Featured Student Profiles:
An Instructional Blogging Strategy to Promote Student
Interactions in Online Courses[*]

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Although blogs have been used in online learning environments with optimistic expectations, the distributed nature of blogs can pose some challenges. Currently, we do not have a robust collection of tested blogging strategies to help students interact more effectively with each other when blogs are used as a primary form of engagement in an online class. Thus, the purpose of the study was to test an early iteration of an instructional blogging strategy, "Featured Student Profiles," which is designed to help students become acquainted with each other better and encourage them to visit and comment on each other's blogs. Sixteen pre-service teachers who were enrolled in an online course in which student blogs are the primary medium of peer interactions, participated in the study. Using a design case approach, seven students participated in interviews and all student blog interactions were analyzed. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the interview data and identify salient themes of students' blogging experiences overall under the study strategy. The findings indicated that students took the most direct and efficient path they experienced to complete the blog task. Their peer interaction patterns varied, but several shifted from random to targeted relationships as the semester progressed. Although all students perceived the strategy as a positive approach to peer awareness, there was no clear evidence of its effect on student interactions.

Keywords : Instructional blogging, Social media, Online interaction, Peer awareness

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Introduction

Blogs, an early form of social media, are particularly attractive to higher education instructors because they can be used for public writing and comments, and thus, educational scholars have examined their effectiveness in teaching and learning (Halic et al., 2010) and developed various approaches to use them in assignments (Lin, 2015; Morgan, 2015; Zhou, 2015). Blog authors may use blogs to write about diverse topics, such as daily life, politics, humor, and reviews (Blood, 2002). They also are able to integrate multimedia or hyperlinks within the text of posts easily. Comments serve as a discussion space for an individual blog post, and readers can comment on each. This blogging system promotes mutual awareness, reciprocity, and interaction.

Previous studies on class blogs have used them as a secondary tool to support classes in a blended format (Halic et al., 2010; Top, 2012). In this context, blog interactions are merely one of many options for learning interactions that are likely to be distributed, with some occurring online and some in the classroom. For example, it is possible that students who tend to interact frequently with others in person never interact on course blogs. Thus, it is difficult to represent the entire level of social interactions in students' blogs in a blended format.

In contrast to blended courses, online courses depend highly on students' online social interactions. Discussion forums, with their centralized technology (i.e., everyone interacts in the same location) have been the default tool used to promote online learning interactions. However, student blogs also are valued as a tool in learning discourse because they provide spaces in which individual students can have ownership of content and facilitate their own learning dialogues. If student blogs are used as a primary form of course interaction, blog posts and comments are the devices through which students communicate.

Although blogs and blog interactions support reflective learning, information sharing, and the development of a sense of community (Halic et al., 2010; Stiler & Philleo, 2003; Top et al., 2010), their distributed nature can pose certain challenges.

When each student maintains a personal blog, the class has multiple possible interaction spaces dispersed across the Internet, and some means of bringing learners together to interact with each other is then needed. Blogroll links can be used to connect all of the personal blogs in one space, usually in a course blog. However, links alone do not guarantee that social interactions will occur in students' personal blogs. This problem becomes more critical as class size increases. For example, if an online course has only 10 students, they can visit and comment on each other's blogs with little effort. In contrast, if an online course has 50 students, interacting with all peers is daunting.

As earlier studies have shown (e.g., Kuzu, 2007; Top et al., 2010), when students are given minimal guidance for blog interactions, they may not interact effectively. However, currently, we have no robust collection of tested strategies to help students interact more effectively with each other when they use blogs as a primary form of engagement in an online class. In addition, prior studies (Halic et al., 2010; Top et al., 2010; Top, 2012) have illuminated the need for effective strategies that will lead to greater active engagement on student blogs. In turn, it is important to know whether a strategy promotes interactions among students and to examine the way in which they occur.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine an early iteration of an instructional blogging strategy, "Featured Student Profiles," (FSP) designed to help students become acquainted with each other better and encourage them to visit and comment on each other's blogs.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do students approach the blogging task under the FSP strategy? Where, why, and how frequently do they comment?

2. How do students perceive the FSP strategy as a means of supporting class engagement?

These research questions are explored through a design case approach. A single

class in which the FSP strategy was implemented serves as the case. Following Yin's (2017) guidelines for case study design, the case study draws upon multiple data sources to identify patterns and explain the natural phenomenon being studied.

