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Blogging as a Tool to Organize the Profession-oriented Independent Work of Future Teachers

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Abstract

The relevance of the study in question is caused by the growth of students' independent work and the need to train future teachers so that they can organize this work more effectively using modern technologies. One of the optimal information and communication technologies for organizing students' independent work is blogging. Therefore, this paper explores the attitude of future teachers towards blogging, its potential forms of use in organizing students' independent work.

The key research method to study this problem, in our case, has been the survey of Vocational Training students. It helped us to determine what future teachers think about blogging as a teaching tool, what skills they have and do not have for this, and also the problems that a teacher may face when organizing students' independent work with blogging.

This paper discusses the main features of blogging as a teaching tool. The criteria for assessing the results of student blogging, the stages of student blogging following the authors' methodology, are presented.

Moreover, the article shows the results of experimental work where the Vocational Training students have been writing their blogs in Russian for over a month. In the research, it was found that student-bloggers lack independent thinking, while the majority of participants would prefer to use blogging in their future teaching activities.

The results of our research conclude that the use of blogging to organize students' independent work facilitates the development of the required competencies such as professional language competence. Furthermore, it is proven that the experience and skills of blogging provide more opportunities for educators in their job and career.

Keywords: profession-oriented blogging, blog, students' independent work, professional language competence, vocational teacher, professional training.

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Introduction

In the context of the digitalization and informatization of higher education, the growth of students' independent work demands researchers to search for the suitable teaching tools to organize it effectively based on the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and focused on the professional development of future university graduates.

The analysis of scientific and pedagogic literature on this issue (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003; Kennedy, 2003; Montero-Fleta & Pérez-Sabater, 2010) has shown that one of such tools is a student blog, a website with profession-related content written by a student for a specific amount of time. Despite the high potential of blogging in organizing students' independent work, the lack of methodology for their use in professional training of future teachers is evident.

What helps to use blogging as a Web 2.0 technology in teaching is not only the fact that it is effective when students have active interaction with each other. It is also helpful because the modern "digital" generation of students has the basic skills to work with websites and web applications. These skills include fast adaptability to new technologies, the ability to create and keep a profile in social media, and teamwork skills with online interaction (most pronounced in multiplayer computer games).

However, two features of ICT use must be emphasized. Firstly, even though the new generation of students is called digital natives, it does not at all mean that it is a generation of digital *learning* natives. Even if it seems to teachers that most of the students embrace new digital means much faster than themselves, this does not hold true for all the students, as some of them experience difficulties adapting to basic software. More than that, the ease of embracing these technologies drops as their complexity grows. Therefore, as e-teaching experts recommend, it should not be taken for granted that students have all the skills developed to work with any type of ICTs. Instead, one has to make sure that, to perform a certain task, each student has a sufficient level of skills developed for this (Reid, 2018).

Secondly, one must remember that language e-learning tools, blogging in particular, cannot and will not replace human face-to-face interaction. Nonetheless, these and other ICTs combined with the appropriate conditions and methods of organizing students' learning could form a complex learning environment where students can practice their language skills (Kulikova & Poddubnaya, 2015).

Thus, blogging is the optimal tool for creating such an environment for language skills development. Students, then, have to publish their content only in a foreign language, while communicating with each other via the comments section to their blog posts.

Purpose and objectives of the study

Purpose of the study is to find out how the potential of student blogging can be used to organize the independent work of students being trained to become teachers.

Literature review

Unlike social media tools such as Facebook and Instagram where there is a high chance for students to send and receive messages in their native language, in blogging, if the learning around it is organized properly, the number of such messages can be minimized. This is important because the posts and messages in a native language are interpreted by interacting parties as an asocial behaviour and a lack of literacy towards other members of the language environment. In such a learning activity as blogging the language is viewed only as a tool for performing a communication task (Slesarenko, 2009).

The main features of blogging that help to discern it from other websites are as follows (Blood, 2002):

- 1) *Chronology*. Each blog post contains the date and time of its publication, with latest posts at the top of the webpage and first posts at the bottom.
- 2) *Restriction to one topic*. Initially, a blog was supposed to be an online diary of a user, but today most authors fill their blogs with the content limited by one specific domain or topic.
- 3) *Social orientation*. Each blog is focused on a specific group of readers, the audience, with respect to which the content of the publication is chosen.
- 4) *Commenting*. If the author enables this function, readers can leave comments on his or her blog page asking questions and sharing their opinions about the content of these posts.

