

Research Proposal

Using Blogs in an Adult Literacy Classroom

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Introduction

Adult students often return to school to improve their reading and writing skills to obtain further employment or higher education. These students write stories, letters or journals to practice their writing skills. As a former literacy instructor, I have witnessed students become bored and sometimes leave school because these tasks have little meaning in their real lives. However, as the world becomes more technological, there are new writing opportunities like blogging that could engage and motivate students to write more. Blogging refers to writing regular online entries on personal webpages called blogs.

According to constructivism, students learn best in active learning environments where they can interact and engage with others. I believe learners will find blogging helps them improve their writing skills because blogging is an authentic activity. Previously, many of my literacy students enjoyed using the computer to write emails and documents. Students can also blog at home which helps overcome barriers to adult learning like transportation costs and child care. The following research proposal outlines my topic statement, literature review, methodology, significance of research, limitations, and conclusion.

Statement of Topic

I am investigating the use of blogs in an adult literacy classroom to determine if learners' writing improves and to determine if students are more motivated with blogs than with traditional writing. I believe my study could help literacy instructors determine whether or not to use blogs in the classroom.

Possible research questions include:

1. Will students be more motivated to write regularly using blogs?
2. Will students' writing skills improve by using blogs?
3. Do students feel writing blogs helps them improve their writing skills?

Key Words

Blogs are personalized online entries written in reverse chronological order. *Adult literacy level 3-4* means reading and writing sentences and paragraphs according to the requirements of the Ontario Ministry of Education.

The following literature review outlines current studies regarding blogs and writing. I will present themes from the literature and show how my research project will fill a gap in current studies.

Literature Review

My review of current literature shows that active learning engages students and that blogs motivate students to write. Themes I discovered include community, engagement as motivation, and improved writing.

Community

In "Culture in the online class: using message analysis to look beyond nationality-based frames of reference," Hewling reviewed previous blog studies to investigate the blogging culture of students. Hewling (2006) suggested students feel like part of a community while blogging which motivates them to write more (p. 340). Hewling (2006) reviewed earlier data collected from two Australian discussion groups to make her determination that students follow rules and norms associated with communities (p. 342). Although Hewling confuses the reader by suggesting online culture exists and then suggesting it

does not, she still establishes that students feel like part of a community while blogging which motivates them to write.

Schmidt (2006) also showed students become part of a community when they blog. In "Blogging Practices: An Analytical Framework," Schmidt compared blogs and discovered students follow norms and practices while blogging which suggests they were part of a community. Schmidt also showed how students become motivated in this community when they add their own blogs or 'voices.' Although Schmidt does not describe how her research tools measure data or how she will analyze it, she still shows how communities are formed while blogging.

In "The Ties that Blog: Examining the Relationship between Social Ties and Continued Participation in the Wallop Weblogging System," Lento, Wesler, Gu and Smith show how bloggers are motivated by social connections. They analyzed data from one specific blogging program over a five week span to determine students who feel connected continue writing. However, their short study of one blogging system might not be able to be generalized. Other studies show students are motivated to write when they are engaged with content and others.

Motivation and Engagement

In "Exploring educational use of blogs in U.S. education," Hong suggests blogs engage students which motivates them to write. Hong reviewed previous studies and determined students feel engaged because they choose what to write and receive feedback from others. However, beyond these findings, he does not outline his thesis clearly. In "Collaborative Blogging as a Means to Develop Elementary Expository Writing Skills," Drexler, Dawson and Ferdig conducted a study to determine if engagement and feedback would improve writing in children. They determined that students felt motivated when they received feedback from student-teachers who assisted them. Their study did not contain a specific

timeline. However, I believe they demonstrated motivation through engagement. Further review of the literature showed that blogging helps improve writing skills and computer skills.

Improve Writing and Computer Skills

In “Blog Writing Integration for Academic Language Learning Purposes: Towards an Assessment Framework,” Murray, Hourigan and Jeanneau (2007) studied blogging with language-learners over a four year period. They determined students’ writing skills improve when blogging. Although they mentioned developing a new pedagogy which they did not explain clearly, they did show how writing in blogs motivates students.

In, “That’s Online Writing, Not Boring School Writing: Writing with Blogs and the Talkback Project,” Witte conducted research to determine how instructors could combine online writing and literacy improvement. She set up a collaboration project between students and teachers. However, her study ended prematurely when school officials became concerned over privacy issues. Despite the difficulties, Witte showed that students were motivated to write when blogging.

Overall, previous literature suggests students are motivated to write while blogging because they feel like part of a community and they are engaged with others. However, I did not find research about blogs helping adult literacy students specifically. Therefore, my study is needed to fill this gap in the research.

