Teacher professional development through blogging: Some preliminary findings

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Abstract

The emerging trend of the use of innovative technologies to support teachers’ teaching and learning is indicative of the increasing dominance of technology in educational environments. One aspect of the use of technology is the developing online technologies where teachers are in an online interactive platform to share knowledge on their teaching practice. Blog is one of the online interactive platforms, commonly used by teachers to interact with their peers which not only makes them cognizant of the usefulness of technology but also helps them to learn how to integrate the technology to support teaching. Utilizing the theory of community of practice and through observing blog activities of teachers, this paper attempts to present some preliminary findings to show that teachers’ sharing of their practices within the communities facilitates collaboration and sharing of knowledge that benefits both the teachers and their students. It is based on a study involving 7 Iranian EFL teachers who shared their experiences and knowledge within the community through blogging for one semester. The initial findings suggest that blogging has a positive effect on teacher learning within a community of practice.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Keywords: technology, blogging, online community of practice, teacher learning, teacher professional development

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, technology has dominated the domain of education around the world. Studies have shown that the use of technology in education has increased dramatically (Fifoot 2000; Mann 2000). Research
studies in various domains of education unanimously shared a common finding that the use of technology is effective in forming and developing innovative teaching methods (Miner 2004; Timucin 2006). In addition to improving and promoting teaching methods, technology has been found to have the capability to enhance cognitive, affective and behavioral learning of the students (Friggard 2002; Miner 2004; Timucin 2006). Some scholars went further to propose that a fruitful integration of technology may result in utilization of different methods of instruction in an environment replete with collaborative work, interaction and communication (Riasati et al. 2012). Hence, it is not surprising that foreign language educators and practitioners have been encouraged to incorporate technology to increase their quality of pedagogical practices.

It is generally acknowledged that the first step towards the successful technology integration is supplying the resources, but what is more important is to train teachers to use technology and arm them with methods for a better use of technology to achieve their instructional goals (Niederhauser 2001). According to Levin & Wadmany (2008), educators and instructors can integrate technology for different purposes such as formal training, time and practice and professional development opportunities. Teachers may refuse to work with technology due to two reasons: they might not be cognizant of the ease in which technology can be used to enhance learning, and they may not be aware of the fact that technology provides a much easier method to make curriculum development, planning lessons, galvanizing students and tracking students’ achievement. Thus, the ways to integrate technology should be shared with instructors and training provided if necessary (Graham, Tripp & Wentworth 2009).

2. The Context of Teaching in Iran

Many universities, in Iran, set up their own language laboratories equipped with various materials such as computers, different software, tape cassettes, CDs, and video scripts (Kashani 2009). However, these materials are used for a very limited time of two hours per week. In many cases, teachers ignore using them. Despite the fact that it is quite permeating in the universities, its pervasiveness does not necessarily correlate with its classroom utilization. These teachers are still using traditional pedagogy in teaching different skills of the language, especially writing.

While it is believed that technology is of great assistance in teaching and learning a language, inclusion of technology into education is not rampant in Iran. This beckons the question whether teachers in Iran believe that technology can assist them to increase the quality of EFL teaching and learning. It can also be mentioned that teachers do not use technology as they may face a lack of understanding about the impact of technology integration on improving their teaching and students’ achievements. Sayadian (2009) argued that although research showed that technology is an effective means for enhancing educational opportunities, many teachers neither use technology as an instructional delivery system nor integrate technology into their curriculum. They never think of the fact that technology can boost the quality of their own teaching through shared practices.

What the researcher of the study found out from her email correspondences with the lecturers of the two universities was that this is the scenario in Iran which spurred her interest in carrying out this research. The participants are seven university teachers teaching in the same domain of education in two universities. These teachers agreed that they had never integrated technology into their curriculum and they had never shared their practice with one another. This is where the intervention that the researcher designed for this study will solve these problems; introduction of technological tool in the form of blog activities for the teachers to share their pedagogical practices on the teaching of writing.

3. Related Literature

According to Wang & Hsua (2008), blog is a socially interactive, collaborative Web 2.0 tool which was initially considered as a personal journaling tool. The asynchronous nature of blogs allows individuals to write
their thoughts and beliefs at their own pace disregarding time and space constraints. Apparently, most blogs are used for personal and journalistic purposes (Godwin-Jones 2003; Richardson 2005); however, it is important to note that a great number of people have been using blogs for educational purposes (Richardson 2005). Blogs are being used in classroom practices in different educational systems. It helps users to share and exchange their knowledge, ideas and opinion which creates a setting appropriate for social constructivist learning (Wang & Hsua 2008). Currently, many educators are testing its capabilities in the academic domain (West 2008; Paulus, Payne, & Jahns 2009). An educational blog can also be considered as an additional communication channel between teachers and learners through which they can communicate by means of a different media (Du & Wagner 2005).

