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**USING BLOGGING AS A TEACHING/LEARNING TOOL IN
A POSTGRADUATE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES (UWI):
An Activity Systems Analysis**

Cynthia James

This paper analyses the impact of blogging on teaching/learning in the English Curriculum unit of a postgraduate teacher education programme that had traditionally been taught face-to-face. Since the 22 teachers of this unit met as a whole group only once a fortnight for most of the semester, blogging was used to introduce course content, to promote reflection and research, and to facilitate teacher interaction. Activity systems criteria such as use of tools, distribution of community learning, interplay of contradictions, and achievement of objectives were used to analyse comments posted to topics on the English Curriculum blog. Two post-blog questionnaires were also administered to gain feedback on interactivity and blog outcomes. Findings suggest that while blogging did promote course content dissemination, it promoted little self-generated research. Teacher interaction was highest on topics of current local concern, while reflection, critical thinking, and risk taking varied with length of teaching experience and individual teacher aptitude. Implications are that in transitioning to online learning in the Caribbean, teacher educators should pay attention to cultural issues and traditions of learning in Caribbean educational systems. With the rapid evolution of e-learning resources and ongoing research in mixing traditional and online technologies, a blended learning approach that accommodates a “flexible learning” philosophy might be best suited for the Caribbean as educators acclimatize to and indigenize technologies.

Introduction

An Overview of e-Learning Initiatives in Higher Education in the Caribbean with Specific Reference to UWI

Marshall (2004) suggests that if the Caribbean is to remain competitive in higher education, it needs to move toward the “radical,” self-directed, and autonomous model of e-learning, even while it implements

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“standard” and “evolutionary” models. Consequently, with the trend towards education “becoming increasing [sic] borderless with universities competing for students in the same market, the global market” (Nagy & McDonald, 2007), the adoption of information and communications technology (ICT) is a challenge that has not been ignored. The post-secondary school sector is moving toward asynchronous e-learning (Caribbean Association for Open and Distance Learning [CARADOL], 2005; Kuboni & Martin, 2004; Thurab-Nkhosi & Marshall, 2006) and, currently, The University of the West Indies (UWI) is focusing as much on training as on ensuring quality assurance standards (Kuboni 2006a, 2006b; Lee, Thurab-Nkhosi, & Giannini-Gachago, 2005; Thurab-Nkhosi & Marshall, 2006). However, the need for training outstrips sheer capacity to train. Therefore, some level of initiative must be taken by staff of UWI. Thus, after completing an online postgraduate course in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) from a United States (US) university, in which blogging was used as a teaching/learning and communications tool, this researcher decided to use blogging for the same purposes with 22 in-service teachers in the English Curriculum group of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Dip.Ed.) programme at the School of Education, (SoE), St. Augustine.

Blogging in Higher Education

A blog or web-log is commonly described as a “diary-like website that presents entries in reverse chronological order” (Safran, 2008). Two other features of its journal-type structure are that it allows for archiving and searching previous entries; and for reading, responding, and discussion (Ebner & Maurer, 2007). With the widespread availability of mobile devices such as cellular phones, i-phones, and other portable, travel-friendly devices, the mobile blog or “moblog” offers increased flexibility, the facility of multitasking, more opportunities for staying connected, and on-the-move *m-learning* (Cobcroft, Towers, Smith, & Bruns, 2006; Cochrane, 2007). Additionally, with more research being done into the effectiveness of blogging as a learning strategy, its use as an e-learning option in higher education has increased (Coghlan, et al.; Betts & Glogoff, 2006; Brescia & Miller, 2006; Dickey, 2004; Downes, 2004; Ferdig & Trammell, 2004; Martindale & Wiley, 2005; Oravec, 2002, 2003; Stiler & Pilleo, 2003; Ward, 2004).

Martindale and Wiley, for instance, used public blogging in their graduate courses in preference to e-learning discussion management systems such as WebCT. Martindale explained: “For my students, the

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blogs offered a clear advantage over [WebCT-type] discussion forums because the blogs had greater sense of permanence” (p. 59), whereas Wiley found “blogs to be significantly easier to use” (p. 60). Learning benefits cited in their paper included: the improved quality of course assignments due to the generation of website research and discussion, students’ access to their professors’ wider intellectual forum and to “big names in the field,” much longer and more thoughtful responses, and the development of autonomous interaction within the course community. All the same, Martindale noted that “once [his] course ended, the student blogging also ceased” (p. 59), raising questions for him about the sustainability of blogging as a learning tool.