Statement of Hypothesis

The purpose of my study is to determine if blogs motivate adult literacy students to write more and if blogs help improve their writing. I will use quantitative and qualitative research methods to determine if writing using blogs is more effective for motivating students than traditional journal

writing. Following is my methodology which includes a description of participants, measuring instruments, procedure, and data analysis.

Methodology

Participants

Participants include adult literacy students in two literacy classes at the Adult Learning Centre in Ontario. There are 20 students in one class and 16 in the other class including 22 females and 16 males. Students are aged 19 – 52 years old and come from various cultural backgrounds. All students are at level 3-4 literacy ability. Both groups have various computer abilities.

I selected these students because I worked at the school for 7 years and believe the students represent adult learners throughout Canada. Furthermore, knowing the teachers gives me easy access to the classes. I am aware that using non-random purposive sampling may cause bias but believe these groups are still representative of other learners. A control group will write in traditional journals and an experimental group will write using blogs.

Measuring Instruments

Initially, I will interview the students to determine their motivation to write. I chose the unstructured interview because students will feel more at ease if we talk about the study. Secondly, I will read blogs and journal entries. Like Hewling (2006) in her study of discussion boards, I will use “content analysis” to discover themes or patterns in discussions (p.342). Also like Hewling, my sample will be small since only one literacy class will be blogging. I will use a writing rubric based on ministry guidelines to determine writing skills because this is part of the literacy curriculum. Finally, I will re-interview students to determine their motivation levels after the study. I realize people might not

answer interview questions truthfully which may cause the study to lose validity (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2009, p.9). Furthermore, Gay, Mills & Airasian (2009) suggest obtaining consent and maintaining the privacy of students by ensuring confidentiality or anonymity (p.22). Consent forms will be updated if anything changes during the study. I will use triangulation to ensure validity.

Procedure

I will get permission from the school, instructors and students for my four month or one term study.

1. I will conduct a study in two literacy classes in Kitchener where students are at level 3-4 literacy levels.
2. One group will write weekly journal entries to improve writing.
3. Another group will write weekly blog entries.
4. Both groups can write about any topic meaningful to their lives.
5. Both groups will begin in September when they start classes and end in December at the end of term.
6. Both groups will be instructed in journal writing.
7. Group two will be given blog instructions as well.
8. Both groups will be asked to submit 1-2 entries a week.
9. Both groups will be given equal class time and told they can work further at home.
10. Students will be interviewed about their motivation to write.
11. Instructors will give feedback to both groups.
12. Instructors will assess quantity and quality of writing.
13. Students will be assessed in accordance with the Ontario Ministry writing levels to see if their writing has improved.

14. Students will be interviewed at the end of the term to determine how motivated they were to write and if they think their writing and computer skills improved.

Data Analysis

I will take notes during the interviews and determine student motivation using a scale from 1-5. I will read weekly journals and blogs to determine writing levels in accordance with both instructors. Writing skills are determined using a literacy rubric for level 3-4 literacy levels. I will collect data over time to ensure reliability and because I realize blogs may take a bit of time to establish.

Furthermore, I will use a qualitative method of analysis and look for patterns and themes in the collected data, blog and journal entries, and interview answers (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2009, p. 7). I will remain open minded while analyzing all data and try to understand the students. However, I realize limitations may include a small sample size and my closeness to the subjects.

Significance of Research

Overall, I believe my study fills a gap and my results can be generalized to other groups of adult literacy learners. This study will help educators determine if students who use blogs are more motivated to write, and if their writing improves. These results could encourage instructors to incorporate educational technology in literacy classrooms for the dual purpose of helping learners improve their literacy writing skills and gain computer literacy skills. Students now need both skills to pursue further education or find employment. With my study, I expect to find evidence showing adult lit learners write more with blogs, improve writing and are motivated to write. However, I realize this assumption can also bias my study.

Limitations

As a researcher who worked in these classes, I realize my role might bias my findings but I feel my ease of entry is worth the risk. Second, my sample is small which may affect my results. However, my use of quantitative and qualitative methods and triangulation will help me determine how blogging affects student writing. A third limitation could be if some other variable causes the change not the one I am testing. Another threat is mortality because it is very common for literacy students to drop out of classes during a term (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2009, p.245). Privacy issues may be a concern if administrators worry about students writing publicly. Furthermore, students may lack computer skills or be uncomfortable writing for an audience.

Conclusion

Overall, adult literacy students may benefit from blogging by becoming more motivated to write and by improving their writing skills. Previous literature suggests blogs engage learners who feel connected to their content and to others in blogging communities. My study would fill a gap that exists by researching blogs in adult literacy classrooms. The results of my study could be generalized to other adult literacy students. Furthermore, my study could be replicated to determine if literacy learners at various literacy levels benefit from blogs.

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