**Assignment 2: Activity Evaluation**

**by: Michael Comeau**

**for: Kathy Snow**

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**Introduction:**

**I decided that a good way to have students do work online, both independently and collaboratively, would be by creating a blog. The content posts of a blog, coupled with the commentaries, allow for “enhanced opportunities for collaborative creation of content and, consequently, for collaborative, knowledge construction” (Jimoyiannis A.; Anglelaine, S., 2012, p.223).
As we had our final Healthy Living assignment coming up on June 8, 2015, I chose to have my first post as a model example of what the first task is: to describe their eating habits for each meal of the day, snacks they eat, what they usually drink, and to include how they can improve their eating habits. This would be the independent part of their experience. For them to work collaboratively, they would have to respond to postings of up to 3 students (or to my post and to 2 other students) in a meaningful way. A rubric was added to the blog to ensure that they would understand the importance of responding to the posts of others.
Links to informative Websites and to YouTube links were added so that students could see healthy suggestions for meals, lunches and snacks. This was also done in the hopes that students would have a more enjoyable experience checking other sources on the Internet, rather than have them do unguided research and possibly finding word-heavy articles; thus, losing momentum or motivation for this assignment.
My goal was to have my students more engaged in this assignment than in previous years, and to have them really reflect, collaboratively, on their current eating habits to ensure good habits at an age when they are just starting to enter puberty (grade 6).
I like the fact that a blog can not only be used within my classroom, but if we so choose, it can also be shared with students from a school in another country (for example, with their pen pals in Guinea that they communicate with through epals.com). In this way, this Healthy Living activity can easily become a cross-curricular assignment with Language Arts and Social Studies.
As Abulibdeh (2013, p. 84) points out, “Through communication skills,** **students are able to use e-mail group discussions and blogs to communicate with school communities and parents.” With parents having more direct access to their child’s work, it may also help ensure that their child is really doing their part to meet the outcomes (indicated in the blog post). They can clearly see how their child’s participation and contributions are when comparing their posts to those of other students. This type of social interaction promotes engagement and makes students feel happier as they enjoy learning more, (Abdulideh, 2013).
Another reason why I chose to do a blog is that it allows for all students to express their opinions and experiences. In group work, with the intent of having collaborative work done, this is not always the case. Where the blog is monitored by a teacher, peers cannot risk mocking or refuting what another has to say, as they may do so in group discussions – especially out of earshot of their teacher. This also prevents a student being left aside while one or more partners do most of the work (research on computer, reporting the findings, preparing the presentation on PowerPoint or Keynote, etc.). Abdulideh (2013) points out how Weiner suggests that children’s need for belonglingness and connectedness to a community of learners has to be taken care of, and I believe a blog that is well done and well monitored does so.
Students will be less afraid to post honest answers when they know how well monitored the blog is. Furthermore, the teacher can do as Baldino (2014) suggests, and have students create pseudonyms known only by the teacher. She also teaches her students how to post in a respectful manner that promotes critical thinking and honest peer interactions. Although my students have not created pseudonyms, I will run this idea by them. As Wong (2008, p 37) states, a blogs are a “powerful tool that enhances communication, foster critical thinking and encourages collaborative learning”. I look forward to experiencing this first hand with my class before this school term ends.**