Stiler and Philleo (2003), early users who used blogging in undergraduate pre-service teacher education as a web-based journaling tool to stimulate reflection, also gave blogging a positive report. Feedback from their post-blogging survey indicated benefits such as the potential for archiving and the availability of quick day-to-day review. Their reservations included: some students’ non-response to sensitive issues such as race and gender bias; problems with set-up and technological issues (which they recommend should be sorted out before initiating blogging); issues surrounding anonymity, privacy, discretion, and giving options to students who have concerns about blogging; and preparing students for and through the process of journaling, giving them time “to think about, prepare, write, and respond to questions and queries” (pp. 795–797).

Even Brescia and Miller (2006), who are cautious about the effectiveness of blogging in enhancing college level instruction, cite positive outcomes such as “reflection, application, and engagement” (p. 50) as well as interactivity and greater student application due to flexibility of study time. Their major reservation surrounds demand blogging—“when instructors take away the voluntary nature of participation and begin requiring postings and responses to their postings.” Nevertheless, they find that although “the temptation for students is to respond simply for the sake of responding and to finish the requirement rather than processing information and learning,” demand blogging “can still promote intellectual development” (p. 50). Continued use of blogging in higher education tends to be less tentative and indicates that the flexibility of the medium in facilitating “conversation as learning” (Instone 2005, p. 306) allows for a variety of beneficial learning outcomes (Cochrane 2007; Ebner & Taraghi 2008; Robbins-Bell 2008).

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Rationale for Using Blogging in the English Curriculum of the Dip.Ed.

Because of its flexibility and this researcher's experience with it, blogging was adapted for the Dip.Ed., which is a one-year, in-service teacher education programme for secondary school teachers that has traditionally been taught face-to-face. It has a basic structure of (a) in-house classes at SoE and (b) school visits. Most of the in-house classes take place during school vacations and on alternate Fridays during the semester; they are either plenary or curriculum-group sessions. On the other hand, school visits take place during the semester on an individual basis and on alternate Fridays in small peer-teaching groups, supervised by subject teacher-educators. This means that during the semester, face-to-face contact among teachers and between teacher-educators and teachers is minimal. The infrequent opportunities for meeting during the academic year create challenges for establishing communities of practice, for generating peer support to address common teaching issues, and for maintaining general group cohesiveness.

Therefore, the English Curriculum blog was set up to: (a) promote an interactive, research-and-reflection archive through online discussion; (b) introduce course content through readily available website resources; and (c) engage teachers in communities of practice, while exposing them simultaneously to the wider world of pedagogy in the teaching of English. As in the Martindale and Wiley (2005) experiment, *Blogger* was used as the meeting place for the English Curriculum blog because of its user-friendliness and its accessibility.

Purpose of the Study

English is only one of eight subject areas in the Dip.Ed. taught under the same face-to-face constraints. Therefore, it was felt that the initiative would be a learning opportunity for all. In particular, information was being sought on two aspects:

1. The operational dynamics of the English Curriculum blog as a teaching/learning system; and
2. Teachers' views about the usefulness of the blog.

Description of the Participants

During the period of the blogging operations, the English Curriculum unit comprised 3 teacher-educators and 22 secondary school teachers (3 male and 19 female) from various regions of Trinidad and Tobago.

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Seven of the teachers (one of them male) were under the direct supervision of the researcher. Nevertheless, the blog was made open to the whole group. Blogging was voluntary and ran alongside the normal face-to-face procedures of the Dip.Ed. The other two teacher-educators did not take up the invitation to participate. However, they supported the call for the 22 teachers to do so.

The teachers were all Trinbagonians who taught 12- to 18-year-olds spanning a range of abilities—from struggling readers in public schools, who had scored between 0–30% on primary school exit examinations, to high achievers in government-assisted “prestige” schools. One teacher taught at a private Canadian international school. They taught English-based subjects such as English language and literature, Communication Studies, and Caribbean Studies. Nine were graduate teachers of English for less than 5 years, and nine between 5 and 10 years. This means that only four could be considered experienced teachers, and although some of them had various types of exposure to teacher education, none of them had training to teach at secondary schools. In their own schooling background, the teachers were past students of language and literature in traditional face-to-face Caribbean settings; their predominant assessment traditions being the essay format.

