

Interactive Blogs

Nurturing the Art of Introspecting, Reflecting and Collaborating in Student-teachers

Giselle Ann D'souza
Associate Professor
St. Teresa's Institute of Education
Santacruz, Mumbai, India

Abstract: The advent of the two year Bachelor of Education course introduced by the National Council of Teacher Education, India has been accompanied by an increased duration of school internship for student-teachers spanning over 21 weeks spread over 4 semesters. Trainees are expected to document their personal experiences and school activities in a reflective journal comprising of a log book set aside for the purpose. This exercise is intended to develop reflective thinking skills in the training teachers. However, due to monotony and lack of orientation to reflective thinking, journaling has deteriorated into a mechanical and routine procedure without fostering critical and analytical thinking skills in the student-teacher fraternity. The present study sought to explore the possible advantages of blogging in enhancing the skills of introspection, reflection and collaborative learning as compared to the prescribed technique of reflective journaling. The sample comprised of 31 student teachers of a private aided English medium teacher education college in Mumbai. It was carried out over a period of 11 weeks wherein, participants were expected to blog their responses to a weekly post relating to their personal teaching-learning experiences in school. This activity focused on guided reflection and was aimed at inculcating reflective thinking skills in trainees. Alongside, they also documented their daily experiences in a log book. A comparison of their skills developed at the end of the period was made using the t-test. Findings revealed the distinct advantages of blogging in overcoming the mental blocks students harbor towards reflective journaling.

Index Terms- Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.), Blogging, Reflective Journaling, Student-teachers

I. INTRODUCTION

Blogging as a means of social networking has long since been used to market products and processes. These web logs are popular because they engage readers providing them with the opportunity to comment on posts as well as answer frequently raised queries. They provide scope for interaction and are highly flexible and portable too. Blogs create a context for exchange of ideas between bloggers and readers. The use of blogs for educational purposes has been explored by Richardson (2006) and Kerawalla et al. (2009). Teachers can use blogs for a variety of purposes ranging from displaying assignments and providing reading resources to keeping students and even parents up to date on class events, submission deadlines and content being covered. However, the use of blogging to nurture reflective thinking skills of student-teachers has not been investigated.

The importance of self-reflection has resulted in the incorporation of reflection journals as learning tools that promote reflection into many curricula (Mann et al., 2009). Reflective journal writing is believed to enable students to critically review their own learning and behaviour, and to understand their ability to transform their own learning strategies (Gleaves et al., 2008). Reflective journaling is not merely recounting of the day's events but a learning exercise in which students express in writing their understanding of, reflections on, response to or analysis of an event, experience or concept. This form of writing covers all aspects of the students' thoughts and emotions relating to their experiences in school. Students are helped to re-define their beliefs and change their orientation through a process of introspection and reflection. Though the worth of a reflective journal cannot be under estimated, the true purpose of this exercise is often defeated due to the inherent monotony that it entails. The prolonged internship period of 21 weeks in the existing 2 year Bachelor of Education course in India further augments the repetitiveness of journaling causing student-teachers to lose interest and enthusiasm in documenting their daily experiences and activities. This has led to reflective journals being reduced to descriptive log books instead of showcasing meaningful reflections and personal observations of teacher trainees. The present research is an attempt to look into the drawbacks of reflective journaling in teacher education. It explores the use of blogging as a strategy to enhance the reflective thinking skills of student-teachers as interns.

II. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study was to compare the effectiveness of blogging and reflective journaling in the development of skills in student-teachers. The objectives were as follows:

- To quantify the Collaborative Learning, Quality Quotient, Reflective Thinking and Skill Enhancement achieved through blogging and reflective journaling in student-teachers.
- To compare the Collaborative Learning, Quality Quotient, Reflective Thinking and Skill Enhancement achieved through blogging and reflective journaling in student-teachers.

III. HYPOTHESIS

The following null hypothesis was formulated for the study:

- There is no significant difference in the Collaborative Learning, Quality Quotient, Reflective Thinking and Skill Enhancement achieved through blogging and reflective journaling in student-teachers.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design employed was descriptive and included a survey. Moreover, the present study is of the comparative type because it sought to study the difference in the mentioned variables achieved through blogging and reflective journaling.

4.1 Population and Sample

The sample comprised of 31 student-teachers of an English medium private-aided B.Ed college affiliated to the University of Mumbai, selected by the purposive sampling technique

4.2 Data and Sources of Data

The blog in the present study was created through Blogger which is currently a service provided by Google. The blog was hosted by Google and could be accessed from a sub-domain of blogspot.com. At first, the researcher oriented the student-teachers to the techniques of blogging and reflective journaling. They were expected to maintain a reflective journal and document their daily activities with critical analysis of the same. The participants were also invited to share their experiences on blog posts displayed through the internship period of 11 weeks on the web portal specifically created for this purpose. The blog posts through guided introspection aimed at enhancing the reflective thinking and communication skills of the students. The Multidimensional Skill Scale was administered to the student-teachers on completion of the internship period. This was a 5 point Likert scale comprising of 20 items with 5 items pertaining to each of the four dimensions namely, Collaborative Learning (CL), Quality Quotient (QQ), Reflective Thinking (RT) and Skill Enhancement (SE).