Teaching activity, while student blogging, according to Hourigan (2010), can be as follows:

- Encouraging students to do their exercises, reminding them about the deadlines and goals of this job, praising and using other incentives for timely and high-quality performance;
- Providing relevant and authentic content in a foreign language, in some cases – evaluating the quality of materials chosen by students themselves;
- Constant improvement of teaching techniques.

Also, certain peculiarities of teaching activity with Web 2.0 technologies are noted in the pedagogical literature, such as a demanding administrative and analytical work, in some cases – the need for supplementary, highly structured guidelines to which students could refer to solve frequently occurring difficulties. Moreover, it is necessary to let students know that blogging as a teaching tool not only makes acquiring a foreign language easier but also develops critical thinking, writing skills and creative abilities (Hourigan, 2010).

Shishkovskaya (2013) suggests the following list of necessary actions a student has to take when preparing for and keeping a blog:

- 1) Choose a topic and a goal for having a blog.
- 2) Determine necessary steps-tasks allowing to reach this goal.
- 3) Search, read, translate, analyze and structurize the information based on the algorithms, techniques and tools provided by a teacher.
- 4) Create a blog and fill it with the multimedia content that would be most appropriate to its topic and goal.
- 5) Reflect on the content of one's blog regularly based on the criteria provided by a teacher and, whenever necessary, make changes in planning or choosing the content.
- 6) Adjust the level of exposure to one's blog and enable or disable the comments feature.
- 7) Compare and discuss the results of the work with peers, make conclusions and necessary changes in the process of blogging.

According to Dieu (2004), for successful blogging a teacher also must:

- Provide students with instructions for creating a blog and filling it with content (text, images, audio, video);
- Organize student blogging as a long-term activity: less «teaching the language», more monitoring and identifying the systematic mistakes in the use of linguistic means;
- However possible, organize peer-to-peer interaction, as our-of-classroom work in particular;
- Engage other teachers and/or experts in the blogs' topics with a sufficient level of professional expertise and language training;

- Depending on the goals of the work, establish minimum restrictions on the choice of style and use of linguistic means to give students more freedom to explore their blog's domain;
- Help students to adjust notifications about other students' new posts using RSS or "Newsfeed" embedded in a blogging platform such as Wordpress.

Among the advantages of blogging the researchers mention their usability, availability and minimum expenses when introducing it into the learning process. Furthermore, blogging as an ICT tool can be implemented with any of the online platforms most of which support a free version.

Thus, blogging does not require a large amount of knowledge and skills because the software developers of the most popular platforms are usually focused on the end users who possess only basic ICT skills. For example, to create a blog, the only thing that is required from a user is to have a device with Internet access. Therefore, in the context of our research, blogging is considered to be the optimal tool based on which it is possible to organize students' independent work.

Methodology

To find out how student blogging can be used in preparing future vocational teachers for their professional activity, a teaching experiment has been conducted at Kalashnikov Izhevsk State Technical University (ISTU). Its participants were ten second-year students from the training program "Vocational Training (in different fields)". In this experiment, the students were to keep their profession-oriented blogs for five weeks. Before this experiment, they were acquainted with the features of blogging and the ways a vocational teacher can use it in his or her professional activity. Also, a lecture was given covering the procedures and stages of creating a student blog. Then laboratory work was organized for the students to learn how to make content for their blogs as part of their independent work.

For the specified period, the students have been independently keeping their blogs within the course "Practical (industrial) training" and were expected to prepare and publish five blog posts in their native, Russian language. The blogging experiment, among other features, implied the online communication of students' opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of a blog as a teaching tool and the ways a teacher can use it in his or her future professional, teaching activity. For the last of the blog posts, the students were to read a piece of a profession-related article in English and write a blog post based on this piece.

The final students' blog posts were commented on by the students themselves and by the teachers specifically invited for this purpose. In particular, to help the students prepare the last blog posts, which included reading and translating a text in English, a teacher from the English Department was involved.