Because of diffuseness and infrequency of meeting times, over the years e-mail has been established as the predominant mode of contact in the English Curriculum unit. Prior to setting up the blog, all the teachers had e-mail accounts and functional computer literacy. To supplement this, a hands-on tutorial on *Blogger* was conducted and teachers were given a take-home guide. The few teachers who were not fully conversant with computers or did not have computers at home could access help and facilities at the SoE, at their schools, or at Internet cafés.

Methodology: Using Activity Theory as an Analytical Paradigm

Since the main goals were getting teachers to interact in communities of practice and generating a shared teaching/learning environment, activity theory seemed a logical investigative paradigm. The use of activity theory in collaborative learning, especially human-computer interaction (HCI), is well established (Collis & Margaryan, 2004; Frederickson, Reed, & Clifford, 2005; Jonassen, 2006; Nardi, 1998; Russell, 2002; Scanlon & Issroff, 2005). An activity system is composed of “interacting components (subject, tools, object, division of labor, community, and rules...)” working in subsystems of “production, distribution, exchange, and consumption” to achieve some outcome (Jonassen, 2000, pp. 4–5). A

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blog, for example, is an activity system composed of interlocking components, since blogging brings together people who are engaged in a system with in-built expectations, norms, and agreed rules or conventions of operation.

The subject or subjects are the persons interacting in the system; tools are the artifacts used as the materials for knowledge formation, such as websites, e-journals, videos, and books; objects/objectives are motives or purposes of the learning system set by the users; and the community is the gestalt formed by the people involved in the system, since learning takes place in “communities of practice” and contexts of use (Bødker, 1995, para. 3). Division of labour or distributed learning is generated by the participants as their exchanges expand or illumine a topic; and the outcome is some measurable evidence of learning. As for outcomes, Nardi (1995) enumerates at least four criteria by which they can be judged:

1. *A research time frame long enough to understand users' objects, including, where appropriate, changes in objects over time and their relation to the objects of others in the setting studied.*
2. *Attention to broad patterns of activity rather than narrow episodic fragments that fail to reveal the overall direction and import of an activity.*
3. *The use of a varied set of data collection techniques including interviews, observations, video, and historical materials, without undue reliance on any one method...*
4. *A commitment to understanding things from users' points of view, as ... in the practical need for getting the ‘natives’ point of view in [the] study of technology in the classroom.*

(“Methodological implications,” para. 1, p. 47)

Organization and Management of the English Curriculum Blog

Nine topics were posted on the blog at intervals of approximately one week apart over the period September to November 2006. Each topic formed its own activity subsystem and unit of analysis within the bigger interlocking English curriculum blog. Topics from the secondary school literature, language, and communication studies teaching syllabi were chosen on the following basis: (a) for their topical nature in the public domain (e.g., censorship of literature—*The Humming-Bird Tree*); (b) for their newness on the syllabus and teachers’ likely unfamiliarity with them (e.g., *Developing Oral Communication Skills*); (c) for teachers’ expressed difficulty in teaching them (e.g., *Teaching Grammar*); and (d)

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for the support they could yield to research practices (e.g., *The Literature Review*). The nine topics in order of appearance on the blog were:

1. Struggling Adolescent Readers
2. Project Gutenberg and Bibliomania — Electronic Literary Resources
3. 100 Top American Speeches: Rhetoric — Electronic Literary Resources
4. The Humming-Bird Tree: Teaching Theme
5. Developing Oral Communication Skills
6. Teaching Grammar
7. What is Critical Literacy?
8. The Journal of the Imagination in Language Learning: Teaching Resource
9. Writing the Literature Review

Teachers had the option of posting anonymously. However, the researcher suggested to the teachers that using real names would inculcate ownership of learning and provide validation for comments, particularly if they wanted to use material from the blog in their teaching portfolios (an end-of-programme requirement). Only two unidentified comments were made. These were later claimed by the two teachers, one citing difficulties with posting, the other “self-consciousness” at her first posting. As blog administrator and tutor, the researcher posted under two alternative identities periodically to jumpstart topics or to act as provocateur. At other times the researcher posted under her own name.

