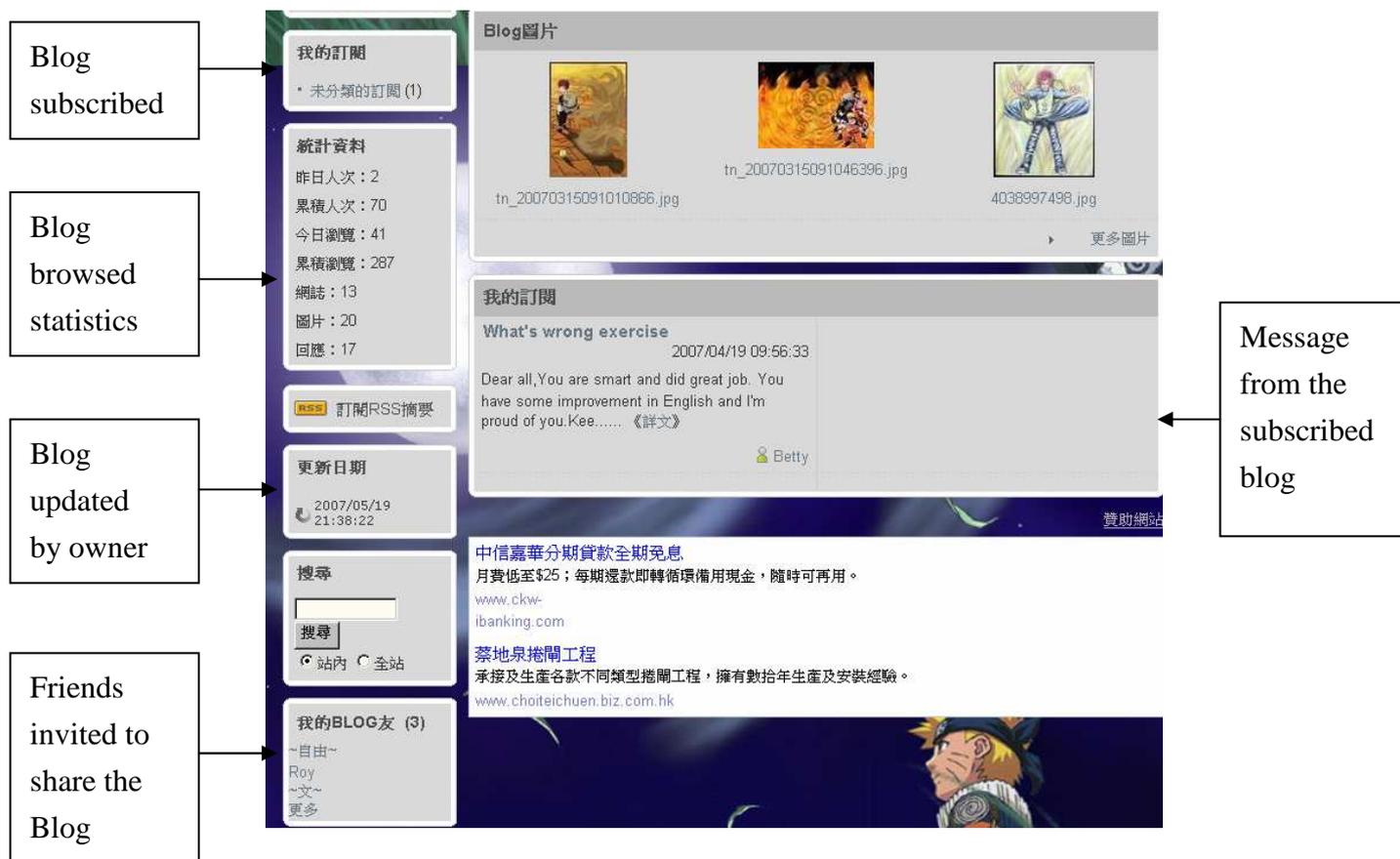
Methodology

For this small action research, qualitative methods of data collection would be manipulated to explore the research question. During the five-month research project, for determining the engagement of the students, data online (weblog messages, interactions, linkage provided), direct observation, online questionnaire and interviews would be collected.

Throughout the process, observation of students' daily work (as in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) and online data would be collected and analysed. The final feedback and evaluation would be collected before examination. The performance of students in their examination would be considered as one of the reflection in the project.