To assess the quality of student blogs, several criteria were developed and approved using the method of group expert assessment. Future teachers and the teachers from the Vocational Pedagogy Department of Kalashnikov ISTU were appointed as the experts. The blogs of future teachers were assessed according to the following criteria:

1. Grammar and vocabulary: guides the development of students' language skills and practice of the knowledge and skills they acquired in their classes.
2. Logical coherence: encourages the clear and logically coherent expression of ideas on the chosen professional topic to help the blog's audience (e.g., the teachers and native speakers involved, other student-bloggers, other Internet users) to understand its contents.
3. Regularity of blogging: helps the teacher to manage students' independent work and motivate them toward consistent deliberate practice.
4. Having links to the sources used: necessary for the transparency of students' independent work, its management by the teacher, and assessment by the experts.
5. Independent thinking (absence of plagiarism): prohibits students from copy-pasting information from the Internet and encourages their independent thinking.
6. Ability to use professional terminology adequate to the communication situation: focuses students' attention on the development of their professional competence which makes it easier for them to communicate on a professional topic (both inside and outside the classroom).
7. Relevance of the blog's topic and its posts: allows students to choose the blog's topic (from the given list or one's own) which: a) motivates a student to do exercises regularly and at a high quality, b) is limited by the range of possible topics within the curriculum of their training program (Gareyev, Shikhova, Shikhov, & Krasavina, 2018).

At the end of their independent work, each of the students assessed both one's own blog (self-assessment) and two of the other students' blogs (peer-assessment). After that, the survey was organized to ask students about blogging as a teaching tool and the ways it can be used to organize students' learning.

Blogging methodology

Experimental work of future vocational teachers was organized following the teaching technology for organizing students' independent work which was developed as a part of thesis research (Gareyev, Shikhova, & Shikhov, 2019). The key component of this technology is the authors' methodology of profession-oriented student blogging. It consists of three stages: preparation, activity and reflection.

The preparation stage implies that a student creates a blog and chooses its topic, which is either formulated by the student or chosen from the list. This list is offered by the teacher and must be composed with the curriculum requirements in mind.

Then, at the same stage, students in cooperation with the teacher design their individual trajectories for their independent work. There are two types of possible trajectories: one is scientific which is used to train future masters' and PhD students, the other is engineering which is chosen by future engineers and technicians at manufacturing facilities. Within each trajectory, each of the students, under the guidance of their teacher, selects authentic information sources which would lay the foundation of their future blog posts, makes a scheduled plan of their publication, and defines the optimal conditions (time, place, method) of one's independent work.

Moreover, at the preparation stage, the entrance test is conducted to identify the initial level of a student's competence development (in the context of the thesis research, it is the professional language competence) and make an evidence-based choice of one's individual educational trajectory. To conduct such a test, a specific set of profession-oriented tasks was designed, which includes the translation of an English text on students' professional topic, its abstract writing, and creative problem solving that implies the search and analysis of scientific and technical information on the Internet.

The activity stage means the actual students' independent work of blogging. Once the blog's topic is chosen, students study the authentic foreign-language content in different formats (text, audio, video), analyze it and based on it prepare and publish their blog posts. Apart from that, each of the students composes a thesaurus of professional terms used in one's blog. After the students' independent work, they prepare and then give a presentation demonstrating the results of their work. The teacher's role at this stage is to motivate students and guide their regular blogging.

At the reflection stage, the current results of students' profession-oriented blogging are analyzed by their teacher. Final results are assessed by the expert group, which, among other things, determines how these results correlate with the goals of independent work, based on the criteria above.

At this stage, the teacher organizes regular feedback with students after looking through and analyzing the contents of their blog posts. Also, the mid-course and the final presentation of the results of students' independent work is organized by the teacher. As a result of this stage, if necessary, certain changes can be made in students' trajectories to optimize their independent work and increase its quality.

The teacher also encourages student-bloggers, foreign-language teachers, practitioners in the field, and native speakers to leave comments in students' blogs. As students' reviews show, their very understanding of the fact that their blog posts are read and commented on motivates them to work more and better.

The expected results of this independent students' work are stimulation of their self-learning and their transition to a higher level of their competence development.

The experimental base of the research is the Vocational Pedagogy Department and the English Language Department of the FSBEU HE Kalashnikov Izhevsk State Technical University.

Results

Analysis of the research results showed that the assessments of Vocational Training students (self-assessment and peer-assessment) correlate with each other and identify a high level of quality of their independent work. However, it is important to point out that most students did not receive the highest score in the criterion "Independent thinking", as a part of the published information was taken from Russian-based Internet sources.