Modelling Rules and Sourcing Tools

To indicate to the teachers that she was a member of their community of practice, the researcher-teacher-educator used “we” in composing topic prompts. For example, the prompt for the first blog topic read: “Although we were successful last year in many areas of our practice, we intend to experiment specifically with more strategies....” Rules of operation required teachers to: (a) bring research from resources (such as websites) that would broaden their teaching approaches, and (b) engage in reflective discussion pertaining to teaching with regard to these resources. Sourcing tools required finding relevant resources, including websites, to match topics. Thus, analysing and discussing tools, whatever they might be, to throw light on topics and clarify teaching practices went hand in hand with sourcing them. Given the low quantity of Caribbean educational material on the Internet, most websites linked to would, of course, be foreign. To provide understanding of topics and to

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encourage reflection and analysis of teaching content, teaching benefits that teachers could gain from responding were suggested, as can be seen in the prompt for Topic 1. To further cushion the teachers' initial attempts, the researcher initiated the first blog response under an alternative identity, modelling features such as reflection, participation in a community of practice, distributed learning, and analytical use of tools (See blog topic, *Struggling Adolescent Readers*).

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The main data for this study consisted of the teachers' responses on the blog at <http://5240english.blogspot.com/>. Two post-blog questionnaires were also administered (see sample in the Appendix). The first was administered in the week after the last topic was posted to get teachers' self-evaluations on areas such as topic preferences, interactivity experiences, challenges, and opinions on blogging as a learning tool. The second questionnaire was administered two months later in keeping with Nardi's (1995) view of using "a research time frame long enough to understand users' objects" in the assessment of outcomes. Additionally, the blog administrator and researcher-teacher-educator kept a computerized diary of e-mails received and replies sent to teachers. This diary archive consisted of reminders to post, notice of new topics, and advice to teachers who e-mailed about difficulties with posting.

Data analysis was done using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, ANSWR. Coding was based on the standard interlocking elements of activity systems. Consequently, codes used were:

1. subjects or participants
2. tools and use according to rules
3. objectives
4. evidence of distributed learning
5. generation of communities of practice
6. observance of topic rules/requirements
7. level of interactivity

"Contradictions" or "breakdowns," a feature of activity systems, was also included as a criterion. Three types of breakdowns, based on Bødker's (1995) formulations, were factored into the analysis: (a) breakdowns due to computer problems (physicals); (b) breakdowns due to misunderstanding and misuse of information; and (c) breakdowns/contradictions emanating from ideological tensions and

opposition to information during blogging, which could signal the process of change and learning.

Findings and Analysis

The Operational Dynamics of the English Curriculum Blog as a Teaching/Learning System

Of the 22 teachers in the English Curriculum group, 2 did not participate (one male and one female). Both cited computer problems as the reason. For the 20 teachers who participated, response statistics for the 9 blog topics showed a topic mode of 3, a median of 3, a mean of 3.65, and a standard deviation of 2.00; thus indicating that most participants responded to just one third of the topics, and that the spread between highest and least responses to topics was large. In fact, only 7 of the 22 teachers responded to more than half of the topics, and most of them were the teachers assigned to the researcher-teacher-educator for supervision. *The Humming-Bird Tree*, which featured a current controversy surrounding censorship of the Caribbean literature text so named, generated most topic responses (13 teachers), while topics that involved manipulation of computer-based tools and foreign-based material, such as *Project Gutenberg*, *Bibliomania*, and *Top American Speeches*, generated the least responses (5 teachers each).

The low response to the electronic resource sites needs more follow-up. However, Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, & Krause (2008) suggest that technological factors may be attributable, not the least of which is perhaps “the lack of homogeneity...with regards [sic] to technology and a potential ‘digital divide’ between students within a cohort of a single year level” (Section: Discussion). These researchers continue:

While some students have embraced the technologies and tools of the ‘Net Generation’, this is by no means the universal student experience. When one moves beyond entrenched technologies and tools (e.g. computers, mobile phones, email), the patterns of access to, use of and preference for a range of other technologies show considerable variation.

This explanation seems plausible; for although teachers of the English Curriculum persisted if they wanted to post, using the computer as more than a glorified typewriter was new for some, and may have accounted for the low level of posting in some cases. As one teacher wrote, although she posted successfully:

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I definitely need more time to navigate around all the resources that are on offer to our curriculum group before I can make a more informed comment. I have to admit that I am a bit overwhelmed [sic] by the technology, though I use my computer everyday. There are some internet resources that I have shied away from for one reason or another. Right now I am not even sure that I am posting my comment in the right place!