Literature Review

Pedagogical Benefits of Blogs

Blogs may have pedagogical benefits for learners, three of which will be discussed here. First, blogs can be used as an effective medium for students' reflective learning. Personal blogs provide authors with an individual space to express their reflections regarding course topics by writing blog posts. Mynard (2008) found bloggers use their personal blogs to reflect their language learning in an informal setting. Japanese college students who studied abroad in the UK kept personal blogs to reflect their English learning in daily situations. In addition, students can engage in reflective learning through two-way communication in comments with others. Yang (2009) created a course blog on the training of preservice English teachers, and found that it could be used as a reflective discussion medium that allowed preservice teachers to engage actively in their own reflection process.

Second, blogs help build online identity. Sociocultural perspectives argue that the expression of learners' identities plays a critical role in the process of learning and in the construction of knowledge within the social presence of the learning community (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). The concept of identity has been emphasized in online learning research, particularly in the field of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL). One's identity becomes more important in an online learning context because learners present themselves through a mediated technology, rather than in person (Ke et al., 2011). Thus, online learning practitioners have emphasized building and maintaining learners' identities that help them construct knowledge

within mediated learning communities.

In this respect, personal blogs provide authors an opportunity to build their online blog identities, which are composed of six elements (Dennen, 2009): 1) name and blog title; 2) profile; 3) post content; 4) voice; 5) affiliations, and 6) visual design. A blog title is a basic element that defines the blog's identity. A blog author's profile usually is given in the sidebar and includes a very brief biography. Blog content can define the blog's identity through either a single subject or the author's diverse interests. Voice is the writing style that an author possesses. For example, some authors tend to write informally and humorously, while others write formally or academically. The affiliations that typically accompany profiles can affect readers' judgements of a blog's quality. Further, authors can customize the visual design of a blog (e.g., theme) for various purposes to define the blog's identity.

In contrast to discussion boards, which are the default communication method in a general online course, blogs are able to construct learners' online identities more effectively. Although discussion boards also enable online learners to present their identities with their names and portrait photos within discussion threads, these may not be sufficient to develop a deeper level of online identities. Blogs, in contrast, provide students with a personal space that helps them construct their identities according to the six elements above (Dennen, 2009).

Third, blogs help develop a community of practice among users. This study focused on a group of pre-service teachers. An important part of becoming a teacher is developing an identity, and in a class of preservice teachers, a blog provides a space to practice that teacher identity. One's identity can be understood according to the framework of Community of Practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A community is defined by three dimensions of practice: mutual engagement; joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Identity is constructed by the lived experiences of participating in a social community. Practices build and maintain one's identity, and are recognized by others in a community (Zhang & Storck, 2001). In this respect, preservice teachers in this course were involved in the same community of practice and their personal

blogs were the best places to practice their identity as future teachers.

Compared to the discussion board, blogs are a more effective way to construct the identities of a certain group of students who share the same professional goals. Preservice teachers can be categorized as "inbound trajectory" participants in the practice of "in-service teachers," and their blogs can be used as a communication tool to share their professional knowledge and experiences with other preservice teachers. Each preservice teacher can develop his/her identity by social interactions with class peers. Further, certain blog activity guidance also can facilitate the process of building one's identity as a preservice teacher. For example, certain blog prompts that ask teachers to reflect on the learning experiences associated with their future instruction can be provided to foster the construction of preservice teacher identities.

Blogs Use in Higher Education

Over the past decade, blogs have been integrated increasingly in the higher education context. A primary purpose of using blogs in this context has been to support students' communication in a blended course format. In many studies (e.g., Halic et al., 2010; Kuzu, 2007; Top, 2012; Top et al., 2010), students participated in a face-to-face lecture together with blog-based online discussions outside the classroom. This blended format demonstrated that blogs can be used as a better discussion tool than a traditional discussion forum, as Halic et al. (2010) argued, "The blog's affordance for displaying posts and comments in the same place made the tool preferable to a discussion forum" (p. 208). The simplest method in this approach is to use a single, teacher-centered course blog where teachers publish course-related posts primarily, and then encourage students to provide their thoughts in comments.

However, when blogs are used in a teacher-centered manner to disseminate information to the class, an opportunity for interaction is lost. For example, Kuzu (2007) used a single course blog in a blended learning course, "Information Technology in Education," which included 30 computer education preservice

teachers, and in which the blog was used merely as a communication tool for the instructor to post course-related content and the students to reply to the posts. The students were expected to reply only to certain posts, not interact spontaneously with each other. His study showed that a single course blog can be used as an effective discussion or communication tool, but that it does not differ greatly from traditional discussion boards.