**Methods:
I began by doing research on blogs in order to find out advantages for using them in the classroom, which sites may be best to create my first every blog, and their shortcomings. Knowing that our school board will soon be using Google Apps for Education, and that our school will have several new Chrome books for the coming school year (if not sooner), I decided to do a Google Blogger.
It was after our collaborative session online that I realised that I needed to do more research on finding and using an evaluation tool for my Blog.
I had already made up my own rubric in the style that I prefer (using rubistar.4teachers.org), with descriptors that give a clear picture of what each grade should look like, on a scale of 1-4 (as we mark all of our assignments). However, this was not based on tools used in research I had done. Once I did find a tool, I was quick to use it as my colleagues let me know that they could not assess my blog after the week of June 1 – June 5, 2015. The school year was ending and they would just be too busy. The rubric I did ask my colleagues to use was based on the Universal Instructional Design (Carter, Irene; Leslie, Donald; Kwan, Denise, 2012). The rating scale had 7 choices: extremely poor, very poor, poor, adequate, good, very good, outstanding, and not applicable. The example in the article I read had 12 questions, but my adapted version only had 9 as I felt that some of the questions were either not necessary or not applicable.
There were other tools I considered. One article described a two-factor model which distinguished between hygiene factors and motivator factors (Zhang, Ping; von Dran, Gisela M., 2000). The hygiene factors had to do with how user friendly the Website was, for example, whether links were live or broken. The authors referred to these factors as leading to having dissatisfaction or not. The motivator factors, according to the authors, would lead to being satisfied or not. Motivating factors would “enhance satisfaction with the Website, while their absence will leave users feeling neutral, but not necessarily dissatisfied” (Zhang, Ping; von Dran, Gisela M., 2000, p. 1256). The number of factors for each category (hygiene or motivating) was more than I felt my colleagues would have wanted to deal with when assessing my blog – 12 categories and 44 features.
Another tool I found was quite intriguing. It is called the WebMAC Professional, version 2.0, which stands for Website Motivational Analysis Checklist. What intrigued me was the final product, a 4-plot Cartesian plane on which a final score (like a set of coordinates on a Cartesian plane) indicates how stimulating and meaningful the Website is. It uses a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, or not applicable) for the following categories: Stimulating, Meaningful, Organized, or Easy-To-Use. There are 32 factors on two pages, from which you have to draw from to make your final score on the Cartesian plan. I do like how the tool was designed to assess Websites for either classroom instruction or for student use for assignments or projects. I did find it a bit confusing when it came to calculating the scores (the Stimulating and Meaningful scores gave a Value dimension, and the Organized and Easy-To-Use scores were the other dimension). These 2 values were very similar in nature to the hygiene and motivating factors in the two-factor model described in the previous paragraph. In fact, most articles I found related to these two factors: having a Website that is attractive and easy to use, and having a Website that is rewarding and makes you want to use it again (value).
One other kind of tool I tried to investigate was WebCHECK. According to Small, Ruth and Arnone, Marilyn P. (2014), WebMAC pro v. 2.0 was inadequate when it comes to being able to “process individual or group scores and provide reports of the results for a variety of purposes” (p. 61). WebCHECK is supposed to be an improved version of WebMAC, and has four different checklists for the various levels of schooling (for lower elementary; upper elementary/middle school; for high school students; and for educators). The problem is that when I tried to find this fully automated system on the site indicated in the article,** [**www.mywebcheck.net**](http://www.mywebcheck.net)**, it brought me to some other, unusable site. I will be looking into this evaluation system in the future, especially since it can supposedly be used for upper elementary and middle school, and it is automated with immediate results.
As in previous articles, Small and Arnone (2014) refer to the basis of this evaluation tool with reference to the Expectancy-Value (E-V) Theory (Fishbein, 1963), which “emphasized motivational quality while including functionality” (p. 60).
I do believe that the questions in my assessment tool address both factors that were stressed in several research sources: having a Website or eLearning instructional design that is both functionally easy to use and valuable in that it is practical and rewarding (meets the purpose for getting the job done). I will be certain to consider these two factors when choosing assessment tools for web-based materials in the future.**