Blogs which primarily work as online journals might be an advantage to teacher development in three ways. First, blogs are easily accessible to readers. Second, blogs not only have personal uses but can also be used for interactive and collaborative purposes. Finally, blogs can provide functions for immediate publishing and editing (Suzuki, 2004). Previous studies suggested that blogging is an efficacious means for professional development (Jeffrey & Hadley 2002) and critical reflection (Yang 2009). Stiler and Philleo (2003) studied the use of blogs as online journals in two groups of pre-service teachers and learned that both students and teachers thought of blogging as a unique tool that could boost reflective development and construct online communities. Blogs, which can function as online personal journals as was mentioned earlier, can act as incentives in galvanizing teachers to record and reflect on their teaching processes (Ferdig 2007; Ray & Coulter 2008). Moreover, blogs improved the creation of online communities in which collaboration and interaction amongst teachers provided insights, perspectives and directions for teacher development.

Blogs can further be regarded as vehicles for online communication where teachers share ideas with each other and receive feedback and support. An increasing number of teachers have begun utilizing blogs in their teaching practices and professional development. Eekelen, Boschuijen, and Vermunt (2005), in their studies of teachers’ self-regulating processes in blogging, learned that the process of reading and writing online journals led to the professional development of both pre-service and in-service teachers. Loving et al. (2007) also examined how blogs could play a role in a teacher networking project and noticed that blogs assisted the construction of a network amongst the teachers involved in the project. The resources and ideas were shared by teachers through the blogs which allowed teachers to reflect on their own practices. Murugaiah, et al. (2010) conducted a research on the role of blogging on teachers’ professional development and its role in building computer-assisted language teaching skills. English language teachers from Malaysian smart schools, who shared their practice through blogging, were involved in the study. The findings indicate that interaction through the blog led the teachers to be exposed to the needed skills for computer-assisted teaching and helped them to boost their abilities. Krish et al. (2012) found the usefulness of blog in advancing teaching practices and boosting a community of practice. The findings indicate that blogs helped them to share teaching practices to a large extent; however, it could only partially succeed in enhancing collaborative efforts among teachers.

To surmise, previous studies conducted on blogs have displayed that blogs play an encouraging role in teachers’ self-reflective practices, assisted in conceptual development through sharing of materials and ideas, and improved the construction of online communities that produced connection amongst teachers. Few studies have concentrated particularly on English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Iran. Therefore, this paper investigating blogging and Iranian EFL teachers’ professional development within the community of practice is both timely and crucial.

4. Framework of the study

This study is framed by the theory of Community of Practice (CoP). The phrase ‘community of practice’ was coined by Lave and Wenger in 1991. In fact, (CoP) is a model which is developed in line with social constructivism’s stand on the sharing of experiences within a community. This sharing of experiences,
knowledge, problems, and insights can be accomplished by means of interaction through face-to-face or online modes.

According to Vescio, Ross, & Adams (2008), communities of practice are considered as an effective platform for the professional development of teachers. Some researchers have reported on the positive effect of professional learning through community of practice (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009). Educators and teachers can benefit when they engage themselves in online communities of practice. Recently, (CoP) have begun to gain popularity as evinced in the studies by Babinski et al. (2001); Chen, Chen, & Tsai (2009); and Hur & Brush (2009).

5. Methodology

The main point of this investigation is teachers’ learning and sharing of knowledge within the community of practice paradigm. In order to acquire a deeper understanding of learning within a community of practice, this study introduced qualitative action research and integrated technology into the teaching practice of 7 EFL teachers from two universities in Iran namely Abadan University and Behshahr University. All the teachers who were interested to participate in this study were experienced university teachers with four to seventeen years of experience. Five male and two female teachers were involved in this study. The participants were invited to participate in the research through email correspondence. A blog was created for the teachers to share their teaching practices for one semester. Prior to the blogging activity, the teachers were invited to participate in training sessions on how to post and respond to each other’s comments and also how to write personal accounts on teaching writing with technology. The researcher participated in the blog activities as a participant observer and moderator. The participants were free to comment on each other’s post and they could make as many postings as they liked. The researcher worked as a moderator and helped to monitor the progress of the blogging activity. The instructions were posted in the blog every two weeks and the blogging activities lasted for a semester. The content of the blog was based on teaching writing (free writing and academic writing) with technology. In this activity, the teachers were supposed to implement the task which was posted to them via the blog and share their views and participate in the discussion. At the beginning, the teachers were not active, but later after intervention by the moderator they began to post more. The observation was systematically written down by the researcher and the blog entries and teacher reflections were collected during the end of the semester. Then the qualitative data were analyzed based on themes and patterns that emerged from the data.

6. Findings and discussion

Findings indicated that the teachers really enjoyed incorporating technology into the teaching of writing and had positive comments towards being a part of the community. Almost all of the teachers emphasized the usefulness of technology in teaching and learning. They believed that technology benefited both themselves and students. The teachers found the experience generally positive and mentioned that through blogging they could learn a lot by sharing their views with other members of the community. Indeed, what they learnt were influenced by whom they interacted with over a period of time. Two important themes appear in this study: Blogging as a medium for collaboration and sharing knowledge, and technology supports learning.