Some studies have examined the way in which group-based blogs can be used to facilitate class activities. Group blogs are student-centered, and increase opportunities to engage in peer-to-peer interactions in a single class blog. For example, in Halic et al. (2010), a large class (n=163) was assigned to each discussion group, with 7 to 14 students per group. Top et al. (2010) also assigned a total of 50 students to 18 different discussion groups with 2 to 4 students per group. This approach focused on group-based peer interactions. Compared to a single class blog, a group blog made the interactions among group members more cohesive, but it still was used only as a discussion tool or even merely as a tool to share information (Halic et al., 2010).

However, when students engaged in blog activities are provided only with minimal guidance, interactions may lack the robustness desired. Kuzu (2007) used a class blog as a simple communication and discussion tool without specific guidance. Students were asked merely to leave comments on blog posts. Top et al. (2010) used group blogs for a large class to facilitate student discussion. They required students to publish ten posts with specific guidance about the processes and results of a group project. However, guidance that focused on information reporting did not lead to meaningful reflections on learning. Instead, students used the group blogs to share information, not reflect on their learning.

Other studies have focused on the benefits of blogs that help support reflective learning, and have used personal blogs to help achieve this goal. Personal blogs are believed to be meaningful to students because they maximize each student's sense of ownership and self-directed investment (Farmer et al., 2008). Stiler and Philleo (2003)

found that students' reflective learning was enhanced when they were asked to post reflective journals on their personal blogs. However, student's reflective learning is a complex outcome that personal blogs cannot guarantee. Hall and Davison (2007) used a form of personal blogs for students, but the majority of their posts and comments included little or no reflective content. This finding also suggests that some sort of guidance must be provided to encourage blog reflection.

Method

Research Settings

Course context. In this class, students were exposed to a wide array of educational technologies, including blogs. Blogging was a required course activity, with each student setting up and maintaining their own blog throughout the semester. Students were required to post to their blogs weekly, and the instructor provided prompts to guide them. Blogging was considered a technical skill as well as an activity that provided space for articulation and reflection. A list of all course blogs (i.e., a blogroll) was compiled by the instructor and posted to a central course blog. The blogroll was posted to help students find each other's blogs. To stimulate this interaction, students were required to make at least two comments on their peer's blog posts from the previous week.

Instructional blogging strategy design. "Featured Student Profiles Featured Student Profiles (FSP), the blog strategy designed for this study, resembles an ice-breaker activity in which students are encouraged to introduce themselves to their peers. The strategy involves student-created profiles that are shared with the whole class via the central course blog. This strategy was designed to highlight each

student's blogging identity by expanding on the concept of blog profiles, which are a typical element of one's blog identity (Dennen, 2009). Typical blog profiles, when they exist, are accessible via a link on a personal blog. They often go unnoticed, and some bloggers neglect to complete their profile information. In contrast, the FSP strategy provided students with an opportunity to introduce themselves on a central class blog, not their personal blog spaces.

The FSP strategy was designed to call more attention to students' profiles by requiring them to present their information directly in the central class blog within the body of a blog post that all students should read regularly. The strategy was designed based on the literature that shows social presence increases interactivity (Tu & McIsaac, 2002) and that blog profiles are a foundational element within blogging communities for establishing blogger identity (Dennen, 2009).

The FSP distributed the presentation of profiles across several weeks, rather than providing them all at once at the beginning of the term. This approach runs was chosen because it would help spotlight individual students, in contrast to course introductions posted in the first week of a course which can be overwhelming

Guided by a blog profile template, students were required to send their profile information to the course instructor at the beginning of the semester. They were asked to include specific elements in their profiles (e.g., name, major, professional goal, what they like, what they want to learn in the course, and their thoughts about why technology is important for their future careers). The instructor collected all of the student profiles at the beginning of the semester and developed a schedule to feature several students per week. Each week, the instructor posted the featured students' profiles on the class blog with their personal blog links (see Figure 1). Profiles included links to the student's blog, and peers were encouraged to follow the link and visit the profiled student's blog.
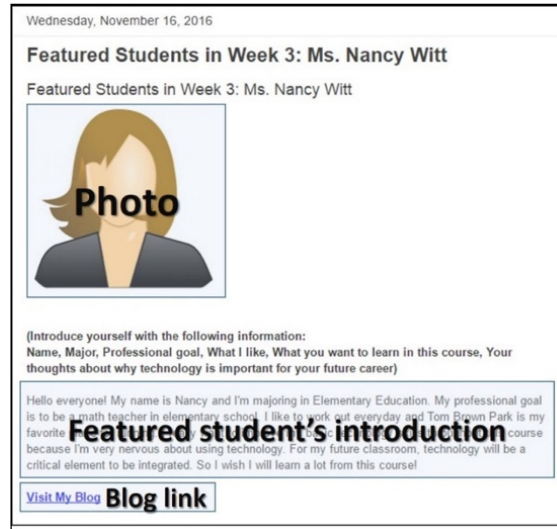
Figure 1. Example of a featured student's profile on a class blog.