Fig.1: Details of student's work

| Blog subscribed | 我的訂閱
· 未分類的訂閱 (1) | Blog圖片 | |
| Blog browsed statistics | 統計資料
昨日人次：2
累積人次：70
今日瀏覽：41
累積瀏覽：287
網誌：13
圖片：20
回應：17 | | |

Fig 2: Statistic and information from student's blog

From the details of student's work online, investigation of data would be focus on their:

1. **Learning and assessment:** from tasks completed, text in the blog, date of posting.
2. **Sharing and interaction:** from feedback, blog subscription and invitation, statistics information of blog.
3. **Internet and computer skill:** from classification of blogs, posting and feedbacks, blog subscription and invitation.

Results and discussion

Throughout the past months, some findings had been obtained:

1 Learning and assessment

1.1 From the task completed, students were found not initiative to complete the task for it was not a formal assessment

From the statistic information from their blogs, the participation rate was low. Since this project would not be counted as formal school assessment, most students, especially the

boys were reluctant to post writing and share their writing in the blog. They might rather keep on playing online games after school. Posting and tasks were few in number.

Data from **Kiki's Work**

She is the shortest, shy, silent in class and slow behind others in English language learning. She does not talk much and not willing to voice out her difficulties in learning though she cannot follow the lesson

1.2 Student's learning and performance could be easily evaluated and traced

During the first two months, students were not initiative in posting their messages in the blog. Though some of them were hard-working, there writings were short and full of grammatical mistakes. Since students' English language proficiency is unsatisfactory, both language use and vocabulary are limited; the content of writing is bored, not interesting and not creative. In fact, in the other sections of their blog which were written in Chinese are much more interesting and interactive. However, this provided valuable data for teacher's better understand and planning.

Grammatical errors were found. These data would help teacher in future planning.

1.3 Student relied on the guiding questions and were not able to form a short passage
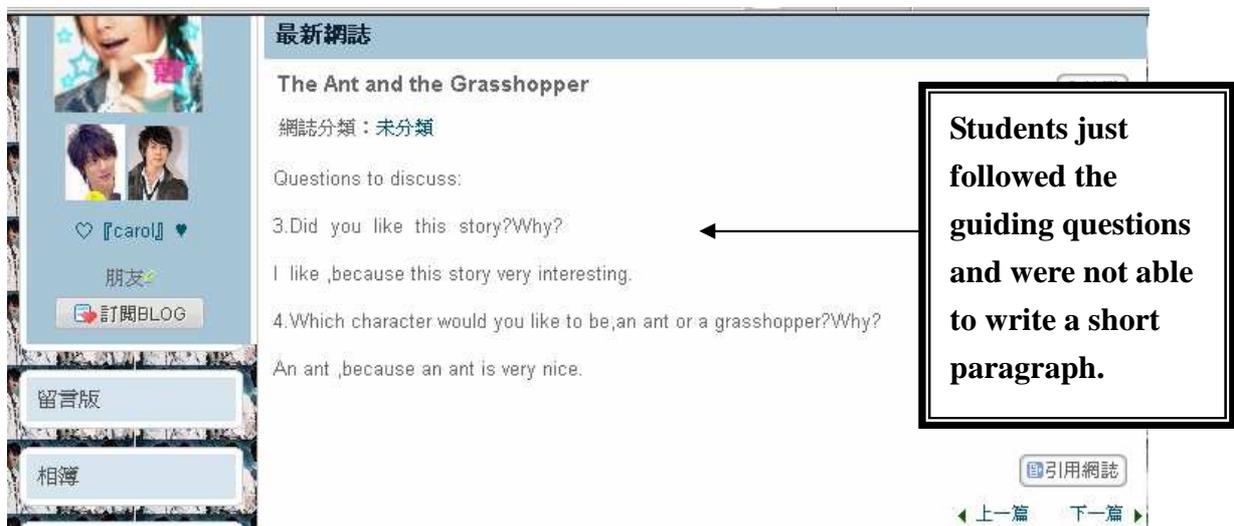
Students just followed the guiding questions and were not able to write a short paragraph.

However, the data collected would be useful for informal assessment of their learning. Teacher could re-consider the plan of teaching accordingly.

2 Student's interaction and sharing enhance improvement in writing

Teacher could get online record of students' participation and their interaction. .

2.1 Teacher would be informed when students had posted their work online

Date, time and name of participants were clearly recorded

By the end of March, student's writing were collected and analysised. Some remedial work was introduced. Grammar task sheets were designed accordingly. More guidance and controlled practices had been introduced.

