



Using Web 2.0 Technologies to Enhance Academic Writing Proficiency Among EES Students in Sultan Qaboos University: an Example of Facebook and Blogs

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Literature Review

Research on using Facebook and blogs in educational settings, especially in developing writing is a currently initiated concept (Wan,2011). Yet, there is a growing body of literature that tackled their use in the educational field generally and in the writing classroom particularly.

Facebook and blogs are only examples of many technology tools (Wikis, MySpace and LiveJournal) to mention a few that are used by educators to empower learners by granting them an opportunity to express their opinions. They help assist students with their reading and writing skills as well as their collaboration in learning (Leight,2008).

Facebook and Theoretical Framework

Facebook originated 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg in Harvard University to facilitate social interaction exclusively amongst college students. To date, more than 49 million users use this site. Then and in a shorter time, Facebook now has become widely diverse for users of all levels of education including companies and universities (Roblyer *et al.*,2010).

In connection with Facebook as one of the Social Networking Sites (SNSs), Roblyer and Wiencke (2003) distinguished five components that underlay interaction in online setting. These are socially- designed interaction, instructionally designed interaction, interactivity management of technology, and students plus teacher engagement.

Further, Schwartz (2009) suggests that "mentoring theory" may provide a theoretical foundation for determining an instructional role for SNSs. Hence, it is no wonder that Facebook is one of those sites and it is used widely to share ideas and exchange feedback among group members.

Blogs and Theoretical Foundation

Mattison (2003) defines blogs as chronological electronic journals composed chiefly by persons, to which participants post comments. They, blogs, use RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds to organize information and notify users of new content. They are more systematic and structured. Once a blog comment is posted, it can not be edited.

In another study conducted by Churchill (2009) and Flatley (2005), it was suggested that students can utilize blogs to publish their personal writings, discuss group homework, peer review each other's work and do their project in collaboration with each other.

There are some theories behind the use of blogs for educational purposes:

First, blogging is grounded in the Collaborative Learning Theory (CLT) which means learners by blogging assist each other and work in collaboration to serve the learning operation (Bruffee,1993). Add to that, The Socio-Cultural Theory is the second theory that underlies the use of blogs in the process of language learning, meaning people intelligence comes originally from society and its culture and then it is applied in the learning process. It further explains Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): the distance between the learner's ability in achieving and the help and guidance he gets from the society or parents (as cited in Fageeh,2011). Third, the Social Constructivism meaning the process of constructing knowledge societies and sharing ideas and feedback among group members (McMahon,1997 and Bakhatin 1981 as cited in Fageeh,2011). Ultimately, motivation of learners is stated in blogging interactivity asserted by the Lawler's theory (Lawler,1994 as cited in Fageeh,2011). This theory stresses that the interaction occurs in the online environment is another contributor to students' increasing motivation and interest.

The Study

Research Questions

The following research questions are raised to examine the actual utilization of Facebook and Blogs in developing writing proficiency among EES students:

1. Do students look at the social networking sites (hereafter SNS): Facebook and blogs as good learning tools to academically develop their writing skills.
2. Can facebooking and blogging in a social setting enhance and offer possible contributions to the students' academic writing skill?

Research Objectives



This research paper aims at investigating the value of the Web 2.0 applications: Facebook and blogs in developing students' writing skills. It further explores if the social use of these tools boost students' academic skill in writing.

Methodology

Subjects

The target population of this study constituted a sample of 75 participants of Sultan Qaboos University students doing their third, fourth and fifth years of study in College of Arts and Social Sciences and College of Education. Sixty six individuals responded to the questionnaire. They were 28 males (42.4%) and 38 females (57.6%). Most of the subjects, about 28 (42.4%) were doing their third year of English. On the contrary, fourth and fifth year participants constituted 23 (34.8%) and 15 (22.7%) respectively. Their computer skills ranged from beginner (9.2%), intermediate (60.0%) to advanced (30.8%). Whereas 59.1% of the participants were intermediate in their Internet skills and 36.4% were advanced.

In connection with their use of Facebook and Blogs, it turned out to be that 22 (33.3%) of the subjects used Facebook daily compared to only 4 bloggers (6.3%). Hence, we come to the conclusion that nearly half 30 (46.9) of the respondents never blogged. Relating to the language used when Facebooking, 22 subjects (33.3%) would use mainly Arabic and some English in contrast to 10 (15.2%) who would use English only in Facebook. However, 17 bloggers (37.0%) would use Arabic compared to an equal number of bloggers 9 (13.6%) who would use English only and use Arabic and some English.

Research Tool

For data gathering and to investigate the study questions, a questionnaire was designed and distributed to the target population. It was not self-administered.

Findings and Discussion

Section Two

A: How Facebook has enhanced my academic writing Proficiency

Respondents were asked to indicate their frequency in using Facebook in enhancing their academic writing proficiency.

Interestingly, it has been observed that students find using Facebook in developing their writing useful and interesting. On one hand, 40% of them state that Facebook (FB) always makes them think about and interact with the readers of their posts. Equally important the same percent 40% asserts that FB often makes them adapt their texts to the potential reader. Almost half of the respondents (31.75%) use formal language when they write on Facebook, 32.2% of them will always be careful about sentence and paragraph organization, 35.6% will always check word spelling and learn new vocabulary. These findings were noticed by previous researchers like Roblyer and Wiencke (2003), Schwartz (2009) and her "mentoring theory" as well as Wan (2011) who suggests that learners tend to be "more observant" of their own writings (p.14).