This teacher's comment about not being sure about posting in the right place suggests that in a future implementation of blogging or any other e-learning strategy, "lecture capture" could be used in the initial stages of demonstrating the use of particular electronic tools intended to be incorporated in a course. Lecture capture is "an umbrella term describing any technology that allows instructors to record what happens in their classrooms and make it available digitally" (Educause Learning Initiative 2008: Section 1). Lecture capture would have allowed repeats not only for technical aspects of tools, but reflective aspects as well; for although there are intellectual property rights issues in its use, it "enhances and extends existing instructional activities, whether in face-to-face, fully online, or blended learning environments," and it facilitates instruction, particularly "in subject areas where students benefit from repeated viewing of content" (Section 4).

Scepticism and cultural defensiveness seemed also to have affected posting. For although many of the teachers who posted found the sites useful, they expressed concerns about the near absence of Caribbean material on the sites and about barriers to access such as the low socio-economic and literacy levels of their students, which could lead to student disengagement. The following posts of two teachers are examples:

(1) I felt that there are some drawbacks to the teacher that uses Project Gutenberg [sic]. The project excludes Caribbean texts. Thus the student may unavoidably receive the message that the classic Caribbean text and situation are not as important as the classic English, the American etc. those regions represented in Project Gutenberg [sic]. Another effect of using audiotexts that exclude the Caribbean text is that the very students that the teacher is trying to assist may in fact experience alienation from the literature used. Thus, instead of achieving reader ideals (such as reading engagement, lifelong reading, critical literacy) in the student, the teacher thus builds an alliterate or even a weak reader. The teacher must be very wise in her use of the audiotext in a Caribbean setting.

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(2) Project Gutenberg is indeed an interesting and useful resource in the classroom. However at my school, 80% of students do not have access to the internet nor do they have an appreciation for reading.

These reservations are reactions that future implementers of e-learning in the Caribbean should anticipate. In parts of the world where e-learning is just getting off the ground and, as a consequence, local visibility on the Internet is low, teachers should be prepared beforehand for their near cultural invisibility in cyberspace, by perhaps being asked to reflect on what avenues could be used to deal with the issue, especially since their visibility in print educational material is often similarly miniscule.

Nevertheless, among the teachers of English Curriculum, where cultural adaptation was thought possible, relevant aspects of foreign websites were cited as positives, as the following post for *100 Top American Speeches* illustrates:

Thank you for the web site. It would be an excellent supplement to use in Communication Studies particularly the Internal assessment where part of the students' exams would involve a speech..... [I]n terms of analysing language elements, I would use the "I have a Dream" speech by Martin Luther King. This would make an impact on my students since the present American culture has a growing impact on Trinidadian youths especially through Black music (R&B and rap).... While the content of the speech is inspiring to youths to overcome obstacles, the elements of persuasive orating are varied.

On the whole, (a) identification with topical local and cultural issues and (b) concerns about new topics on the Trinidad and Tobago syllabus seemed major factors in teachers' response to topics. The high response to the controversial topic of gender and sexuality in the Caribbean novel, *The Humming-Bird Tree*, supports this view. *Developing Oral Communication Skills* was another topic that generated high response. The latter was a new examination feature of the secondary school syllabus, with which teachers had indicated they needed help, because of their lack of competence with teaching Standard English in the Trinidadian Creole context. However, high involvement did not necessarily mean a high level of research or good use of tools. In their responses to both topics, teachers tended to focus more on personal experiences and their own views, rather than on observing the rules of the blog, which required them to: (a) bring research from resources (such as websites) that would broaden their teaching approaches, and (b) engage in reflective discussion pertaining to teaching with regard to these

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resources. The following post on *Developing Oral Communication Skills* is one example of such limitations:

The aspect of oral communication as regards the lower school is new information for me. We have recently taken in form ones and this is my first term of teaching them. My head of department has yet to bring this oracy aspect of the syllabus to my attention. However, now that I have heard about it I will start doing my research and interfacing with the members of my department to ascertain their knowledge and preparedness for this aspect of the English syllabus.

Thus, although teachers shared information among themselves, their communities of practice remained parochial and chat-based.