**Results:
One of the challenges in using a tool may be to identify the factors/features as either user friendly, well organized and functionally working well, or stimulating, meaningful and satisfying. Of the 9 factors to be assessed in my assessment tool, based on the Universal Instructional Design (UID), there are 4 factors that I believe are “functional” features:
1. How well was the material presented in an organized, well-planned manner?
2. How well did the instructor communicate clearly and effectively?
3. How readable were the blog pages (font size, colour scheme, web design, etc.)?
4. How well does the blog provide clear guidelines and expectations for assignments?
I also believe that there are 4 of the 9 factors that are more “rewarding and practical” in nature:
6. How challenging was the material in the blog assignment?
7. How well does the blog site promote independent learning?
8. How well does the blog site promote collaborative learning?
9. How was the value of the overall experience using this blog?
There is one factor in the tool may be considered to be both a “functional” feature and a “meaningful, rewarding” feature. Even the three colleagues who evaluated my blog agreed that it could be considered to be in both categories of factors. The question is:
5. How well did the blog postings facilitate your learning?
In any case, the rubric has a good balance when using an approach of having 2 categories of factors.
As previously stated, three colleagues evaluated my blog. What is interesting is that all three teach grade 6 in the English stream, whereas the only grade 6 teacher who did not evaluate my blog (despite my request and despite wanting to use it with her students) is a grade 6 Early French Immersion teacher like me. Besides these three teachers, two of my four children also assessed my blog. I felt that it was important to get the honest opinion of children near the age of my students (especially since my students will be using the blog for an assignment). One of my children who assessed the blog is also in grade 6, and one is in grade 8.
Here is a chart of the results of the assessment of 3 colleagues and 2 of my children:
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**At a first glance, it would appear that the functional attributes of the blog (related to the first 4 questions, as well as to the 5th) seem to be the strength of the blog. I was told that the assignment was clearly communicated with an excellent exemplar, that the material was well organized and well sequenced (from the introduction of the exemplar and the brief but clear description of the task, to the excellent, workable links for practical information and YouTube videos), and that the guidelines and expectations were clearly outlined in the brief but clear description of the tasks and in the assessment rubric with clearly outlined outcomes. But the responses for question #3 and #5 were not as positive both on the grid and in the section for comments. It is because there were issues with visitors to the blog when trying to post a comment or a response – which was to describe their own eating habits.
When my colleagues tried to post a comment on the blog, they found that they could only do so if they had a Gmail account. Furthermore, once they did try to post something, whatever they posted disappeared once they clicked “publish” because another page opened up prompting the visitor to sign into Gmail. Once they did, their previous post disappeared and their 2nd attempt would work as their actual post. For this reason, I had to e-mail all parents so that they could support their children at home when they were ready to post something. Parents often let their children use their own Gmail account since they are too young to have a Gmail account (indicated once they try to create one with their actual date of birth; unless they lie!). The biggest stumbling block, however, was the fact that our school board denies access to all blog sites. So, after showing my students how to find my blog and post something on the assignment (using my “teacher” computer and an LCD projector), they found that on our mini-Ipads and student desktops that access to the blog was blocked.
So, some of the functionality problems were due to limitations with the use of technology in our school board, but unfortunately, one serious problem was the inability to just simply post a comment or an entry with their own school e-mail account. We thought that if all students got their own e-mail address using the link for the Google Apps for Education on our Website, that it would make things simpler; however, they could not post using that address (****username@gnspes.ca****; Google Nova Scotia Personal E-mail System). Had students (and teachers) been able to more easily post their entries, I was told that the blog would have been awesome!
I was a bit surprised that the answers for the last four questions, in the category of motivational factors (satisfaction; meaningful) that the answers were as low as they were. This is because I felt that the site promoted both independent learning (which scored well) and collaborative learning; however, the difficulty students and teachers had posting their entries did not allow for very much collaboration. Also, it takes time for the administrator, the teacher (me), to go through the postings before approving them to be published. This delay in a world where people are used to instant responses online seems to sour the value of the overall experience for the visitor to the site.
I think it’s very important to have a “comments section in any instructional design evaluation instrument, as it allows for clarification when necessary. Just checking off a box of “good” or “outstanding” for questions in the assessment tool does not allow for shedding light on specific aspects of a category. Furthermore, some of the questions were not specific enough for example, regarding the practicality of the useful links. In the comments, one teacher (who tried out every single link) wrote “you’ve chosen age-appropriate clips with which students can connect”. I thought this was excellent, encouraging feedback.
Overall, the only thing I think I would change with my assessment rubric would be to add a question regarding how challenging it was to complete your assignment – a functionality question. This would allow the evaluators to have a question that would cover the issues with having links that are very helpful, but also with having challenges being able to post their comment or assignment response.**

