

Wikis, and Podcasts, and Blogs, Oh My! (Lessons Learned)

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Introduction

We were inspired by a Will Richardson (Richardson 2006 and <http://www.weblogged.ed.com>) presentation in August 2005 to begin exploring pedagogical potentials of using new Web technologies in our classes at the University of Indianapolis. We observed the ubiquitous iPod ear-phones traveling silently across our campus. The iPod has been called the Swiss Army Knife of electronics. We also watched students in our computer labs checking e-mail and visiting blog and chat sites. What is currently referred to as Web 2.0 is a shift in use of the Internet to allow students to use Web applications and save files online, to share ideas and files with other users, and to create original graphic, text, audio, and video content (Bull, 2006). We became aware of the anywhere, anytime delivery of content, emphasis on writing, reading, speaking, and critical listening that were possible (Alexander, 2006). We were also aware that the iPod gives students with special needs something to hold, a useful feature for special education students (Blaisdell, 2006). And most of our students are aware of the one famous wiki site, the wikipedia (at <http://www.wikipedia.org>).

The specific Web 2.0 applications we explored were blogs, wikis, and podcasts. We emphasize that we lacked support to explore these technologies. The university Information Systems staff approved what we did with the understanding that they would supply neither resources nor support, and they have been true to their promise. Therefore, we found free resources whenever possible and bought meager equipment to allow this pilot to begin.

The pilot was used with an educational technology class offered to first and second year teacher candidates at the University of Indianapolis. Our purpose was to integrate the technologies fully into one assignment, not merely to use podcasts, for example, as a way to deliver class lectures online.

The next section is a discussion of the resources we explored. The final section of this paper discusses the actual pilot and its successes and challenges.

Resources Used

We spent considerable time gathering and reading educational technology publications and Web posts related to our plan. From that and some time-consuming trial and error we determined that the following free Web resources would form the basis of our plan:

Blogs: Free blogs are easy to find, and they have a notorious reputation. Misuse of blogs and the negative reporting of inappropriate blogging activities made this an important decision. In the end we settled on using what is generally considered to be the dominant and easiest-to-use free blog, Blogger at <http://www.blogger.com>. We created blogs with one administrator, the instructor. Students could reply to any post created by the administrator, but in order to save their reply, they were required to log in to blogger with their user name and password. Although this took a bit of time for each student, the result was that it was clear which student was responsible for which reply

Wikis: We tried several free wikis and settled on seedwiki at <http://www.seedwiki.com>. It is extremely to use and presented no problems for us. Accounts can be created very quickly, and it is not necessary to have a seedwiki account to use the wiki once it has been created. The result was that unless a user who changed the wiki added their name, it was not clear who posted what.

Podcasts: This was clearly the most problematic issue, especially since we had no financial resources at first. A podcast is just an audio file in mp3 format posted to a Website that is downloaded to a computer automatically by the computer's podcast software, that in some cases may be the free and cross platform Apple iTunes. We will discuss the process and results further in a later section of the paper, but the resources we used included purchasing a USB microphone (Samson C01U USB Studio Condenser Microphone, about \$80), the only purchase we made. We used free, cross-platform Audacity sound editing software to record and edit the files. This worked but was sometimes a problem. Mac users will enjoy using GarageBand 3, part of the iLife 06 software suite. It has robust podcasting and sound editing tools for the Mac. (See Johnson 2005 for a detailed description of creating a podcast.)

We needed a Web site to store our sound files and settled on the free site at <http://ourmedia.org>. Other more costly solutions include purchasing a .Mac account for Mac users or a subscription account to Liberated Syndication (LibSyn for short) at <https://www.libsyn.com>. The cost is presently \$5 per month for 100MB of storage each month. Ourmedia did the trick for us. We continue to explore finding local server storage on campus, but they aren't returning our calls!

In order for the podcast to work properly, we needed to have the OurMedia files linked from a blog. We used a free site at blogger.com.