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an online educational technology course for pre-service teachers. The course was taught at a large public university in the southeastern United States. Of the 18 students enrolled, 16 (88.9%) were eligible to participate because they were engaged in the blog profile activity. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), with waiver of consent for basic analytic data. Additionally, 7 students agreed to be interviewed and provided informed consent.

Table 1 provides the students' demographics as well as the timeline of the study strategy applied and interviews. Student IDs were assigned according to the sequence of the featured schedules throughout the semester. They were asked to participate in the interviews, but only seven (S01, S03, S04, S09, S10, S14, and S16) responded to the interview request.

Six females and one male were interviewed. They included one freshman, two sophomores, two juniors, and two seniors. Six were Caucasian and one was African-American. Five were either majoring or minoring in education.

Table 1
Student demographics

ID	Gender	Ethnicity	Year	Major	Featured Wk	Wk Interviewed
S01	F	C	Freshman	Exceptional Student Ed	3	5
S02	-	-	-	-	3	-
S03	F	C	Sophomore	Hospitality/Ed Minor	4	6
S04	F	C	Junior	Writing/Ed Minor	4	6
S05	-	-	-	-	5	-
S06	-	-	-	-	5	-
S07	-	-	-	-	6	-
S08	-	-	-	-	6	-
S09	M	C	Junior	Media/Communication	7	9
S10	F	C	Senior	Art History	7	9
S11	-	-	-	-	8	-
S12	-	-	-	-	8	-
S13	-	-	-	-	9	-
S14	F	A-A	Sophomore	Elementary Ed	9	12
S15	-	-	-	-	11	-
S16	F	C	Senior	Art History/Ed Minor	11	12

Note: F=female, M=male, C=Caucasian, A-A=African-American, Ed=education, Wk=week

Data Collection

Interviews. Interviews were semi-structured and used a protocol designed to explore students' blogging experiences overall. Each student was invited to be interviewed after their profile was featured, with the target interview window set for two weeks after the week they was featured. A small conference room was used for the interviews, which were typically 40 minutes long. All interviews were audio-recorded.

Blog archives. The blog archives in this study included blog posts and comments. Data collection focused on recording the number and time of posts and comments in an Excel spreadsheet. In addition, blog comments that students left on peers' blog

posts were archived manually in a matrix format, and their date stamps data also were included in each cell's note. A matrix format was used because blog comments include dyadic relationships between peers: "senders" and "receivers." "Outbound comment" refers to a comment that a blogger sends to others, and an "Inbound comment" refers to a comment a blogger receives from others.

Procedure

Figure 2 illustrates the study procedure. The university's IRB approved the study before the semester began, and granted a waiver of consent to access basic analytic data from all student blogs within the class. The course instructor also agreed to have the study conducted in her class.
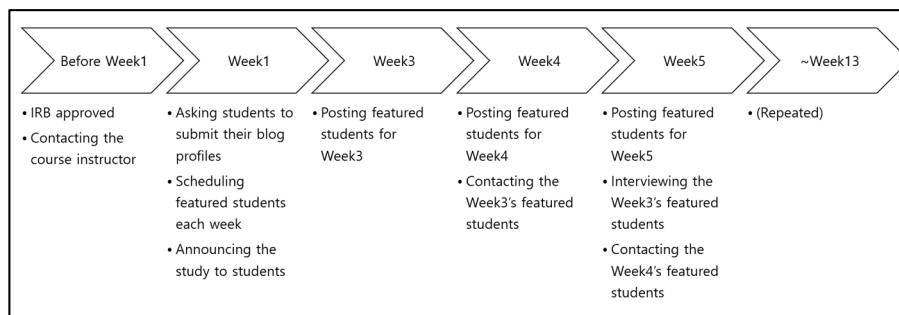
Figure 2. Study procedure.

As part of the regular course activity, in Week 1, the course instructor asked all students to create and submit a blog profile using the blog profile template. After receiving their blog profiles, the instructor created a schedule to post the profiles on the course blog, distributing them throughout the semester. At this time, the instructor also alerted the students to the study and informed them that the researcher would invite them to participate in an interview. From Weeks 3 to 13, featured students were posted on the course blog based on the schedule.

Beginning in Week 4, the researcher emailed the previous week's featured students

and asked them to participate in an interview during the following week. Before the interviews began, participants provided informed consent. They received a $30 gift card when the interviews were completed.