**Conclusion:
I never realised how important it was not only to have an assessment tool for an eLearning activity or a Website, but also to have the most efficient one possible. In developing one based on what I could find through research, I realised that they are similar in importance to the rubrics our students use for their assignments. To give a student a pre-made rubric from a teacher’s guide, or one that a teacher quickly made up, would be like researching rubrics and just using one directly from a source on the Internet. On the other hand, when developing a rubric with students in class (with the outcomes in mind), coming up with descriptors for each mark (facilitated by the teacher), reminds me of how the making of an adapted version of rubrics presented in different sources comes together with analytical reflection. Just as the students and the teacher discuss their opinions on what a category and its descriptors should be for an assignment, a teacher has to reflect on the opinions and examples of various kinds of rubrics used for assessing instructional design activities developed by teachers. It helps a teacher keep in mind the goal of the eLearning activity, in a similar way that students have a clearer understanding of their assignment as they determine the descriptors for each mark.
I remember well how I had a very difficult year with a spoiled, French Immersion class in a rural area, when they came to me in grade 10. When the going got tough, the road was always paved for them because of dwindling numbers. They were the 2nd group coming through, and the first group went from 30 students in grade 7 Late Immersion, to 18 in grade 10, and only 14 by grade 12. This group that I was about to teach grade 12 Global Geography to were not used to being pushed when I taught them History and Math in grade 10. When they saw me they were not happy (I would actually push them to speak French!). However, just a few days before, on the first day of school for teachers, a lady from the Department of Education had presented a workshop to us on developing rubrics for assessment with students. She offered to come back for my first class with this group. I was not surprised to see that they were not happy to see me, but I was surprised how we had a great year together! With the help of this lady, we developed a general rubric that made it not so difficult to get a 3 out of 4 in each category (or a B), but a challenge to get a 4 out of 4 (or an A). Only 1 student said that he would always give himself a 4 out of 4 when having input in his marks, regardless of his efforts; whereas the rest of the class seemed to enjoy having input into the making of their assessment rubrics for assignments and for having input into their marks (they had the opportunity, rubric in hand, to renegotiate a mark that they may not have agreed to).
Despite always having faith in rubrics, I now have a different outlook on them as I attempt to incorporate even more eLearning into my classroom activities. It is obvious that each different kind of eLearning will require time and effort to really have an efficient assessment tool to ensure that my students will have an optimal experience with their eLearning activities.**

**Resources:**
**1. Abulibdeh, E. S. (2013). USING SOCIAL MEDIA (BLOG) IN THE CLASSROOM: Reflecting Lecturer’s Pedagogical Approach And Students (In-Service Teachers) Intrinsic Motivation. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education. 14 n 4* *(6)*, 83-89.**

**2. Baldino, S. (2014). The Classroom Blog: Enhancing Critical Thinking, Substantive Discussion, and Appropriate Online Interaction. Voices From The Middle, v22 n2, 29-33.**

**3. Carter, I.; Leslie, D.; Kwan, D. (2012). Applying Universal Instructional Design to Course Websites by Using Course Evaluations. *Collected Essays on Learning and Teaching, 5,* 119-125.**

**4. Hong, W. (2008). Exploring Educational Use of Blogs in U.S. Education. *Online Submission, US-China Education Review, v5 n10*, 34-38.**

**5. Jimoyiannis A.; Angelaina S. (2012). Towards an analysis framework for investigating students’ engagement and learning in educational blogs*. Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, v28 n3.* 222-234.**

**6. Rahamata R.; Shahb P. M.; Putehc S. N.; Dind R., Azize J. A.; Bipachandraf J. S. (2014). Teachers’ Evaluation on The Motivational Aspects of a Webbased Resource. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Science, v118 n19*, 404-411.**

 **7. Small, R. V.; Arnone, M. P. (2014). WebCHECK: The Website Evaluation Instrument**

***Knowledge Quest, v42 n3,* 58-63**

**8. Zhang, P.; von Dran, G. M. (2000). Satisfiers and dissatisfiers: A two-factor model for website design and evaluation. Journal of the Association for Informational Science and Technology, v51 n14, 1253-1268.**