B: How Blogs have enhanced my academic writing proficiency

Worth mentioning here that what it has been suggested about Facebook applies to blogs as well. To put it clearly, blogs benefit students in terms of enhancing their grammar proficiency and fluency. This indicates compatibility with prior research study from Fageeh (2011). Also, they create an environment for an independent and autonomous learning as supported by Pinkman (2005), Zhang (2004) and Gonzalez (n.d).

Section Three

A: My Attitude towards using Facebook in enhancing my academic writing proficiency

Intriguingly most students have found the experience of using Facebook enjoyable, effective, motivating and easy to use. A finding that strongly goes in line with some previous published research conducted by Schrand (2008), Hazari *et al.*, (n.d) and Wan (2011).

B: My attitude towards using Blogs in enhancing my academic writing proficiency

Similarly, findings of this part have indicated that the students have almost the same positive feedback about blogging just like Facebook. That is enjoyable, effective, motivating and easy to use. These findings resemble some accumulated research documented by Mattison (2003), Churchill (2009) and Fageeh (2011)

Section 4

Verbal data

When learners are asked the question whether the Facebook and Blogs are good tools to teach writing, most of them answered it positively in terms of that Facebook and blogs are good learning tools and that they are *interesting, useful, practical, enjoyable, exciting, easy to use, funny and effective*. They enhance *cooperation, interaction and communication* between students. Further, they also asserted that they can *express their ideas clearly and freely*. What is more, by using these tools, students get *more motivated* and they try *new experience*



and *break routine*. These findings are compatible with what has been found and documented by Schwartz (2009), Roblyer et al., (2010), and Wan (2011). Also, they agree with some other published research by Mattison (2003), Flatley (2005), Churchill (2009) and Fageeh (2011).

Astonishingly, some students expressed their resentment of using these tools in the or outside the class claiming that they are “out of their culture” and that “they waste their time” by using them. These observations are consistent with Maranto’s and Barton’s assertion (2010) that outlines electronic media and social networking sites are “perilous terrain for educators [and students alike] p.37. and that MySpace and Facebook lead to destroy student and faculty “ethos”p.36. Additionally, some students are against the use of these technologies thinking that using them would only make them use “local language” as one of the respondents claimed. It is a finding that extremely disagrees with what has been found in a growing body of literature. Also surprising, it has been found that students use some other types of SNSs like WhatsApp, messenger, twitter, yahoo MSN, Netlog and LinkedIn, Google scholar, Arabchat, Netlog, Google+, microblogging, Gmail chat, googletalk, ebuddy and MSN, LinkedIn, Interpals, Livemocha and some others that even me, the researcher is not aware of such as Badoo and BBM. Let me here write a few lines defining Badoo and BBM. According to Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia, Badoo is a social discovery website, founded in 2006 and owned by Russian entrepreneur Andrey Andreev. It ranks as the 52nd most popular site in France and the 117th globally according to Alexa Internet. (Badoo, 2012). Whereas BBM: BlackBerry Messenger is an application included on BlackBerry devices which allows messaging between BlackBerry users. It was developed by the manufacturer of the BlackBerry (BlackBerry Messenger, 2012).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In light of the research results presented here and the effectiveness reported in terms of using Facebook and Blogs in the composition classroom, the researcher puts forward a number of scenarios that might be worth of investigation. Such scenarios would include a bigger number of respondents might give a clearer picture about the use of these applications in the writing classroom. Another scenario is conducting this research project on students from different disciplines not only those doing English. Also, this paper focused only on Facebook and Blogs and did not include other social networking sites like wikis, MySpace, LinkedIn and so forth. Relevantly, this research paper centred on using Facebook and Blogs in enhancing fluency in writing and did not tackle accuracy and form. Most importantly, this paper is suggested to be repeated again trying to investigate and find out teachers practice in using these technologies in teaching writing : their practices and attitudes.

Implications

Technology has been used around the world as an enabler to facilitate learning (Hazari *et al.*, n.d). On the whole, empirical data from this study suggest the value of using Facebook and Blogs in the composition classroom. Also important, they can be used to manage digital portfolios in the university course as proposed by previous researchers like Churchill (2009) and Flatley (2005). To date, we live in a digital world and our students are digital natives, they come to schools and universities geared up and wired with the latest technologies available (Roblyer *et al.*, 2010). Thus, it is not fair to just ask them leave these tools behind once they get at the class door. Their use should be integrated within the university syllabuses to encourage innovation in an online environment. Equally important is the fact that these applications once they are used, they are going to take some of the burden off the teachers' chests as these tools promote autonomy and interactivity among learners as stated by Pinkman (2005) and Zhang (2004). Ultimately, Facebook and Blogs are both effective tools to be implemented in the reading course too. This in turn opens up a door for further research on this area.

Conclusion

In sum, this paper attempts to investigate the current use of Web 2.0 technologies to enhance academic writing proficiency among EES students in Sultan Qaboos University: An example of Facebook and Blogs. It has found that students love using these tools. However, there are more facebookers than bloggers. Suggestions have been proposed to reconsider their importance in learning and explaining to both students and teachers alike the educational merits of using them in the writing class. Finally, recommendations for further research are suggested in order to avoid the limitations of this study.

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