4.3 Theoretical framework

Blogging and Reflective Journaling were the Independent Variables and Collaborative Learning (CL), Quality Quotient (QQ), Reflective Thinking (RT) and Skill Enhancement (SE) were the Dependent Variables. The operational definitions of the key terms included in this study have been given below.

1. **Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.):** A course of 2 years duration spanning across four semesters which qualifies students to be trained teachers.
2. **Student-teachers:** Trainees who enrol for the 2 year B.Ed. course leading to the degree of Bachelor of Education.
3. **Blogging:** It is defined as the act of posting one's comments /views or sharing one's personal experiences and opinions on the web portal referred to as a 'blog'.
4. **Reflective Journaling:** It refers to the exercise of documenting the daily happenings during the internship period of student-teachers and could range from personal insights gained, critical analysis of events, and experiences encountered by them to introspection and deep contemplation on their day at school.
5. **Collaborative Learning:** It denotes the extent to which there is dialogue, open communication and mutual learning between student-teachers.
6. **Quality Quotient:** It signifies the measure of effectiveness of a technique in terms of achieving standards of utility, meaningfulness, purpose and instructional and educational objectives.
7. **Reflective Thinking:** It is the process of self-analysis and self-examination leading to self-awareness, mindfulness and self-discovery.
8. **Skill Enhancement:** It indicates the improvement of abilities and proficiencies such as self-confidence, expression, communication and using technology.

4.4 Statistical Analysis

The scores were tabulated and then analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

- **Descriptive analysis** included the magnitude of the variables included in the study to show the extent of Collaborative Learning, Quality quotient, Reflective Thinking and Skill Enhancement achieved through blogging and reflective journaling.
- **Inferential statistics** included the 't'-test to determine any likely difference in the Collaborative Learning, Quality Quotient, Reflective Thinking and Skill Enhancement achieved through blogging and reflective journaling in student-teachers. When P value was less than 0.05, the difference was considered statistically significant and highly significant when P-value was less than 0.01 and 0.0001.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Results of Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Table 1 shows the magnitude of the variables of the study

Table 1

Magnitude of the Variables of the Study

VARIABLE	GROUP	MEAN	PERCENT MEAN	MAGNITUDE
Collaborative Learning (CL)	Blogging	22.87	89.35	HIGH
	Reflective Journaling	6.84	36.8	LOW
Quality Quotient (QQ)	Blogging	21.48	82.4	HIGH
	Reflective Journaling	8.97	19.85	NEGLIGIBLE
Reflective Thinking (RT)	Blogging	22.68	88.4	HIGH
	Reflective Journaling	9.13	20.65	LOW
Skill Enhancement (SE)	Blogging	22.06	85.3	HIGH
	Reflective Journaling	9.13	20.65	LOW

From Table 1 it can be concluded that Mean % of all the variables achieved through blogging was high whereas it was low in the case of CL, RT, SE and negligible for QQ achieved through reflective journaling.

5.2 Results of Inferential Statistics of Study Variables

Table 2 shows the relevant statistics of the Collaborative Learning (CL), Quality Quotient (QQ), Reflective Thinking (RT) and Skill Enhancement (SE) achieved in student-teachers through blogging and reflective journaling.

TABLE 2

Relevant Statistics of the Variables of the Study

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-ratio	Level of Significance
CL	Blogging	31	22.87	2.01	30.22	P< 0.01
	Reflective Journaling	31	6.84	2.09		
QQ	Blogging	31	21.48	4.09	14.28	P< 0.01
	Reflective Journaling	31	8.97	2.52		
RT	Blogging	31	22.68	1.73	28.23	P< 0.01
	Reflective Journaling	31	9.13	1.98		
SE	Blogging	31	22.06	2.59	22.43	P< 0.01
	Reflective Journaling	31	9.13	1.81		

The tabulated values for 't' are as follows (Garett, 1985):

$$\text{For } df = 30, \quad t \text{ at } 0.05 \text{ level} = 1.96$$

$$\text{Similarly, for } df = 30, \quad t \text{ at } 0.01 \text{ level} = 2.59$$

Interpretation of 't': The obtained t-ratios for Collaborative Learning (CL), Quality Quotient (QQ), Reflective Thinking (RT) and Skill Enhancement (SE) are 30.22, 14.28, 28.23 and 22.43 respectively, which are greater than 2.59. The p-value is < .00001. The result is significant at $p < .01$. Thus, 't' is significant for all the mentioned variables at the 0.01 level. The null hypotheses for these mentioned variables are, therefore, rejected. Thus, there is a significant difference in the Collaborative Learning, Quality Quotient, Reflective Thinking and Skill Enhancement of student-teachers achieved through blogging and reflective journaling.