Finally, podcasts need an RSS (Real Simple Syndication) enclosure in order to work properly with podcast software. Had we paid for a LibSyn account, this would have happened for us more-or-less seamlessly with that product alone. But we didn't have money, so we used the free Web-based FeedBurner at <http://www.feedburner.com>. It proved to be only a little complicated to use, and the results, once we figured out how to use it, have been very good and reliable. Mac users can choose to purchase a .Mac account to solve this issue also, and there are other solutions. FeedBurner is often mentioned in the literature and seems to be a reliable solution.

Our Department of Teacher Education purchased a second Samson USB microphone for us to use with our classes. Other than that, to date we have spent nothing.

The instructor created hyperlinks in Blackboard and TaskStream to the blogs, wikis, and podcasts created for the class. Students used these resources as they completed their assignment to create a new lesson using innovative technologies.

Internet Safety

We teach technology courses for teacher education candidates. One of our concerns was to make our approach something that could be applied in the K-12 sector as well as in our college classes. We developed and piloted an acceptable use agreement to which all of the students agreed and signed. We had no problems related to inappropriate use of the applications other than occasional silliness that could be expected from 20-something students. The document we used follows:

The following statements apply only to external blogs, wikis, and podcasts on the Internet used for this class. They do not apply to your use of Blackboard and TaskStream, both of which are securely password protected.

I agree to the following terms of use for shared communication resources on the Internet for this class:

1. I will not post inappropriate material to blogs, wikis, or podcasts shared for this class.
2. I will not provide my full name, e-mail address, photo, or personal information about myself to areas shared for this class.
3. I will not reply to any inappropriate material that may be posted.
4. I will report any inappropriate material posted to Internet resources used by this class to the instructor.
5. I understand that inappropriate use of shared Internet resources for this class will result in a lowering of my grade and other possible action.

Your signature below indicates you agree to abide by these statements.

Name _____

Date _____

We also had concerns about copyright considerations in the classroom and attempted to follow the law with our student projects. (For more information on the Copyright law as it applies to classrooms, do a Google search for "TEACH Act.")

The Pilot:

We created a new assignment for the class EDUC220/586, Technology in Education I, ordinarily taken during the first or second year. Students were told on the first day of class there would be a new and experimental assignment they would help to shape. We thought part of the experience would be to use a wiki as a vehicle for the instructors and students to design cooperatively assignment guidelines for this class and for subsequent classes. The instructor started it with only skeleton guidelines. The assignment divided the class into groups of three or four roughly assigned by content area interest and elementary education major versus secondary education major. It became evident as the assignment began that the instructor needed to be a little more specific. Students contributed several good ideas. The final assignment statement reads as follows:

Collaborative Learning Assignment EDUC 220/582 Spring 2006

The intention is to use the group assignment as an exercise in exploring new media such as blogs, wikis, and podcasting and relate them to instruction based on the ISTE NETS-S standards for students. For this assignment you will be divided into small groups by the instructor. Each group will have its own blog space and its own wiki space.

Guidelines:

The group leader should convene your group during class. Choose a name for your group.

The instructor will create a blog and a wiki for your group and share the URLs with your group.

Read the National Educational Technology Standards for Students (NETS-S) on the inside front cover of your textbook, or find them at <http://www.iste.org>.

Decide and agree upon a topic for your group activity. It should have some relation to the NETS-S standards, but you will be given considerable freedom by the instructor as to exactly what you will do.

Some possibilities might include:

1. Create and use a blog site and a wiki to create a presentation for our class. It might result in a PowerPoint presentation or a Podcast on a topic related to NETS-S standards
2. Create and use a blog site and a wiki to create a lesson plan for a given subject and age level resulting in a WebQuest or podcast
3. Create and use a blog site and a wiki to create a lesson plan for a given subject and age level resulting in a video production.

4. Create and use a blog site and a wiki to create a presentation for our class that could be shared with others.

Present your project to the class.

Send the instructor TaskStream e-mail with the URL of any blog, wiki, or website you used.

Send the instructor TaskStream e-mail in which you describe your contribution to the group in relation to contributions of the other members.

Attach additional files, such as a PowerPoint slide show, to the instructor through TaskStream e-mail.

You will be graded using the rubric for this assignment.