Data Analysis

All students' names were anonymized and coded by Student IDs (e.g., S01) before data analysis began. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to analyze the interview data and identify salient themes in students' blogging experiences overall under the study's strategy throughout the semester. All audio-recorded interview data were transcribed by a native English speaker and cross-checked by the researcher.

The trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was established by prolonged engagement at the research site, in which the researcher observed student's blogging throughout the semester. Further, the findings were reviewed with the instructor to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Triangulation between blog archives and interview data was performed during the data analysis to enhance the reliability and credibility of the study findings.

Findings

Approaches to the Blogging Task

Blogging was required, but not all students participated fully in the assignment. Of the 7 students interviewed, 5 (S01, S03, S04, S09, and S16) participated fully in blogging. However, S10 discontinued blogging in Week 12, when the semester approached the end, and S14 demonstrated a level of insincerity in blogging during the course.

Blogging and time. Students demonstrated a variety of patterns in blogging. Some participated fully, but others stopped participating after a few weeks. Some blogged periodically, while others blogged infrequently.

Three students could be categorized as "early posters." Two students (S01 and S04) showed clearly that they preferred to blog very early in each week. They participated fully throughout the semester and most published 5 to 7 days before the deadline. S03 also appeared to be an "early" poster and tended to publish posts 3 to 4 days before the deadlines.

Some students had no obvious pattern of blogging. S09 and S16 blogged at inconsistent times each week, and although they participated fully in posting, their posting times varied.

S10 appeared to be a "deadline poster" who tended to publish posts close to the deadline, and published largely at the deadline or one day before, except in Week 9.

S14 was not actively engaged in blogging participation throughout the semester. Thus, it is difficult to determine S14's blogging pattern given the data.

Fulfilling requirements. Students were required to make at least two comments on peers' blogs each week. Most students interviewed met the comment requirement each week, although most did not complete the requirement in Week 13.

A few students posted three comments, which exceeded the requirement. S04 left three comments in Week 7; S09 provided three in Week 3, and S16 left three in Weeks 6 and 8.

Receiving blog attention. Figure 3 shows the number of blog comments received by week. S01 received no comments in her featured week (Wk 3), and S03 also received no comments in her featured week (Wk 4). S04 received two comments in her featured week (Wk 4), and S09 received four comments in his featured week (Wk 7). S10 received two comments in her featured week (Wk 7), and S14 received no comments in her featured week (Wk 9). S16 received one comment in her featured week (Wk 11).
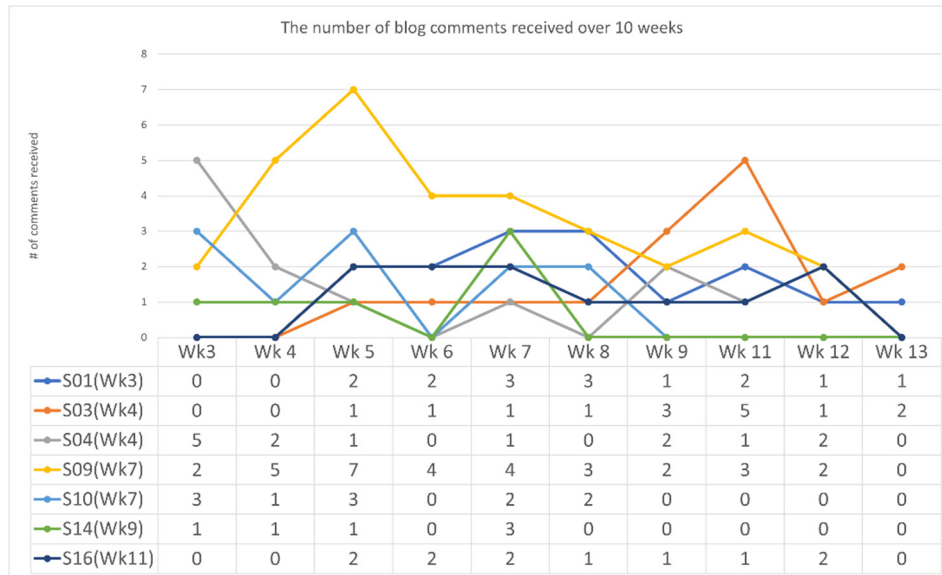
The number of blog comments received over 10 weeks

	Wk3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Wk 6	Wk 7	Wk 8	Wk 9	Wk 11	Wk 12	Wk 13
S01(Wk3)	0	0	2	2	3	3	1	2	1	1
S03(Wk4)	0	0	1	1	1	1	3	5	1	2
S04(Wk4)	5	2	1	0	1	0	2	1	2	0
S09(Wk7)	2	5	7	4	4	3	2	3	2	0
S10(Wk7)	3	1	3	0	2	2	0	0	0	0
S14(Wk9)	1	1	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
S16(Wk11)	0	0	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	0

Figure 3. The number of blog comments received over 10 weeks.