6.1. Blogging as a medium for collaboration and sharing knowledge

Different technological tools can be used within online communities such as email, wikis, blogs, chats, and podcasts. Wenger (2005) stated that the easy use of any tool should be considered and the selection should match the goals. Here, the choice of blogging as a technological tool was a correct choice as it led to a richer and more
significant participation among members. It created meaningful participation and matched the goals of the group. Blogging has proved to be an effective way of creating an online CoP and helping the participants to reflect on their professional practices (Luehmann, 2008; Stiler & Philleo, 2003; Yang, 2009). Teachers’ collaboration inside the blog made them feel less isolated as they could support one another and share their ideas easily. Teachers could learn from each other.

Sample1:
In response to Teacher 1 who stated that “My students didn’t respond well. They post hardly.” Teacher 2 said: “You can add good topic and ask motivating question.” Teacher 1 answered “I think Teacher 2’s success is due to good components inside his blog and the way he responds to his students is quite challenging and different.” Here Teacher 2 tried to advise Teacher 1 on how to make her blog more meaningful for her students. Through this interaction, Teacher 1 and other teachers were able to learn how to make their classes more interesting. Such exchanges promote meaningful technology integration.

Sample2:
Prior to blogging activity, Teacher 1shared: “Before being introduced to blogging, I had no idea what blog was but after a period of time working with it, it made me realize it is a great way to share our practices with colleagues. Just write what you really feel.” Here, it is clear that, Teacher 1 is feeling free to express himself in the blog. The blogging activity had brought about a safe and free space for the participants to share their personal feelings easily. By considering themselves as a member of community of support and practice, as themselves called it a ‘family’, teachers could support each other towards the ultimate goal of CoP.

6.2. Technology supports learning

Using blogs for teacher-teacher communication led to the building of awareness and understanding of blogs and also enrichment of the teaching and learning environment. The blog entries revealed that the teachers and their students learned a lot from participating in the blog’s environment. For example, Teacher 2 said, “I just think blogging is great way of learning because it allows us to give comments and to see other views.” In a discussion on the benefit of class blog for student, Teacher 4 declared that blogging improved his student ability to write and their reflection abilities. “It’s unbelievable! Now they fully know what they are going to write”.

Regarding the influence of using video clips on student, Teacher 5 stated: “my student are encouraged to write. They have their own voice. I’ve asked them to write a story on the video and they created creative piece of writing.” Teacher 7 viewed teaching with technology as something enjoyable and motivating which facilitated the process of teaching. She declared:

With traditional way, it was really boring. Just go to the class and write set of rules. Give them a topic. Expect the students to write and again the same process for the next session and expect them to get a good mark. Now, everything has changed. Technology made things simpler.

Teacher 5 also had a very positive view towards integrating technology to the teaching of writing. He said:

In EFL context in which students are not able to write well until obtaining a language degree, using technology for motivating students to write is like adding spice to the food which makes it tasty. My students were always absent and had no interest in writing. It is surprising that they themselves ask for new topic to compose.

Most of the teachers believed that the level of students’ engagement is increased by integrating technology to the teaching of writing. The students’ learning has increased as a result of their classmates’ support. According to
Bender (2003), peer support facilitates learning in online environments.  Teacher 3 said: “this online tool let the students to interact with their classmates that was not feasible in the classroom due to the time limitation.” This comment is confirmed by one of the student participants who said: “I am definitely a better writer with my classmates’ help. At the start I was afraid, now I have the confidence to write and share my ideas with them.”

It is clear that the collaboration though the blog allowed the students to interact efficiently and share ideas and opinions. Blogging encouraged the students to benefit from each other and boost their writing ability.

7. Conclusion

This study is a preliminary study that investigated the role of blogging on teacher’s professional development and its impact on teacher’s learning and teaching practices. The results suggest that the blog is useful in promoting collaborative interactions within CoP. According to McLoughlin & Luca (2000), providing a suitable environment and support for teachers is a prerequisite for productive teaching and learning method. In this research, providing CoP opportunity to teachers has lessened their isolation and augments the sense of problem solving between them. The blog represented a space for the teachers to expedite online discussions of teaching writing. Blog, as one of the online interactive platforms, provided the opportunity for EFL teachers to have interaction with peers which not only made them aware of the usefulness of technology but also helped them to learn how to integrate the technology to support teaching. Although this is a preliminary finding, it does give some insights on how teachers’ sharing of their practices within the communities facilitates teacher learning and can assist them to develop professionally in the domain of teaching writing with technology.

Teachers found that peer support and evaluation had motivated the students to write better. Thus, the sharing not only helped the teachers but also their students as the knowledge these teachers gained were imparted to their students. If this practice continuous consistently over a long period of time, the sharing will bring about changes in their teaching and help them to develop professionally. Thus, although this is a preliminary finding limited in scope as it involved only a small group of teachers, the study managed to give some insights on how teachers’ sharing of their practices within the communities can facilitate teachers’ learning and teaching. In addition, the blogging activity also assists them to develop professionally in the domain of teaching writing with technology.

References