On observing that teachers were not using the web as a ready resource for the topics *Teaching Grammar* and *Critical Literacy* with which they were unfamiliar, the researcher-teacher-educator began to direct searches, providing examples of websites to stimulate discussion. However, many of the responses were merely regurgitations from these websites. The following example from the *Critical Literacy* blog gives little analysis, personal reference, or intimation of how the teacher would use the ideas in her own teaching:

• *Critical Literacy is an ongoing learning process that enables one to use reading, writing, thinking, listening, speaking, and evaluating in order to effectively interact, construct meaning, and communicate for real-life situations.... The goal is development of critical thinking to discern meaning from array of multimedia, visual imagery, and virtual environments, as well as written text.*

• http://www.bridgew.edu/Library/CAGS_Projects/LTHOMSON/web%20page/literacy%20definition.htm

• <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/contareas/reading/li300.htm>

With regard to the uneven responses alluded to above, Nagy and McDonald (2007) may shed light for further implementation of e-learning in the Caribbean. Reporting on research in higher education in Australia, they note that students' traditional cultural patterns of education impact their learning styles and responses to learning. Citing various scholars they note:

Entrants to higher education in any country bring with them embedded learning foundations and abilities based on various culturally defined paradigms. These learners may struggle to adapt to the student-centred focus common in many western centric higher education institutions (Zobel & Hamilton, 2002; Hinton, 2004). Kawachi (2000, p. 42) notes that "Western

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conceptions and approaches are not transferable across cultures and that global distance education providers need to become more culturally sensitised to individual differences.” (p. 741)

Nagy and McDonald suggest greater flexibility within ICT use in e-learning. Their observations highlight, at the very least, that consideration and planning must be given to potential fallout arising from differences in cultural educational traditions in e-learning adaptation.

On the whole, though, a low level of critical thinking was not the norm on the blog. Nevertheless, on topics where teachers were making accommodation to new information and teaching strategies that they were unfamiliar with, there was a tendency to individualistic, exercise-driven responses. Few teachers posted more than once on any topic, again suggesting that they were not engaged in dialogue, but responding in the traditional paper-based assignment mode.

With regard to interactivity, *The Humming-Bird Tree* was the topic during which teachers made most sustained reference to each other. On most of the other topics they did not use the format of addressing each other directly; nor did they link or thread ideas. This tendency to individualistic response seemed to be associated with factors such as teacher personal linguistic style, textbook attitudes to learning, unfamiliarity with the topic being discussed, years of teaching experience, and type of school at which the teacher was teaching. The comments of the two males on the blog on *The Humming-Bird Tree* are representative examples. One male was in his early thirties, the other in his late thirties; one had been a graduate secondary school teacher for 10 years, the other for only 1 year; one taught at a prestige school, the other at a low-achieving public school. Both responded to few topics—one to four and the other to three—and in this last respect, they can be thought to represent the mean. However, while the longer-serving male, who taught at a prestige school, did not refer to any colleague by name, his style was very interactive. The following excerpt illustrates:

Upon preliminary reading i dont [sic] see what all the fuss is about...it is quite common for a speaker who is so emotionally engaged with his subject to become base especially if that person is not possessed with the gift of 'gab' there is nothing startling about this. i may go so far as to ask the class to 'look' into their own repertoire of verbally assaultive language. is there a realistic assault tone to these words or are these hyperbolic? The Buddah of Suburbia'...those of you who do not know dealt with themes as these though much more explicitly.... Chaucer expounded on these issues in the Nun's tale....

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The high level of engagement above contrasts with the following short response from the other male that comes almost at the end of topic:

I was asked to give my views on the Hummingbird Tree during an interview. I tried to say that text should be taught in context. However now I will say that text should be taught to suit the psychological level of the student.

The stilted tenor and the lateness of this posting suggest “lurking” (visiting the blog without necessarily becoming involved in posting). However, these very two factors indicate that the blog was serving as a site for reflection, gestation, and ideological change. Also, as is evident from the shorter response, a low level of interactivity did not mean that there was diminished division of labour or limited distributed learning. Teachers rarely repeated each other’s ideas, suggesting that they were reading each other’s posts, although their interactive behaviour did not signal that they were doing so. Of note, too, is the fact that the teachers who posted most often did not necessarily have the most reflective statements, share most information, or show strongest evidence of enhancing communities of practice. As with the two males above, personality, attitude, intellectual acumen, and literary awareness of individual teachers were larger factors in the level of thoughtful exchange on the blog.