Overall efficiency. In interviews, students shared how they tried to blog as efficiently as possible, spending minimal time on the assignment. They usually engaged in blogging and commenting once a week and tried only to meet the minimum posting and commenting requirements.

Distributed random commenting. In this approach, students visited multiple blogs initially, and then finally chose two blogs on which to comment at random. The distributed random commenting approach was found in three cases (S01, S03, and S16). They not only visited peers' blogs randomly, but also tried spread their comments around to different blogs each week. They believed that they should try to visit different people from week to week because they should provide others with a "fair chance" to receive comments from them. Using this practice, they tried occasionally to find blogs that had fewer comments.

Targeted commenting. Some students chose specific blogs on which they

commented regularly. S09 and S10 showed significant changes in their commenting approaches. They usually had no specific tendency to choose others at the beginning of the semester. However, as the semester continued, they realized that visiting particular students guaranteed greater efficiency. Thus, they began to shift to a targeted commenting approach.

Two factors appeared to play a critical role in developing comment relationships: timing and reciprocity. First, students preferred to visit timely bloggers. They wanted to find those who were guaranteed to have updated a post when they visited them. When students discovered those who always updated early in the week, they began to visit them consistently throughout the semester. S03, S09, S10, and S16 used this approach.

Occasionally, students checked comments on their own blogs and tried to reciprocate, which helped develop the blogger and commenter's relationship as peers who visit each other's blogs. In particular, S04 was a student who strove for reciprocity, visiting the blogs of those who commented on her posts and reading their profiles as well.

Participants' blogging behaviors seemed varied. Their blogging patterns including commenting approach, reasons to comment, and time spent for task are summarized in Table 3.

Perceptions of FSP Strategy

In general, students stated that FSP was a useful approach for blogging and during interviews they discussed how they experienced being profiled and how they explored their classmates' profiles. Being profiled was motivating and exciting to students. For example, S14 stated that she was excited because her profile was highlighted on the main post of the course blog. She believed that it might lead other students to view her profile:

> "That's actually *exciting* (…) Because *if the other students are like me and they actually come here to see other people's blogs, then I know that they read my information and that's really exciting.* (…) When I see somebody featured I'm like 'Hey let me look at their blog'."

S16 had been aware of the study strategy since Week 4, and indicated that she skimmed the profiles every week. She perceived the study strategy as positive and had eagerly anticipated when her profile would be featured:

> "(…) I was like 'Oh when is it going to be up?' because I didn't know how she was choosing. *I was excited* because I was like '*Ok yeah cool*' like actually my profile is finally there."

Students who were featured enjoyed having the spotlight, and felt that profiles provided greater encouragement to visit each other's blogs than a mere blogroll link. Students shared how they approached their classmate's profiles when they saw them:

> "(…) *if that profile is right in front of my face, I would be more apt to like click on that and then comment on that person's blog*, just because it is readily available like it's right there, I'm interested. I also think that it's really important to attach a picture. I like the way in which the pictures are attached just because I feel like it's more personal. You see what that person looks like and you see what they're interested in, like 'Ok, I'll go looking'." (S01)

> "(…) *I'll definitely look into it more and I actually read them* and become acquainted with some of my fellow classmates (…) So, I think it would probably make me look into someone's blog little bit more (…) *it makes me want to read some of their posts.*" (S03)

Developing peer connections was otherwise a challenge. S09 shared, "I don't know

anyone in the class and it's all online. So, it's kind of tough to become acquainted with someone in an online class." Through this comment, S09 identified the reason why FSP was developed and implemented in this class.

Once exposed to classmates via profiles, students started to feel like they know each other better. S01 shared, "*I like to see what people are passionate about, what they want to do especially if it's in the education field*, because that's what I'm interested in." And S03 commented on the importance of developing relationships with classmates:

> "(…) *personally I think it's important for our classmates to become acquainted with us* because (…) *I'm going to be an education minor* I have to take a couple of their classes, and you know *fellow classmates* that are in this course maybe in one of my other classes. So, it's a good way to become acquainted with someone's personality too (…) *it would definitely give you more of a sense of who they are as a person and maybe what their major is.*"

In particular, photos were deemed useful by S16, who shared "(…) *when I actually saw their faces*, you know like 'Oh that's S01,' like I've been responding to all of her blog posts like know who she is."

However, in contrast, a student who was not an education major expressed less interest in developing relationships in this class:

> "I mean I read it all (…) it didn't change my view of like any of them really (…) I guess in the class I'm not really trying to create relationships with any of the students. Because it's just a class I'm taking and I'm not an education major." (S10)

It is important to note these differences, because in order for a strategy to be successful enough students need to be interested and to participate.