From the data collected online, students show improvement in their writing. They started to make use of vocabulary and language use in their writing more readily. More interactions were found among the group. Better writings with correct grammar were presented. The group managed to make better use of weblog as the communication with peers

and teacher. Without sufficient reading experiences, the content of their writing was still found limited

2.2 Students learn from other classmates:

Writing of Ken (A student who always gets high scores in English)

Writing of Sam (A student who works hard and is on good progress in English language learning)

From these two pieces of writing, they both use "sixth former students were went to"…. Same mistake was found. And it is supposed that Sam read Ken's writing and tried to copy the beginning of the passage. So teacher should remind the students of this and encourage them not just copying the work of other classmates. Discussion should be encouraged among students when they had any problems.

3 Internet and computer skill

Students were found rather weak in classification of blogs, posting and feedbacks, blog subscription and invitation. They were not able to classify their blogs according to teacher's suggestions. They rarely post feedbacks or review what had been responded. Both Internet and computer skill were found not unsatisfactory.

Most students were not able to classify their blog

Stu... to ... postings according to teacher's guide.

Most students were not able to subscribe other blog!

Conclusion

Though the project is still in progress, some findings had been identified. They were: wrong assumptions had to be re-considered; guided and controlled tasks should be well planned; student's interest and ability should be properly considered; changes of plan should

be made according to the on-going feedback and responses; trackback of individual learning could be valued by both teacher and students.

Wrong assumptions had to be re-considered

Before implementation of this project, I thought students who were interested in online game should have no problem in handling such technologies. In fact, that was a wrong assumption. Students, who loved online games, would not be skillful at computer and Internet literacy. For setting up the blog, especially for primary school students, careful guidance and instruction are critical. 'Instead of drowning you in theoretical possibilities and length explanations', visual guides uses 'big, color illustrations coupled with clear, concise step-by step instructions' (Castro, 2005) are vital importance. For establishing any particular online blog, teacher is advised to read the "Help" carefully. Besides that, teach students to view the "Help" whenever they have problems online. The guides can be easily obtained online but teacher's clear instruction and explanation are necessary.

Guided and controlled tasks should be well planned

Though the blog is being used for personal accounts or writing in authentic situation, before students become skillful users, they should be taught to manage the weblog through some careful guided and controlled tasks. If the weblog is used as a tool of learning and teaching, the tasks should be clearly defined and correlated to the school based curriculum. They should be informed of the criteria of evaluation, so that they would be more devoted to the tasks involved.

Handbook providing guidance and criteria of assessment would be necessary for them. Besides, details of the tasks, properly information policy would be of advantage. They should be taught about the netiquette, too. They should respect other's opinion; provide positive and polite feedback; not to provoke quarrel or fire online; not to publish false, disgusting or horrible postings.

Student's interest and ability should be properly considered

Students are usually not interested in school assignments. So when preparing the topics for discussing or writing, student's interest and ability should be taken into consideration carefully. Otherwise, blog writing would only become another monotonous and mechanic writing task for them. To improve the writing performance, students should be more exposed to good reading resources which suit their interest and ability. In order to attain their motivation and interest, shared reading with teacher or peers would be highly recommended for those slow behind.

Changes of plan should be made according to the on-going feedback and responses

During the processes of action research, for improvement in learning and teaching, plan had been changed after the analysis and evaluation of the data collected. At the beginning of the project, students were invited to write either a weekly report or a reading journal as a week-end assignment. They were encouraged to borrow books from class and school library. However, the students were initiative in neither writing nor reading. Observing this phenomenon, some reading resources were assigned and a focus question was being raised for discussion.

Trackback of individual learning could be valued by both teacher and student

With the special chronological arrangement of the blog, student's progress could be identified easily. It could be an individual portfolio in which own performance, feedbacks from teacher and peers were clearly kept. And the most important is that, student has his own mastery of performance record. Through the interaction with other bloggers, information exchanging, publishing would enhance student's confidence in English writing.

From the data of the questionnaire set on this project, all twenty-three participants agreed that writing weblog improved their writing. Twenty-one participants agreed that weblog can keep good record of their work. Twenty-one of them would like writing blogs and invite their friends to their read their blogs.

Both teacher and student could interact after school. Students could learn on their pace. With the bookmark of student's blog, teacher would be notified of their new postings. Teacher could read, response and assess student's work accordingly. Sure instead of carrying heavy pile of assignment home, teacher could access student's work at any time available.

Lastly, though this project was really a small trial on the usage of weblog and the data collected had not yet thoroughly investigated by this writing moment, blog writing really had been a good tool for learning and teaching. It was very impressed especially when students gathered around in the computer room, sharing their messages, discussing about them.

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