Teachers’ Views About the Usefulness of the Blog

Outcomes of activity systems are not customarily assessed in limited time frames (Engestrom, 1999). Therefore, two post-blog questionnaires were administered—the first questionnaire, one week after the last topic was posted and the second, two months later—to gain more comprehensive feedback about the blog. A major objective of the second questionnaire was to gauge whether the blog was still having an effect on teachers’ practices after a delayed interval. Seventeen of the 22 English Curriculum teachers responded to post-blog Questionnaire 1 and 16 to Questionnaire 2.

Teachers’ responses revealed that by far the most frequent reason for the low levels of posting was time constraints. Extrinsic factors such as “tutor reminder” and the desire “not to seem delinquent” propelled them most often to post; while intrinsic factors such as topic interest and curriculum relevance took second place. An interest in interaction was cited twice as prompting posting, while self-motivation was cited only once. Nevertheless, all the teachers who responded found the topics and the exchange on the blog helpful. Some indicated that they had become aware of website resources that they had not known of before and this

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had stimulated spin-off initiatives they were considering for the future. For example, arising out of using *Project Gutenberg*, one teacher wrote:

I have used the idea of the audio book in a few of my classes (Macbeth) but due to time [I was] unable to continue. A good idea though and one that I am sure to continue using. I am also thinking of recording excerpts from various books on the curriculum to use in class next term.

One teacher with Internet access in her classroom introduced her class to blogging: “It [the blog] has made me rethink talk in the classroom. I now include techno talk, and blend it differently now with the oral, visual and other literacies.... The blog is teen-friendly....” Another teacher, who had no Internet facilities at her school, had started a paper blog:

My Form 3 students...wanted to have a blog of their own but since our school does not have lab facilities with internet access, I decided that we would create a blog using flipchart paper on the back of the classroom. Every week I provide a topic and provide them with paper to write and ‘post’ their contribution.

Additionally, Questionnaire 2 revealed that teachers were using information from the blog two months after it had closed in the preparation of their action research project, which required each teacher to create and implement an intervention of lessons to address a curriculum problem with a class. All the same, only one teacher had set up a blog, although the majority of them said that their teaching had been influenced by the blog. Two cited lack of technological know-how and one lack of Internet access as reasons. However, eight said they had visited other blogs. More follow-up is needed to be able to assess whether the use of material from the blog two months after was merely opportunistic, that is, for their action research projects mentioned above. Further, considering the negative impact of time constraints on the initiative, and that many of the teachers felt they would have more time to implement blogging “after Dip.Ed.,” it would be useful to find out the extent and purpose of teachers’ use of blogging or any other e-learning medium after the Dip.Ed.

Researcher-Teacher-Educator Insights and Implications for Future Use

Major challenges for the researcher-teacher-educator were: (a) dealing with silence and reticence on the blog, and (b) the time-consuming nature of preparation of prompts for the topics. With regard to dealing with silence and isolation, Benfield (2001) suggests “face-to-face induction”

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to HCI and “get to know each other sessions” prior to the start of online classes (para. 5). He also considers defining expectations, developing a persona or voice, and devoting space to “social” communication, to be just as important in online as in face-to-face teaching. In retrospect, one realization is that more attention needed to be paid to social communication. For although there was much in the affective domain on the blog, the researcher’s preoccupation with academic objectives and fear of losing control to lightweight conversation suppressed the teachers’ wider communication needs. Creating a parallel social forum might have engendered more trust and less isolation as well as generated better and more sustained learning outcomes.

Also, the researcher’s decision to limit her voice on the blog and at times to disguise it, using alternate identities for fear of seeming to dominate, might not have been wise. A more prominent and sensitive voice might have led to better achievement of objectives. Additionally, the teachers could have been allowed to share administration of the blog. For although half of those who responded to Questionnaire 2 indicated that they were comfortable not initiating topics, either because of time constraints, or because they preferred to respond to the directives of the tutor, the other half wanted “to be allowed an opportunity to guide the discussion,” “to converse with others in class about stressful areas (like deadlines),” and to “have been given the opportunity to express [their] concerns regarding teaching and the Dip.Ed. Program.”