Similar to the varying interest in FSP, the strategy motivated some students but not others. Both S01 and S03 were interested in FSP, but they experienced different

motivational responses:

> "I would feel more motivated [to] blog (…) *because people are more apt to look at your blog.* I'm going to want them to read something interesting." (S01)

> "(…)I'm motivated with all my schoolwork (…) I don't really think [FSP] would motivate me." (S03)

S04 also had a positive reaction, stating "I looked at it and I thought that *it was sweet* that the teacher posted me I guess (…) *I wasn't super excited but I thought it was nice of her.*" However, she then shared that she was not motivated to pay attention to other students' profiles because she didn't see how it would help with her work:

> "(…) I'm sitting down studying and doing a bunch of homework (…) I don't want to take time away from my other work to look at other things [featured students' profiles] (…) I'm just kind of busy. *So, it's not like 'Oh I don't care.' It's more of 'I need to focus on other things right now'.*"

S09 also indicated that he personally had less interest in the strategy because he normally did not care much about classmates in online classes. He believed that the study strategy was meaningful for others, but it was not interesting to him:

> "(…) I think it is helpful for some people. For me personally like, in an online course I don't, I don't really have that much interest in my getting to know other people strictly online. That's just not my type (…) For me *it's not really the deal*, but for other people I could see the way in which it would be nice to get to read other people's profiles and stuff. So, I'm not going to say like overall it's a waste of time or something, *just for me I'm not that interested in it.*"

Essentially, motivation will vary by student, and for some students the task may

need to be further incentivized or have more structured interactions to be successful.

Some students provided useful insights into the strategy's shortcomings. S14 noted that the strategy did not lead to substantially greater interaction among peers, sharing "*I know people read it but at the same time I don't know if they read it because you know nobody replies to it* or anything like that." This comment suggests that having more targeted interaction when a student is featured might be helpful. Additionally, timing is an issue for students featured later in the class. S16, who was featured at the end, felt that "nobody cares" when a feature comes at the end of the semester.

Summary of Blogging Experience

Table 3 synthesizes participants' varied approaches to blogging, commenting, and interacting with peers. In addition, each student's perceptions of the study strategy and the number of comments received in his/her featured week are summarized.

First, the students accessed peers' blogs in different ways. However, they all agreed that it was better to access them with the course blog rather than the discussion forum. Second, they had a variety of reasons for commenting. Quality and their interest in contents were mentioned frequently as the most important factor, and they also indicated that the timing of posts was important. Further, the reciprocity in comments was also mentioned as an important factor for those who had a reciprocal commenting relationship. Third, the students adopted a variety of approaches in commenting. Most of them were random, because they wanted to spread out their comments to as many others as possible. Some preferred strongly to interact with certain peers for various reasons. Fourth, most students revealed that they spent only once a week on the blogging assignment. Fifth, they perceived the study strategy largely as a positive way of helping them become acquainted with each other. Lastly, there were no specific "skyrocketing" with respect to the number of comments they received when they were featured.

Table 3

Summary of blogging experience

ID (featured week)	Access to peer's blog	Reason to comment	Time spent for task	Commenting approach	Perception of Strategy	Comments received in featured week
S01(Wk 3)	Discussion board	Quality of contents	N/A	Random, Distributed	Positive	None
S03 (Wk 4)	Discussion board	Interest in contents	Once a week	Random, Distributed	Positive	None
S04 (Wk 4)	Course blog	Reciprocity of comment	Once a week	Reciprocal	Not very excited, but nice	Two
S09 (Wk 7)	Discussion board	Content, Timing	Once a week	Fixed	Positive	Four
S10 (Wk 7)	Course blog	N/A	Once a week	Random, then fixed	Not very excited, but cool	Two
S14 (Wk 9)	Course blog	Timing	Once a week	Random	Excited	None
S16 (Wk 11)	Course blog	N/A	Once a week	Random, Distributed	Positive	One

Discussion

The primary purpose of the study was to test an early iteration of the FSP strategy. This strategy was designed to help students become acquainted with each other by providing more opportunities for them to read other's profiles in a more open blog space. The strategy was expected to generate greater interaction and thereby increase social presence and students' sense of community. However, no clear evidence of these effects was observed.

Instead, students developed routine blogging patterns that allowed them to complete the course requirements successfully and efficiently. Each student developed his/her own pattern of participation, and most focused on efficiency. They did not want to spend time in extra involvement, but focused instead on

completing the minimum requirements. Thus, they tended to develop commenting relationships based on time efficiency as well. Some students employed a consistent distributed commenting approach, but others wanted to maintain certain relationships in commenting because it saved time finding other's blogs.