Comparison of the mean scores for all the mentioned variables indicates that blogging was more effective than reflective journaling in the development of skills in student-teachers.

5.3 Discussion: An analysis of the results obtained in Table 2 indicates that the Collaborative Learning, Quality Quotient, Reflective Thinking and Skill Enhancement achieved through blogging are significantly higher than that achieved through reflective journaling in student-teachers. This finding suggests that orienting teacher trainees to blogging of internship experiences, using guided reflections could help to inculcate reflective thinking skills in them. With respect to promoting Collaborative Learning, it was noticed that blogging offered the unique advantages of providing a forum for the bloggers to learn from the experiences of others, share their feelings and opinions about issues of academic concern, come up with creative solutions to commonly encountered challenges a teacher faces in classroom settings and feel a sense of pride in knowing that their ideas were respected and appreciated by their classmates and faculty. This finding is supported by Efimova and de Moor (2005) who concluded that weblogs serve as a true conversation tool, supporting fast and meaningful reactions, exchange of multiple perspectives and joint development of ideas. Hall and Davison (2007) have also provided evidence of learning effectiveness achieved through blogging in terms of peer support, being open to the views of others and group cohesiveness. When blog-writing activities are incorporated into the course, it has been observed that students develop more positive attitude to learning and motivation to communicate and share ideas with their classmates (Dujsik and Cai 2011; Gedera 2012); an increase in motivation and confidence stems from the awareness that their blog is read and commented on by their peers (Muangnakin 2012).

In terms of Quality Quotient, the second dimension of comparison in this study, blogging proved to be superior in terms of utility value, meaningfulness of the posts, learning motivation, learning outcomes and personal satisfaction. Reflective journaling on the other hand was evaluated as a monotonous, mechanical, boring and meaningless exercise which had failed to meet its true objective. This finding too is backed by research evidence wherein blogs have been known to enhance learning, motivate students and foster collaboration among learners (Holzberg, 2003). The high utility value of blogging has been attributed to the fact that posts and comments on a blog can be updated easily and promptly (Clyde, 2005). Instructors have the added advantage of extending learning and engaging students beyond the walls of the classroom (Downs, 2004), shifting the focus from the traditional approach of 'Sage' on the Stage' to 'Guide by the side'. In such learning environments students are empowered and take the pivotal position in the learning process. This in turn paves the way for quality education where learners assume responsibility for their own learning.

Comparison of the third dimension namely, Reflective Thinking revealed that blogging helped to foster critical thinking skills in the student-teachers making them more mindful about their teaching-learning activities. The participants agreed that they developed the habit of introspection, reflection and self-analysis. Comments on the blog posts were original and creative suggesting that student-teachers had inculcated the skill of analyzing and judging their own behaviours and responses to experiences, situations and events. All-in-all blogging had led to a journey of self-discovery. Research evidence suggests that electronic discussion boards, in one form or another, have been around for a number of years and have been used in a variety of education settings. In the area of teacher education, these mechanisms have promoted reflective learning, supported problem-based learning, and fostered a sense of community (Hawkes and Romiszowski, 2001). Stiler and Philleo (2003) incorporated blogging into a pre-service teacher education course and then compared students' reflective blog journals to handwritten journals from the previous semester's students. Analysis revealed that the blogged entries were more analytic and evaluative than the handwritten journals from the prior semester. The blog entries were longer and written in ways that indicated that students were considering the motivations behind their beliefs rather than merely describing them, compared to their handwritten journals.

Skill Enhancement-the fourth dimension of this study included proficiencies such as self-confidence, expression, communication and versatility in using technology. The student-teachers unanimously agreed that sharing their experiences and views on the blog had caused a marked improvement in their skills of expression and writing. A study on the potential use and value of blogs in language learning in Taiwan revealed that there was a general acceptance of blogs by students as a productive tool to improve their language skills, such as writing, vocabulary, self-expression, socializing and thinking skills (Noytim, 2010). Similarly, a study conducted by Kocoglu (2009) revealed that the use of blogs was significant in terms of learners' writing and speaking skills. Student-teachers in the present study suggested that blogging had provided them with a gateway experience of using digital technologies and helped them overcome their phobias of using web-based applications. They had grown in confidence and started to feel empowered about making a difference in the world as teachers of tomorrow.

VI. CONCLUSION

Though the worth of maintaining a reflective journal for student-teachers during their pre-service training cannot be denied, the fact remains that they need to be oriented towards the skill of reflective thinking. Only then would the exercise of reflective journaling meet its desired objective. The research implications of the present study suggest that blogging due to its distinct advantages could serve to fill the lacunae that logging of internship experiences has created in the landscape of teacher education. Due to the plethora of skills that blogging helps to instill in teacher trainees it may be the miracle solution to usher in a generation of tech savvy, confident teachers

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