You may be asked to complete a written evaluation of this assignment.

East student's grade for the assignment was based on two parts: a group grade was given to all students in the group and assessed the quality of the final product. The second individual grade was given to represent the individual's contribution to the group activity. Students created the following rubric using TaskStream for the instructor to use when determining the individual portion of the grade:

Group Project Rubric-use this				Created with www.taskstream.com
Levels	Unsatisfactory (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Excellent (3)	Your Score
Criteria				
Participation	Student was excessively absent, and did not participate while gone, or did not participate while present.	Student often contributed while present, with few absences and acceptable amount of work.	Student frequently contributes more than is expected; no absences.	
Group Grade	Group's work is sloppy and contains multiple errors, and there is little creativity in the assignment.	Group worked together to create an assignment that is somewhat creative, and contains minimal errors.	The Group Project is unique and creative, and contains no errors.	

Results:

No group chose to create an original podcast, though they had all participated in an instructor-created podcast. They indicated it would be too complicated and time-consuming. In a lesson created by one of the groups, they indicated that their own students would use a podcast as the final project of the unit plan. Apparently more instructor assistance or urging is necessary for the teacher education candidates to enter into the podcast realm. Each group used their own blog and their own wiki to some degree of effectiveness. Most effective was use of the wiki. They used it to divide their work efforts and as a part of the lesson they created for their hypothetical class.

The blogs were used, but they were not popular with the students in this pilot. When asked later why this was, comments related to their common use of blogs to share personal interests, hobbies, or thinking on a number of issues. They were not as comfortable using that medium as they were with the wikis.

In a survey administered by the instructor to all class members, they indicated they would use blogs and wikis with their own students. They might consider using podcasts. They were generally positive to the use of these tools for instruction.

Lessons Learned:

We will use these technologies in our classes again, and we have a plan to expand them into our advanced educational technology classes, but we have learned a few things and will ask ourselves the following questions:

1. How much time will be required to use a new technology? We devoted considerable time in this effort. Much of that time was very late at night and over vacations.
2. Are the new Web-based resources safe for students? Our local media reported widely, and on more than one occasion, the misuse of blogs where adult men communicated with underage girls in inappropriate ways. Though our teacher education candidates were all over age 18, we made them aware of potential dangers and asked that they report them to the instructor immediately.
3. Will adequate support be provided to the instructor from the institution? We had practically none, and we succeeded despite this. We must note that our institution was aware of our efforts and blessed them.
4. Will there be rewards from the institution for instructor efforts!? We discovered that although the institution was not willing to provide much in the way of support, there was some recognition that the effort was useful and might eventually be applied by other instructors in their classes
5. Will student learning improve sufficiently to warrant spending time and money in this effort? Our student survey of attitudes toward using these technologies was encouraging. Casual observations of students engaging in learning using the new resources suggest that there was greater motivation to complete a successful assignment. The ability to share information with others seems to be a factor in the success of the assignment.
6. Can parents/students be expected to have iPods and computers with fast Internet Service Providers at home? We believe this may be a difficult problem in some situations. Home access to Web-based technologies, especially podcasts, depends on a fast connection. Podcasts once downloaded don't require an iPod. They can be heard directly from the computer, but the "cool factor" may be diminished. On our university campus everyone has access to computer labs to participate in these media. This benefit may not be available universally.
7. In a K-12 setting might some of the Web resource sites be filtered and therefore be unavailable to students even in school computer labs? This is potentially a large problem.
8. Are these passing fads that will fade in a short time? Time will tell, but other Web developments such as Yahoo, Google, online chats, Web-based course management systems, and eBay seem to have established as permanent and useful technologies.

Conclusion:

Pilot use of blogs, wikis, and podcasts with a course in instructional technology for preservice teacher education candidates at the University of Indianapolis was successful. Student group projects using the new Web-based media were of generally high quality. A brief survey of student attitude toward using blogs, wikis, and podcast technologies in their own teaching showed a general willingness on a part of the class members to employ them. Difficulties such as steep learning curve and large time commitment by the instructor, lack of campus technology support for the effort, and concerns for Internet security and Web filtering continue.

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