Student engagement is a top theme in online learning research (Martin et al., 2020), perhaps because fostering engagement remains a challenge. Students in this study rarely exceeded minimal course requirements for engagement, and interview comments showed that students did not view blogging and commenting as a priority. This finding confirms earlier studies. For example, Nonnecke (2000) indicated that online learners generally did not want to spend much of their time in online discussions that were not one of their high priority tasks. Yukselturk (2010) also indicated that online students' low-level participation results from the fact that they have various occupations and different responsibilities in their daily lives. Bullen (2007) also indicated that when online students made the minimum contribution required, they typically stopped participating. This approach to participation shows a grade orientation rather than a learning orientation, or alternately suggests that students are unaware of how peer interaction contributes to their learning process. Still, students may have benefited from blogging all the same. Students in other studies commented favorably about blogging assignments in general, noting how these assignments offer a platform for students to really engage with course material and find their voices (Morris et al., 2019).

Despite the students' efficiency and minimalism, reciprocity emerged as a factor relating to the development of commenting relationships. Gaudeul and Peroni (2010) indicated that the more comments bloggers produced in a reciprocal manner, the more they tended to receive per post. Reciprocity among bloggers and commenters tends to occur naturalistically in authentic blogging environments (Dennen & Pashnyak, 2008), but may need to be motivated within a class setting.

Reciprocity does not occur among strangers, but rather reciprocity is a hallmark of a developing relationship. The development of commenting relationships in

classes has been associated with social presence (Kim et al., 2011; Swan & Shih, 2005; Wise et al., 2004). Social presence is intertwined with identity in online learning (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017). Students need a means of expressing identity, such as through featured social profiles, in order to establish presence and build relationships. Additionally, the desire to connect with likeminded others, such as the students who saw FSP as a way to connect with peers in their major, is also well established in the research (Baturay, 2011; Dawson, 2006; 2008; Shen et al., 2008).

Students generally had a favorable impression of FSP, primarily because it offered the opportunity to be recognized by others. The strategy appears to have had little influence on student behavior overall, which may be attributable to various course and student contextual factors. For example, there were a multitude of other tools and required tasks within this class, splitting student attention. Additionally, blogging is no longer a popular technology among American young adults. Finally, students in this class may have had a greater orientation toward creating products with technology compared to engaging with others in discourse, which has been found in studies conducted in this course during other terms (Dennen et al., 2020)

Conclusion

Although the FSP strategy did not yield the intended outcome of generating a rich sense of community and high level of engagement among the students, the majority of the students still has positive sentiments about it. They believed that it is important to learn about other students' information, particularly their majors. However, reading their profiles required additional cognitive effort in which they did not want to engage.

For the next iteration of the FSP strategy, further consideration needs to be given to three elements. First, students need to be required to read the FSP. For example, as part of the weekly required assignment, students must leave a comment on the

FSP posts on the class blog. That requirement will force students not only to visit the class blog, but also to read the profiles. Such a requirement likely will not pose a significant burden on their weekly workload, but rather should increase students' social presence among their peers.

Second, students who have similar majors can be featured together in the same week. This may increase the sense of community, particularly for those who are in a similar community of practice. For example, students who are majoring in math education can be featured in the same week. They should be aware of this, as it may lead them to focus more on each other's profiles and develop a certain level of sense of community that week.

Third, the strategy could be implemented with alternate timing, front-loading the profiles at the start of the class to establish relationships quickly. For example, new students could be featured daily for the first few weeks of the term, giving students reason to check the central course blog frequently and establishing good habits early in the course. The strategy could be combined with other strategies later in the class to maintain interest in peer blogs and continue to promote peer reading and commenting. For example, the second author frequently writes "tour de blog" posts on the central course blog that promote student posts, encouraging students to visit an interesting post written by their classmates. These posts include brief "teaser" descriptions along with links. This "tour de blog" strategy effectively functions like an extension of FSP.

Although the FSP strategy itself was not successful at generating more peer interaction, the component parts were well received. Thus, while the FSP strategy as a whole may continue to be refined and tested, researchers may also want to explore the concepts of featuring students and developing robust student profiles independently. These strategies may be explored in a blogging context, or in more typical online learning environments (e.g., learning management systems). In this sense, the main goal is to establish knowledge of how to engage in a practice, not of how to use a tool (Greenhow et al., 2019). The end goal of this pilot study and any

future research building on it is not simply to test the FSP strategy, but more generally to promote peer awareness and engagement in the online classroom.

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