The results of the survey demonstrated that 90% of the future vocational teachers would like to use blogging as a teaching tool in their future teaching jobs. This implies how relevant it is for a teacher to have blogging skills and the ability to organize students' independent work based on blogging.

As a result of profession-oriented blogging, the students were asked to share their opinions about how important it is to use blogging to organize students' independent work from both perspectives, as students and teachers. The future teachers have concluded that:

- Their writing skills are not sufficient enough;
- They experience difficulties when preparing profession-related content for their blog posts independently, by themselves;
- They are reluctant to show the results of their work publicly.

According to the students, these difficulties can be overcome if:

- The independent work of profession-oriented blogging is not an occasional, but systematic and regular activity;
- Individual consultations and the management of this independent work are organized by the teacher on a regular basis;
- The blog topics not only are focused on the professional activity but also require creativity from students;
- The content of blog posts does not duplicate other learning activities, and future teachers use blogging as a way to share the information about the work they did and discuss its results, not as a type of reporting about other assignments.

Future teachers also have pointed out that blogging is an effective tool to communicate certain types of information. For example, one can share the content of finished laboratory and practical assignments, awards and course projects which eventually make up their electronic portfolio.

An example of a blog written by a future vocation teacher, presented as a part of her electronic portfolio is available here: <https://myblog310797.wordpress.com>. Its author teaches her readers the basics of blogging, discusses its importance for teaching activities, and shares the examples of her individual and course projects.

The students believe that the ability to communicate with other students online enables them to conduct surveys and do research so that they quickly receive necessary feedback. As a result, profession-oriented blogging, according to most Vocational Training students, stimulates the development of their professional teaching competence.

At the same time, thinking of a blog as an effective tool to organize students' independent work, one of the students has emphasized how difficult it is to write blog posts on a regular basis claiming that "one gets tired of it quickly". This opinion proves that it would be reasonable to use blogging for independent work not on an obligatory basis, but only as one of the possible activities that students can choose voluntarily for their additional professional development.

The examples of blogs written by future Vocational Training teachers are available here: <https://kupsup.wordpress.com>, <https://comjan.data.blog>, <https://blo444417479.wordpress.com>.

Discussions

The results of our research have informed us that the two following questions require further, more thorough investigation.

Despite many of the students participating in our experiment who want to use blogging in their future professional life, the question of its obligatory use for teaching remains open. So far, the results of our studies show that students' independent work (not only of teaching programs but also of technical ones) must be optional, be only one of many possible forms. For instance, in one of our studies, comparing the results of two experimental groups, where blogging was obligatory and voluntarily chosen, the students from the latter demonstrated a much higher growth in their level of professional language competence (their independent work was focused on this competence development).

The other important question that demands further investigation is teaching students to think independently and express their opinion. Multiple studies point out the controversial nature of the Internet as a tool which is used by students in their independent work. On the one hand, it provides access to a lot of information and helps to find the answers to the needed questions, but on the other hand, the amount of this information is so large that it causes trouble in its understanding, navigating through this ocean of data, and provokes students to copy-paste the text they find, instead of examining it closely and expressing their own opinion.

In the given research, the lower score in the criterion "Independent thinking", comparing to the other criteria, proves how urgent this problem is. In the studies of Russian teachers and scientists, this problem is rather neglected. Hence, to help students develop their writing and blogging skills, it is highly recommended to motivate them to take responsibility for their learning and be proactive, create the space for them to express their opinion more often and build their own projects. This is especially urgent in technical universities where the paramount student activity is constrained within lecture classes which would be reasonable to promote students' active participation.

Conclusion

To conclude, according to the teachers from graduate departments in Kalashnikov ISTU, future vocational teachers who had the experience of blogging are much better than others at setting their short-term professional goals and being aware of their positive profession-related personal qualities, while demonstrating a broader spectrum of independent professional actions at their work placements.

It is also worth noting that, according to future teachers, having blogging skills and the ability to organize with it their future students' learning creates many opportunities for an educator. A teacher who is a confident user of ICTs and has experience in blogging can organize students' feedback effectively, as well as their independent, remote work. This is especially critical today when the teaching community searches for ways to adapt learning and communication with their students in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, a teacher with blogging skills could use this tool to improve one's image and position oneself as a modern and competent specialist.

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