Preparing prompts was very time-consuming and just as challenging as dealing with blog silence. Much time was spent revising the wording of topics to achieve the “right” tone to entice the teachers to respond. In retrospect, doing seminars with the teachers, prior to and during blogging, specifically on how to do Internet searches and how to analyse, reflect on, exchange, discuss, and thread ideas in an online learning community would have made the experience more effective. For as a user of different kinds of web-based material herself, the researcher had adapted to various cultures and modes of online communication that she assumed the teachers were proficient in, since e-mail was a regular mode of communication in the group.

Implementing blogging within the traditional face-to-face structure of the Dip.Ed., as was done in this experiment, was not blended learning, but such an approach can be considered. It could be to the advantage of the Dip.Ed., given the time and contact constraints of its present format, to devote a portion of its teacher education and assessment to e-learning. For one, this would broaden teachers’ exposure to alternative ways of teaching and learning in teacher education, and, secondly, this would make the question of whether or not to make an e-learning component

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compulsory null and void. In this regard, some consensus about how much and how best to incorporate blended learning could be worked out.

All the same, in light of the mere 30% response on the English Curriculum blog and the abstention from participation of the two other teacher-educators of the English department (although they encouraged their students to support the blog), this researcher feels, like Nagy and McDonald (2007), that a “‘one size fits all’ approach is inappropriate for both academics and students” (p. 744). The contexts that Nagy and McDonald cite are similar to those under which technology is being adopted in the Caribbean, and so relevant aspects are here stated:

Many higher education institutions have used ICT as a way of providing educational access to new kinds of students, such as mature aged, and/or external national and international students. However, the idea that advanced learning technology could provide both more effective pedagogy and lower costs has been largely dispelled through the last few years in which on-line learning has been conceptualised as the delivery of a product. It is now widely accepted that a sound pedagogical underpinning has been largely missing in these developments (McDonald & Mayes, 2005). In their study of the failed uptake of elearning in America, Zemsky and Massy (2004) suggest that “the hard fact is that e-learning took off before people really knew how to use it.” (p. 739)

Nevertheless, Nagy and McDonald do not exclude e-learning; rather they recommend “flexible learning” that takes into consideration both students and academic staff, noting the “disempowerment and loss of academic autonomy” (p. 740) that some staff feel, and the fact that “many academics have engaging oratory skills and when required to embrace on-line approaches to learning struggle to adapt” (p. 739). They posit that it would not be cost-prohibitive to offer a pedagogical model incorporating ICT that values diversity of teaching-learning styles, cultural backgrounds, learning traditions, and preferences. They recommend flexibility and choice such as the “three models of student on-line learning - the independent learner, the interactive learner and the collaborative model initiated at the University of Southern Queensland” (McDonald & Reushle, 2000, as cited in Nagy & McDonald, p. 740).

Overall, the aims of the English Curriculum blog were moderately achieved. As stated earlier, these were to: (a) promote an interactive, research-and-reflection archive through online discussion; (b) introduce course content through readily available website resources; and (c) engage teachers in communities of practice, while exposing them

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simultaneously to the wider world of pedagogy in the teaching of English. Undoubtedly, carrying their face-to-face operations alongside voluntary participation in the blog resulted in academic overload. As a result, for the future it is suggested that, since the experience showed that blogging can promote interactivity, research, and reflection on curriculum content, it can be integrated into the Postgraduate Diploma in Education at UWI, once educators are prepared to invest time and effort in designing flexible models of e-learning to suit the evolution of the institution.

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Appendix

Sample Post-Blog Questionnaire

About Blogging in General

- A. Was the English Curriculum blog your first time at blogging?
(Circle one) Yes No
- B. Did the tutorial help to make blogging easier when you were on your own?
Yes No
- C. What did you know about blogging before blogging for this course?

About the English Curriculum Blog 2006-2007

1. Did you post on the English Curriculum blog?
(Circle one) Yes No
2. If not, what factors caused you not to post?
3. If yes, to what topics did you post?
4. What prompted you to post?
5. Were you able to express yourself as you would have liked to on the blog? Explain.
6. Were the topics helpful? Explain.
7. Were the comments posted to the topics useful? Explain.
8. Were there topics that you would have liked to see on the blog that were not there? Examples?
9. Would you have liked to post your own topics? Explain.
10. What is your opinion of blogging as an educational tool?

